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EDITORIAL – NOVEMBER 28, 2022

A NICE BUCKET OF SUDS: HOW COULD THE FORD GOVERNMENT GET OUT OF THE MESS IT HAS MADE IN LONG-TERM CARE?

Oliver Hardy of Laurel and Hardy fame put it well in the 1940 movie Saps at Sea – “here’s another nice bucket of suds you’ve gotten me into”.

It seems the current government has gotten elders and Ontario taxpayers into a nice bucket of suds as well, investing over \$6 billion of our money in long-term care institutions (Ontario Government, 2022) rather than in-home and community care.

Minister Calandra now confirms that the government and its collaborators in the hospital system have managed to force 2400 alternate level of care (ALC) patients into nursing homes whether they wanted to go or not (Ferguson, 2022). 2400 people sentenced to nursing home hell against their will for being old and frail – a tragic commentary on what Ontario has become.

We could not be blamed for seeing those responsible as “saps at sea” when so many other alternatives that elders actually wanted to see in place were available to them, but were repeatedly ignored. Why? Did they need to fill all those long-term care beds in facilities where no one wanted to go?

Nursing Homes Are Closing Everywhere Else While Ontario Wastes Money Building More

The Ford government is definitely swimming against the tide in investing in institutions when they are being closed by the hundreds because of lack of demand by our neighbors to the south. More than 550 nursing homes closed there between June 2015 and June 2019 and occupancy rates in existing facilities dropped as well (Flinn, 2020). Almost 1600 were expected to close in 2021 because they could not make ends meet, and could not staff their facilities (AHCA/NCAL, 2021). All those private enterprises are looking for taxpayer-funded bailouts from Congress now to keep them afloat. Not unlike Ontario which has funneled billions their way.

Some Canadian nursing homes are also closing because they can’t find people to staff them (Grant, 2021). That’s right. Few want to work in institutions, just as almost no one wants to live there. SSAO has been telling the government this for almost three years, but they appear to be suffering from hearing loss.

In other Canadian news, a company in Quebec just filed for creditor protection because of financial problems. Selection Retraite just informed 14,000 older adults that it has applied for a “court-assisted restructuring” of its “48 seniors homes” (Harrold, 2022).

The Ontario government is not hearing what older adults are saying so let's test their eyesight. **RED ALERT!!** Long-term care institutions are not financially sustainable! Time to listen to your elders and invest in keeping people at home! It is cheaper and more respectful.

Other, more progressive jurisdictions, like Denmark, learned this lesson long ago and have, for decades, taken a different approach (SSAO, 2021). In 1988 Denmark passed a law stopping construction of new institutions so that 80% of its long-term care support services are now provided in peoples' homes. The same law converted existing nursing homes to single occupancy rooms resulting in a 30% reduction in institutional beds between 1985 and 1995 with bed numbers continuing to fall for decades after (Weekly Source, 2020).

One wonders to whom the Ford government was listening when it decided it needed 30,000 more institutional beds instead of investing in the kinds of supports older adults and their caregivers wanted? Certainly not to economists or older adults who could have told them that institutions are not financially sustainable and that this generation of elders is not interested in ending up there. Queens economists DID tell them (Drummond et al, 2020). Apparently the Ontario government did not hear them either.

How Does the Ontario Government and LTC Industry Get Out of This Mess?

The question now becomes, how does the Ontario government and the long-term care industry that it was so eager to please, transform those huge 19th century style white elephants with 30 year licenses that were built with wasted taxpayer's money, into something in which people might actually want to live?

Seniors for Social Action Ontario (SSAO) has long advocated that creating environments where older adults want to live, and building health and social supports into those buildings was a much better option than institutions. PACE (Program of All Inclusive Care of the Elderly) in Burlington is a good example of this (CBC, The National, 2022).

SSAO has also advocated Hub and Spoke models where health and social supports are provided using a case management model in apartment buildings housing high numbers of older adults. The "spokes" extend services out to the community surrounding the buildings where others may also require assistance (SSAO, 2021).

In the U.S. where nursing homes are being forced to close thanks to higher investments in direct funding programs like Money Follows the Person and where Baby Boomers have no intention of entering nursing homes, institutions are being converted into apartment complexes (Cowgill, 2021). It would be quite easy to introduce PACE and Hub and Spoke programs in apartment buildings, especially if they were fully accessible and built using universal design standards.

Why not? Many nursing home companies are already functioning as real estate investment trusts. Why doesn't this industry make itself useful and provide much needed affordable, accessible housing with the province kicking in funding for non-profit organizations or

municipalities to provide the needed support services? Ontario does appear to have a lot of cash to throw around in long-term care.

Elders could remain in their own apartments with the privacy and security that affords, becoming tenants instead of residents, and have care provided to them in the privacy of their own homes. That would be an infinitely better option than sharing a ward or a floor with dozens of other strangers with no locks on their doors or privacy, and being subjected to institutional food and routines instead of their own meals and habits.

The big nursing home corporations could also just sell these expensive properties and buildings and let someone else do it – maybe the federal government in partnership with municipalities? The federal government already funds community housing, so why not the supports to go with it? Better still turn them into co-operative housing with elder care built in.

Institutional Bed Glut in the U.S. - A Warning for Ontario?

With a new generation of elders choosing home and community-based services rather than institutions, the U.S. is facing a problem - bed glut. Ontario may soon confront that as well, given this government's misguided policy of over-building institutional beds and providing 30 year licenses to corporations that own the facilities.

In the U.S. between 2004 and 2014, people age 54 and older occupying skilled nursing facility beds dropped from 3.6% to 2.5%. Those aged 65 and older in nursing homes decreased 11.7% during the same time period, from 1.32 million to 1.16 million (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2017). Meanwhile the number of nursing home beds only decreased 3.9% during the same time period causing an over-abundance of institutional beds unnecessarily raising Medicare costs. This decrease in use of nursing home beds occurred in spite of a 28.3% growth in the 65+ population (U.S. Census Bureau 2014).

It seems Baby Boomers were saying “hell no, we won't go” into institutions. Unlike in Ontario, U.S. states, being part of a free society, did not force elders into institutions using a legislative club like Bill 7.

Older adults need affordable housing built to universal design standards. They also need co-housing and co-operative housing with built-in attendant care arrangements.

Why is the government not investing in more of these options?

Can the Government of Ontario Keep the LTC Industry Afloat?

Ontario is avoiding investing in in-home care, direct funding, and community-based residential alternatives because it apparently wants to keep those big long-term care companies afloat.

It's a dangerous strategy because moves are already underway by the Baby Boomer generation to create its own alternatives here in Ontario – home sharing, co-housing, and elder care co-ops being three examples. It would seem that the generation that has always been resourceful is

continuing to be, and will create its own alternatives since the government is failing to do so. That does not bode well for the institution-based long-term care industry as any economist worth their salt could tell them – if they asked.

All of this should also be a red alert for the nursing home industry in Ontario. But will this industry see the writing on the wall and recognize that it needs to adapt and transform those ugly white elephants it has built into more attractive, affordable housing? Will it approach government to fund PACE and Hub and Spoke programs to support people to flourish in place in their own apartments similar to the programs in Denmark?

So far, the long-term care industry in Ontario has made all the wrong projections, believing an increase in the elder population will automatically lead to use of nursing home beds. And the government of Ontario has, so far, trampled on elders' rights to help funnel people into these institutions by refusing to invest heavily in Home Care, Family Managed Home Care, Paid Family Caregivers, Money Follows the Person, and non-profit, community-based small community residences and by introducing Bill 7. Elders are now refusing to go to hospitals for fear of being dumped into these places.

Will the Ontario Long Term Care Association wake up and notice the looming financial debacle? Will it tell the Ford government to put the brakes on building more of these institutions so that its members' 30 year licenses don't spell bankruptcy instead of prosperity?

Time will tell. But in the meantime this generation of seniors is exploring other options to ensure it never ends up in them. Not a good scenario for an institution-based system that outlived its usefulness decades ago and failed to innovate in its approach to care provision. Also not a good scenario for a government that has failed to see that institutionalization is an outdated, unsustainable and dehumanizing approach to long-term care.

This is what happens when you stereotype elders and see them as a homogenous group instead of as individuals quite capable of deciding their own fate. You bring in regressive policies based on ageist stereotypes then need legislative clubs to try to keep people in line.

Not a good look for a government claiming to be “for the people”.

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