

A Journey to Discover the Value of Long Term Care

I came to my role as CEO of the OLTCA at the beginning of June this year with limited awareness of Ontario's long term care sector and its importance to aging Ontarians and our health care system.

A quick web search provided me with a basic overview of the sector. It is large, with more than 600 homes providing care and services to some 76,000 residents. It is also a sector in transformation as homes—like hospitals, home care and other providers—respond to the challenge of the aging demographic. The implementation of a new Act governing long term care homes is imminent. Statistics and reports on individual homes are available on the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's website.

With the exception of these 'facts,' long term care is a sector that people, in general, reluctantly discuss—and often only as something to be avoided. Looking in from the outside, I have often wondered if this perspective is based more on our own fear of aging and mortality than on knowledge of what life is like *inside* a long term care home.

This desire to broaden my personal understanding was the reason that I embarked on a journey of discovery by touring some of our member homes.

I have learned and observed many things that can't be understood simply by reading statistics and charts on a website.

I have discovered that the long term care sector is comprised of dedicated providers, staff and volunteers doing good things with limited resources. I have come to see how homes, staff, volunteers and community partners are adding value to the lives of residents, their communities and our health care system. For the most part, they are doing it out of the spotlight, satisfied that their work is known and appreciated by the direct recipients of their efforts.

The 2009 annual report of Ontario's Health Quality Council was released just

before I started my journey of discovery and provided some context for what I found. That report published the first-ever resident and family satisfaction data on our sector and the results were likely surprising to some people. Ninety per cent of residents and 85 per cent of families surveyed said they were either highly satisfied or satisfied with the care and services that homes were providing.

The reasons for this were clearly visible to me as I observed what goes on in the front line.

While all homes are part of single system, each is also unique. Each has its own identity that has been forged by a complex interplay between the home's vision; the views, needs and contributions of the people who work and live there; and the day-to-day interactions of the homes with the communities in which they are located.

There is an unyielding commitment to providing residents with a quality living experience and involving residents in determining what defines that quality. Everywhere, I saw care and support to manage the impact of aging so that residents can continue to experience the things that give meaning to their lives: growing vegetables that are incorporated in the menu at Chateau Gardens in London; planning for a three-day camping expedition at Vision Nursing Home in Sarnia; the end of summer corn roast at Roberta Place in Barrie; and a 100th birthday recognition at Leisureworld North York.

Innovative approaches and strong community partnerships enhance the knowledge and skills required for caring: the close working relationship between the Village of Winston Park in Kitchener and the Research Institute for Aging at the University of Waterloo; the internships at Columbia Forest Long-Term Care Centre for students in college programs in Waterloo; and the support for skills upgrading provided by PeopleCare in Stratford.

Homes are working with their health care partners to collectively add value to the care they provide to residents and to the

delivery of local health care services: the telemedicine link between Copper Terrace Long Term Care and its local hospital in Chatham that will ensure residents get more of the care they need in the home, while at the same time having a positive impact on local emergency room wait times; the participation of Algonquin Nursing Home in Mattawa in a regional collaboration to improve wound care in all health care settings; and the leadership of Specialty Care Trillium Centre in Kingston in the new physician assistant program.

All of this value—and more—is being delivered with a deep sense of personal and professional pride. The management staff at Extencare Kingston greeted me with exuberance, excited to show and tell me the details of what they do and how and why it works. And staff at the John M. Parrott Centre in Napanee demonstrated how they successfully combine their roles as care providers within the municipal and provincial health care structures, while at the same time interweaving this with the heritage of their community.

These are just a few examples of the innovations, accomplishments and achievements that I was introduced to at every stop along my journey—innovations, accomplishments and achievements that focus on the quality of life and care of residents in long term care homes across the province. As Radica Bissoondial, Executive Director of Columbia Forest so aptly said, "It is during these special visits that we come to understand that it takes a village of compassionate people and organizations to deliver the high level of care to our residents."

Taking these experiences and imagining them replicated in kind across 600 homes, I am left with a tremendous sense of appreciation for the value that long term care brings to the lives of some 76,000 residents.

It is my commitment to our members and their staff, residents and families in these places we call 'home' to ensure that this value is maintained and maximized for the benefit of the people who live there now and those who will live there in the future. **LTC**

by Christina Bisanz

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