

VON volunteers in the spotlight

Many people benefit from the care and support given by volunteers of the Victorian Order of Nurses' Halton chapter.

In honour of their collective efforts, a recognition awards luncheon was held at Churchill Retirement Home November 24.

Among those receiving 10-year service certificates was Miltonian Yvette Smith.

In addition to volunteer visiting, VON members also provide service for the VON Seniors Day Program, education and support groups, office and courier duties, foot care clinics and serve on VON committees and the board of directors.

More than 600 Halton clients were visited by 700 VON members this past year.

Halton VON branch holding its own, but other units in trouble

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

As some branches of the esteemed Victorian Order of Nurses fear being pushed out of business, the Halton branch is holding its own.

"We consider ourselves one of the lucky branches," said Halton VON executive Director Lila Hobbs-Smyth. "It isn't maybe as much of a crisis as it may be in other areas."

The VON offers home care, friendly visiting, meals on wheels and palliative care through various branches across the country.

At the heart of the Ontario crisis is a 1996 provincial move to open up community health care to competitive bidding. That pits non-profit agencies such as the VON against bottom-line seeking for-profit companies for jobs.

Worsening the matter is a wage gap between registered nurses, registered practical nurses, homecare workers and personal support workers labouring in hospitals versus those working in the community.

Currently hospital workers are covered under the Canada Health Act, while community workers aren't. That means community health care salaries are paid by the Province, which has to fit it into their funding envelope, said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

The result is a remuneration lag of about 10 per cent for community workers.

That can make a critical difference when staff are already in high demand due to a

provincial shortfall of qualified health professionals.

"The crisis is looming because of the shortage of workers right across the province," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth. "And this is at a time when more community care is needed."

Shorter hospital stays and an aging population mean more people are requiring home care, and the workload is getting more technical all the time, she added.

"You have to have really competent workers," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

Compounding the crisis is a block of workers poised to retire in the next five years.

"The average age is moving up every year," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

New grads went south

And though retirees have historically been replaced by young graduates, that isn't likely to happen this time around.

"A lot of our new grads left us to work in the United States," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth. "The generation that should be replacing these people is weak."

Today, the average VON nurse is in her late forties. Typically, nurses retire in their fifties.

The Halton VON currently employs about 425 workers, the majority of which are personal support workers. About 120 are nurses.

And another 700 volunteers contribute 50,000 hours of volunteer time to the organization annually.

Recently both the Ontario and the Canadian VON have acknowledged their

struggles publicly.

But the Halton branch is financially independent and should be able to stay the course despite the challenges ahead, said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

"I don't think it can help but affect us in an indirect way," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth. "But we can continue to function as long as we manage our own affairs."

One reason for its success is the number of stable, permanent positions the Halton organization has been able to offer to its workers, said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

Also, the agency has been able to hold its ground in competitions with for-profit companies since 1996.

"It's certainly a challenge," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

"But we're pleased to have successes and to work with the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC)."

The CCAC awards community care contracts.

Still, the competitive format has meant the VON has had to give up some work.

"There has been a number of times we've had to tell the CCAC we couldn't deliver a certain service they wanted," said Ms Hobbs-Smyth.

The aim of the Halton VON is to close the gap between community and hospital workers sometime in the new year.

And Ms Hobbs-Smyth hopes the province will help her achieve that goal.

"We'd really like to see some increased government funding," she said.

"I think the government is getting the message."



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Town to be promising destination

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after a year, other provincial incentives could help entice physicians to town.

A friendly environment central to both Toronto and Hamilton should make Milton a promising destination for new family doctors, said Mr. Oliver.

"It has all sorts of amenities," he said. "We believe it's a very desirable area."

But a lack of available office space has proved to be a stumbling block in the past.

"Most younger graduates coming out are looking for a group practice so they don't have to finance the whole thing themselves," said Mr. Oliver. "Most of them can't afford to start a practice on their own."

To ease the situation, HHS has entered into discussions with the Milton Chamber of Commerce and the Milton Economic Develop Advisory Committee.

And though a shortage of physicians across the province means the competition will be stiff, overcoming the office space stumbling block should lead to some relief in town, said Mr. Oliver.

Councillor Cindy Lunau, who sits on the HHS hospital board, also expressed pleasure at making the list.

"It's a wonderful tool," she said. "It won't guarantee physician recruitment, but it certainly helps."

She said the Province was likely swayed by the proven track record of HHS, which operates the amalgamated Milton District and Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial hospitals, into adding Milton to the list.