

HEALTH

Road to nurse deal 'long and difficult'

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cent rollback of wages and benefits," she said, adding many nurses who have received pinkslips are seeking work outside the province. "A 20.3-per cent rollback isn't going to attract nurses back to the profession."

But the road to the deal was long and difficult.

"We started the negotiating process back in April 1996, and we were in the situation where we had agreed to go to arbitration with the OHA and along came Bill 136," said Mitchell, explaining that allowed either party to approach the labour board and ask for immediate arbitration.

The two groups arrived at arbitration together when a deal couldn't be reached. At that point, former Judge Lloyd Houlden was appointed to the proceedings.

Bill 136 governs all public service employee groups and requires that all contracts be arrived at based on affordability and taxpayer ability to pay.

"Working under the bill was quite an expedited process," said Mitchell.

Of the three York Region hospitals, only nurses at York County are members of the centralized bargaining unit of ONA - the union representing 40,000 RNs across the province. About 414 full-time and part-time nurses at York County will benefit from the new contract.

However, nurses at York Central and Markham-Stouffville Hospital will likely benefit from the deal, as those hospitals usually keep pace with salary adjustments made as a result of a new contract.

Hospital administrators had been planning for a wage increase and say the deal is manageable.

York County vice-president Pat Norman says a 2-per cent wage increase was factored in when forming this year's operating plan.

"We planned for it in the budget - we knew it would be inevitable as everybody was at the arbitration stage," Norman said, adding the union representing the hospital's service and clerical workers are also working without a contract.

Mitchell says with more money provided to doctors in the last year, and salary increases for the majority of hospital administrators over the last few years, the nurses couldn't be rejected in their bid for a wage hike.

"It's only treating nurses fairly. Let's look at what's happening across the health-care sector. With the delisting of services by OHIP, doctors are now billing directly for many services and subsidizing their income on the backs of the public," said Mitchell, who believes the OHA realized it had to provide the ability to attract new people to the profession.

Obviously there is the ability to pay, and when you take into account all the administrators getting significant pay increases, they've done an environmental scan and what they're hearing from hospitals is there are no emergency or critical care nurses - they can't get them," said Mitchell.

However, the two-year deal covered the period from April 1, 1996 to March 1, 1998, which means bargaining a

new contract will begin almost immediately.

Even with announcements made last week recommending the creation of 7,900 new nursing jobs to serve 20,000 new nursing home beds, Mitchell says ONA isn't overly optimistic about the future.

In fact, she predicts there will be a further loss of front-line health-care workers as hospital restructuring continues.

"We're only at the beginning of restructuring. We would like to know when those new nursing positions will be created. They may be five years down the line," she said. "Yes, we can re-open beds, but doing it means having the people at the bedside to provide care. Yet this is the government who reduced nursing care hours in nursing homes."

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