

HEALTH CARE: Victorian Order of Nurses are threatening to strike if new contract isn't signed by end of month

Nurses talk first strike in 38 years

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Registered nurses with the Victorian Order of Nurses will strike if a new contract isn't signed before Sept. 27.

Eighty nurses are in a position to take job action, the first of its kind in VON's 38-year history in York Region.

The nurses, who provide visiting home nursing for acute and chronically ill patients, have been asked to accept a number of concessions, including removal of weekend and shift premiums, uniform allowance, cap of shift nurses' pay and reduction of car allowance from 29 cents per kilometre to 17 cents per kilometre.

"We are very concerned that, due to recent layoffs in our agency, the nurses will be asked to travel even more, with less money for doing so," said Local 16 spokesperson and RN Darlene Hisko. "But we remain hopeful the VON will continue to value their nurses and allow them to maintain quality care so we can avert a strike."

Negotiations have been ongoing for three months.

However the VON's chief executive officer for York Region says the listed issues are among a group of 19 items up for negotiation.

"We're not looking for all of them. Mileage is an option, and we would continue to pay for breaks, but may ask if they would

be willing to work through their breaks," said Kim Lenahan.

Any concessions the nurses agree to, VON management will also adopt, Lenahan said.

Nurses and patients blame the Ontario government's competitive bidding process for home-care services, which is pitting non-profit agencies such as VON and St. Elizabeth Health Care against for-profit corporations for the work.

While VON's quality and continuity of care was not questioned in the bid, their price shut them out.

"We were high priced, compared to the competition," she said. "We need to achieve cost savings to become more competitive."

This time, the bidding will be for

a greater portion of the nursing caseload offered by the CCAC. The VON is afraid if it loses this contract, it could mean further layoffs.

Whatever happens, patients will be caught in the crossfire.

"It's a sad thing, it's a shame it has come to this," said Ron Pearce, a Richmond Hill resident who receives VON care seven days a week from nurses who come to change a dressing on his leg.

Last week, he learned that the nurse who visits him on Saturdays had been laid off. Another assured him that, despite the dispute, she would continue to care for him.

Pearce is angry the province is putting nursing care to a bidding process. He feels patients deserve

the right to choose who will come into their homes and treat them.

A representative from the Ontario Nurses Association said, should a strike occur, the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) of York Region will find replacement nurses for clients of VON and the CCAC will be given plenty of notice.

"We believe the main stakeholders have to know the situation VON nurses are in. They are being asked to take incredible concessions," said Judith McIlwaine of ONA.

McIlwaine said contracts with about 70 nurses employed by the CCAC have also expired and will be up for negotiation.

EDUCATION: Parent meets with minister



PHOTO/NATALIE SCHONFELD

Stouffville resident Loula Bigioni (right) talks to reporters Tuesday after meeting with Education Minister Dave Johnson in his Bay Street office regarding the Catholic board teacher's strike.

Parents vow to return Monday

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not go back for the entire month of September. This is crazy," said the Stouffville mother.

"Someone has to step in for the kids. I'm not happy because we are going away empty handed."

The four parents have vowed to return to Johnson's office Monday if striking teachers remain on the picket lines.

While about 75 parents and children waited in the lobby of

the ministry office, Misko presented Johnson with more than 600 signatures from irate parents demanding their children be returned to the classroom.

They vowed to keep up the pressure on both sides, organizing pickets outside the Embassy Suites Hotel yesterday, where representatives of the separate board and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association are negotiating. But if comments during a parent information meeting

Monday night in Newmarket are any indication, the chances of a settlement appear bleak.

Board solicitor Paul Rouleau admitted he has no solution for high school teachers who refuse to teach an additional class.

"The union has made it very clear that it is a provincial mandate not to go back to class unless they are teaching only six periods a day," Rouleau explained in a rare public appearance. "It can't be resolved at the table."

Gormley post office makes nation's top-20 list

Mystery shoppers visit 18,000 post offices

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
STAFF WRITER

They don't come any better than the Gormley Post Office.

In fact, the local mail outlet was judged to be in the top 20 in all of Canada.

The accomplishment gained Gormley a "WOW" letter from Canada Post's brass. Considering there are 18,000 post offices and outlets in Canada, it's quite an accomplishment. "In the top 20, your post office in Gormley tied for second place Canada-wide," said John Williston, Canada Post's district director of communications.

Staff and management of the local post office have just received a plaque recognizing them as the recipient of Canada Post's national Top Performer award for 1998.

Local post mistress Lil Hafenbrack and staff Cathy Wideman, Wendy

Shropshire, Georgina Alexopoulos and Bonnie Lofthouse are not only thrilled with the win, they're surprised.

The Gormley Post Office was put to the mystery shopper test and won, said Williston. In determining the winner of the Top Performer award, each and every post office in Canada is put through a secret examination.

Canada Post commissioned a private company to send shoppers across the country asking a number of questions regarding mail service.

The secret shopper takes note of service, awareness, attitude and efficiency, said Hafenbrack.

The secret shopper even noticed the neatness of the staff's uniforms and the cleanliness of the outlets. The people at the individual post offices have no idea who it was or when the secret shoppers came.

"We are very proud," said Hafenbrack.



Gormley post office was recognized as one of the top 20 postal outlets in the country. Pictured here are employees Georgina Alexopoulos, Lil Hafenbrack, and Wendy Shropshire. Story by Joan

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