



Ontario's long-term care system is paralysed and failing its most vulnerable residents. More than 600 government-funded homes are supposed to provide high-quality, round-the-clock care to the frail elderly. But Metroland's special report shows seniors stuck on record wait lists, entangled in bureaucracy and subject to pressure tactics that jeopardize their rights.

More coverage

4-PART SITUATION CRITICAL

• **Part 2, June 19:** When the woman's head hit the wall with a dull thud, Cathy's blood ran cold. "I was just thinking, 'Oh my God, oh my God, what if I killed her?'" The 26-year-old was four months into her first job as a personal support worker at a Toronto long-term care home when she left a frail, wisp of a 90-year-old Alzheimer's patient with a bump on the head, after struggling to transfer her 100-pound body from wheelchair to bed.

• **Part 3, June 24:** When a visitor pounds on the metal door of his no-frills, \$550-a-month apartment, George LeLievre slowly, painfully answers. That he is able to unlock the heavy door and swing it open with enough energy to flash an inviting smile and offer a "Please, come in" is a remarkable feat, given the number of complex medical conditions that reside, or have resided, in this frail 67-year-old man's body, and considering the number of times the tough Hamilton senior has walked a tightrope around the mouth of his grave.



• **Part 4, June 26:** The answer to gridlock across Ontario's long-term care system is an injection of new money, advocates for the elderly say.

For nursing-home operators, a top priority is the fulfillment of a long-standing promise from the province to fund more staff.

Ontario's Health Quality Council, a watchdog agency, sees more assisted-living homes as a potential pressure relief valve for overwhelmed nursing homes.

Have your say

We welcome your feedback, as well as your personal experiences with the long-term care system. Do you have a loved one waiting to enter or already in a long-term care facility in York Region? Tell us your story. E-mail editor Jim Mason at jmason@yrmg.com

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WAITING LISTS LEAVE SENIORS WITHOUT PROPER CARE



Elderly play waiting game

BY MIKE ADLER, JILLIAN FOLLERT AND ROB O'FLANAGAN

To Jill Wetstein, it's obvious why some long-term care homes have short wait lists, while years go by without beds opening up at others.

"It's the nice ones where you wait, while the dungeons of the world have a bed open right away," the York Region resident said.

Overwhelming wait lists for long-term care are a problem across Ontario, leaving thousands of senior citizens stuck at home without adequate care or languishing in hospital after their medical crisis has passed.

'It's the nice ones where you wait, while the dungeons of the world have a bed open right away.'

Jill Wetstein
Richmond Hill resident

Ms Wetstein's mother fell into the hospital-wait category.

A near-zero Ontariowide vacancy rate forces families such as Ms Wetstein's on to the growing queue. In this health region, recent data shows 2,466 people are waiting for a long-term care bed, 201 of whom are in hospital.

In 2008, the elderly woman — who had been living in a retirement home — was sent to York Central Hospital after she began having problems with her medications.

Once treated, it was determined that she needed round-the-clock long-term care.

Applications were sent to three nursing homes.

"They were all full," Ms Wetstein said. "Then the pressure was on."

She said the family was urged to accept an open bed at a North York home — of which she was wary, after hearing less-than-stellar reviews.

"Eventually, we were actually given an ultimatum. They said, 'She's going today ... and that's the end of it,'" Ms Wetstein recalled. "We had no choice."

The family was assured it would only be for a few weeks until one of their preferred homes had a spot open.

Six months later, Ms Wetstein and her siblings pulled their mother out of that home — they say her

experience there was "horrid" — and scraped together enough money to cover supplementary care back at the retirement home.

Ms Wetstein said she is disgusted by the lack of choice and unreasonable wait times, a sentiment echoed by other families confronted with the realities of Ontario's immobilized long-term care system.

A growing number of vulnerable Ontarians are trying with little success to find what they need in a long-term care system that is overwhelmed, unwieldy and tangled in red tape.

Health Minister Deb Matthews agreed there are problems, but said it takes time to turn around the system.

The province's \$3-billion-a-year network of government-licensed, publicly supported nursing homes is meant to provide high-quality care to Ontario's most fragile and medically needy residents.

Situation Critical, a Metroland Special Report, shows a system in paralysis, with only one nursing-home bed in 100 available across Ontario, and with an average wait as high as 200 days in some areas.

A \$1.1-billion government program, created three years ago to make home support more widely and easily available, was supposed to ease the problem.

Instead, wait lists have expanded, leaving more seniors in need of long-term care at home and thousands more taking up hospital beds with nowhere to go.

From 2007 to 2009, the average wait time for a nursing home bed in Ontario more than doubled, from 49 to 109 days.

The provincewide tally of people waiting is now more than 25,000 and rising, doubled from 12,000 in 2005.

The supply of new beds is static, with annual growth of less than 1 per cent. Only 900 more beds are expected to be available in nursing