

Factoid 2: PSW Profile

The long-term care home's 30,000 PSWs work on a casual or part-time basis, are not unionized and live with the uncertainty that comes with high turnover. The average PSW in Ontario is a single woman in her 20s whose job is the only thing keeping a roof over her head. Many are single mothers. Many PSWs earn as little as \$11 an hour and max out around \$19 an hour. The roughly 7,400 nurses who work in long-term care homes make \$25 to \$39 an hour.

of bed, put them back in bed. Feed them, wash them, dress them. Move on to the next one."

PSW advocates say it would be easier to navigate the growing challenges if PSWs were all well-trained and had a professional organization to lean on.

"We are in desperate need of regulation and standards, if you get a PSW in there who isn't properly trained, you put the public at risk. People get hurt," said Miranda Ferrier, president of PSW Canada, an advocacy group. "PSWs become an extension of their residents, they're their hands and their eyes. They do everything they can't do for themselves, and that takes the right training."

PSWs are faced with short staffing, a relentless work pace, supply shortages and residents whose medical needs are increasingly complex.

"I think one of the hardest things about my job is seeing people who are being abused or neglected," said Christine, a PSW working in the eastern GTA.

She said PSWs bear the brunt of funding and staffing gaps because they're forced to look residents in the eye when there aren't enough diapers, or enough staff to bathe them properly.

Residents unable to speak are the most vulnerable.

"There's a lady with MS who has a catheter, she's tube-fed and mostly bed ridden, she can't talk. The other day I started my shift at 2:30 p.m. and I got to her around 3 p.m. She was soaked with urine from head to toe as well as the bed pad and the sheet underneath it. Her catheter had a slow leak," Christine said. "But, the last rounds before I got there were at 1 p.m. There's no way she would have been that wet if someone had just checked her two hours ago. It means that no one came."

In order to meet each resident's complex needs, homes need to be run on strict, even rigid, schedules.

Residents are sometimes awakened before dawn or put to bed at 6 p.m. to accommodate the crunch to provide care, often in an operation similar to an assembly line.

Natrice Rese, who retired last summer after decades as a PSW, recalls dinner hours where she'd feed up to 15 people at a time, "literally shoving food in their mouths and trying to make sure they didn't choke".

Lack of time isn't the only pressure PSWs face.

Scant resources — a problem blamed on inadequate government funding — is a constant frustration, especially when incontinence products are involved.

Many PSWs reported watching residents sit soaking for hours, to



METROLAND STAFF/ PHYLIS PAPOULIAS

Personal support workers need better training, higher standards and a professional organization to lean on, says Miranda Ferrier, president of PSW Canada.

the point where urine dripped from the bottom of a wheelchair, or a bed was soaked to the mattress.

PSWs in Ontario banded together over the last few years to try for the same type of standards that apply to other health professionals and in the wake of increasing public concern about the overloading of the long-term care system.

"I want to try to change things, but I can't afford to lose my job over it," said Cathy, who went back and completed another course after banging her elderly patient's head against a wall.

PSWs say the lack of standards means people who aren't suited for the work are enticed by its reputation as an easy course that yields employment.

"It's one of the courses they tell people on welfare to take. They tell them it's easy, anyone can do it. And some of the courses are that easy, because they're not actually teaching you anything," said Heather, a Toronto PSW who said many of

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Toronto-area personal support worker

her coworkers are former Ontario Works recipients who completed six-month PSW courses offered by boards of education.

Heather said anything short of a year-long community college course such as the one she took, is inferior.

"The (career college and board of education) courses are too short. They don't teach them basic things like anatomy, it's more like here's how to give someone a bath. They

don't teach a lot about mental health and dementia and we really need to know those things."

But, concern that PSWs are not regulated or certified, coupled with media reports of infractions — a North Bay PSW, for example, was sentenced to house arrest this year for stealing an elderly resident's credit card — have led to calls for the profession to go through an accountability overhaul.

For the organizations working on behalf of PSWs, that means an Ontariowide PSW registry, uniform curriculum and clear-cut standards of practice.

In the chaotic life of a PSW, time, wages, resources, training, support and respect are often in short supply.

Without education standards, some new hires end up at a loss when they're thrust into real-life situations — jeopardizing the care of fragile residents they oversee.

"... When I got out there working, then I realized there's some things I don't know," said Jen, who has been

FIGHTING FOR PSW RIGHTS

As a champion for PSWs, Miranda Ferrier, 30, is outgoing, outspoken and easily outraged.

She worked in long-term care for three years before switching to advocacy and is still haunted by a particularly disturbing incident from her short stint in the field.

"I started an afternoon shift and took a woman to her room to change her. She was wearing a pad and it took me about 10 minutes to peel it off her skin. She had been sitting in feces since the morning," Ms Ferrier recalls, her voice cold. "It took me and another PSW 35 minutes to clean her and she was screaming. The other PSW and I were bawling. No one should have to go through something like that."

Ms Ferrier said she realized early on in her career that there simply was no support system for personal support workers.

PSW Canada launched in 2006, as a grassroots "by PSWs for PSWs" initiative, Ms Ferrier said. Today it has 4,500 members and its founders are responsible for the newly minted Ontario PSW Association, with its mandate to self-regulate the PSW profession and create a provincewide PSW registry.

Personal Support Network of Ontario also launched four years ago, in affiliation with the Ontario Community Support Association, but isn't pursuing regulation.

"We want to work with the government," said PSNO director Lori Holloway Payne. "It's difficult to regulate a profession when the government has said they're not interested ... so we have to work within the environment that exists."

PSNO has drafted a list of steps to make the profession more accountable, including a third-party process to evaluate and approve PSW training programs, a certification process that includes provincial exams. The group counts its membership at about 1,200.

Neither PSNO nor PSW Canada comes close to representing the estimated 100,000 PSWs working in Ontario.

The push and pull over PSW regulation in Ontario has been going on for years. In 2006, the Health Professionals Regulatory Advisory Council stunned advocates when it recommended that PSWs not be regulated, citing a lack of infrastructure, support and willingness.

But, with PSW Canada and PSNO growing and the public taking more notice of the PSW situation, HPRAC had planned to take another look at the regulation question this spring, with consultations slated to start in April.

Health Minister Deb Matthews scrapped those plans in March, saying ministry officials are instead working to develop a common understanding of what a PSW is and what training is required for the job.

on the job for a year and completed a six-month adult-education course offered through a school board.

"We didn't spend much time on the proper terminology for certain illnesses or anything that can go wrong with the body. Even the CPR first aid course, I find myself having to go back and reread my book over again. Because I find myself in some situations where it's like, 'Oh my God, it went too fast and now I don't remember what to do in this situation.'"

Factoid 3: Training

In Ontario, an aspiring PSW can train at a board of education, community college, private career college or nonprofit organization.

"Right now, we have these four sectors that train PSWs and there's nobody to make sure they're following consistent standards," said Lori Holloway Payne, director of Personal Support Network of Ontario. "At some, you maybe watch videos for two weeks and get a certificate, which is completely inappropriate."