



HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

NEWSLETTER

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Residential care fee hikes: a burden to province's most vulnerable citizens

On January 1, another rate increase went into effect for many seniors living in B.C.'s long-term care facilities, bringing their monthly fees from a maximum of \$2,220 to \$2,932 – the highest in the country, and a 93 per cent hike since the Liberals took office in 2001.

This second fee increase stems from the B.C. government's two-year phase-in plan, announced in 2009, as they attempted to standardize residential care rates based on an income-testing structure. At the time, the government said the increased fees would be put back into direct resident care.

But a 2010 survey, "*Standards of Respect: the Human Cost of Residential Care Fee Increases in British Columbia*", commissioned by HEU, reveals that these escalating rates have added an unnecessary financial burden to seniors and their families, with no improvements to staffing levels or quality of care.

Increasingly, spouses or relatives are draining their savings accounts, dipping into their own pension funds, remortgaging their homes, or going into debt to cover the growing out-of-pocket care costs. And some residents are no longer able to afford social outings and activities that add to the quality of their lives.

"Raising fees is only one way for the government to fund increased and more consistent staffing, which is the foundation for delivering quality care," says HEU's research director Chris Kinkaid. "We see discrepancies in staffing levels from facility to facility. Generally, staffing is higher in the publicly run residential care homes, and staff turnover is higher in those that turn to contracting out to cut costs.

"The government does need to stabilize and improve staffing levels, but achieving this through hefty increases to resident fees is unfair. We don't need to drive seniors into poverty to get them access to the quality care they deserve."

Under the new regulation, all residents are expected to pay 80 per cent of their after-tax family income in residential fees. In some cases, residents may be left with only \$275 a month for personal expenses. These items may include medical equipment (wheelchairs, eyeglasses and hearing aids), appointments with dentists, optometrists, physiotherapists and other specialists; plus telephone, cable and internet fees, and hygiene products, clothing, and other personal necessities.

The "Standards of Respect" report also revealed a lack of transparency in the "hardship review process", where low-income seniors or their advocates can apply for reduced rates based on personal financial circumstances. The process, however, is criticized as being overly complicated, time-consuming, and mostly unsuccessful.

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