

# Personal Support Workers on the front lines of caring for your loved ones



Personal support workers at Caressant Care Lindsay. From left to right: Deb Snable, Sharon Blundell, Celina Sisson and Trent Vokins.

When it comes to senior care, it takes a village to ensure our family members are well looked after. While some positions may be more glamorous, personal support workers (PSW) are a critical part of health care, but there's a growing shortage of PSWs. In an area like Kawartha Lakes, where we have a higher-than-average senior population, that's a significant concern.

The vast majority of care in long term care homes is provided by PSWs, whether with physical care, help with meals, personal hygiene, dressing, or emotional care and social interactions.

Catherine Dickinson-Gretton, a PSW from Lindsay, worked for about two years at a retirement home in Bobcaygeon. "I absolutely loved being a PSW," she told the *Advocate*. "Most likely this is because my grandma

raised me and we were extremely close. I loved the feeling of being needed and knowing how to take care of people. I loved hearing their stories and having them smile when I was able to help them and make them feel better about something."

Brianna Smit has worked as a PSW in Lindsay since 2012. Although she worked in a long-term care home for the first two years, she has worked in home care for the last six years and currently works for St. Elizabeth Health Care, which provides home-based support.

Smit says that what she loves about her job is "getting to know my clients on a one-on-one basis and actually getting to talk with them about their past, where they grew up, and just listening to their stories."

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# PSWs ON THE FRONT LINE

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## SHORTAGES NEED ADDRESSING

A positive attitude and a desire to help others is a great start for a career in this field, but without some significant changes and the political will, Ontario will soon face a serious shortage of PSWs just when it needs them most.

The Ontario Health Coalition (OHC) works to protect and improve the public health care system through advocacy. It is a non-profit, non-partisan public interest coalition and network. The OHC states in a recent report that this shortage of PSWs "is pressing and it requires urgent systemic action by policy makers."

"Long-term care homes have taken on a patient load that is commensurate to that of complex continuing care or psychogeriatric care hospitals but in long-term care they are funded at one-third of the rate. PSWs are on the front-line of this off-load of heavy-care patients. At best they are frustrated. At worst, they are getting injured, burnt out or leaving as a result," the OHC report says.

PSWs are a critical part of Ontario's health care system – but Ontario's health care system is under-funded. This province spends the lowest amount of dollars per person of all 10 provinces, and is even lower than the Canadian average.

"PSWs have gone the extra mile to make things work despite the systemic failure to support them adequately," states the OHC.

Pamela Kulas is the executive director at Victoria Manor Long Term Care, which is owned by the City of Kawartha Lakes. "PSWs play one of the most crucial roles in senior care," Kulas tells the *Advocate*. "There is no doubt it's demanding work," she says, adding that Victoria Manor "has made strides in enhancing the experience through our quality improvement initiatives."

That means the home is actively working to address PSWs' needs, she says, such as flexible scheduling and creating weekend worker positions, as well as encouraging the "use of our tuition and employee assistance programs to minimize the challenging aspects of the job."

"Additionally, we prioritize making the work experience as rewarding as possible by engaging our team in quality improvement committees and professional growth opportunities," says Kulas.

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**Employment**



PSW's Ann-Marie Cavan-Barry, left, and Rhonda Hughes, right, work at Frost Manor in Lindsay.

From nearby Peterborough, Season Himura has been a PSW for two years. "I love to see my residents laugh and smile," says Himura, describing that as the highlight of her challenging job.

"My unpopular opinion is that most management teams do the best they can, given the circumstances, but ... there needs to be more incentive for potential new staff or students. Clearly the sector is suffering and education should be subsidized or at least grants offered for those interested in doing this work," says Himura.

Smit says wages should be more competitive for support workers across the board, something that could be remedied with better funding from the province. Right now, according to PayScale, the average wage for a PSW in Canada is \$17.64 an hour — but it can start as low as minimum wage.

"I also believe elective health insurance benefits for part-time employees is a potential draw," she says. She had no access to such a program, but says, "I would have immediately paid into that and would have been a healthier and more available employee as a result."

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**Most management teams do the best they can, given the circumstances.**

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## PSWs NEED MORE PROVINCIAL FUNDING

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Zac Miller is co-chair of the Kawartha Lakes Health Coalition, the local chapter of the OHC. He says the provincial government must eliminate all barriers for people who want a career as a PSW, or other front-line health care positions, so the health care system has the qualified staff it needs.

The local health coalition believes this would involve eliminating post-secondary tuition fees as well as student debt for those intending to work as a PSW. He says provincial governments have failed to pay front-line staff adequately and to ensure good working conditions."

"Increasing funding to long-term care to increase wages and hire more PSWs and RNs is an absolute must," he says.

Miller says almost 2,000 Kawartha Lakes residents are waiting for long-term care and are being told the wait list is anywhere from four months to a year.

Despite the complex, precarious and often physically demanding positions of PSWs in long-term care homes, retirement homes, and in-home visits, compassionate people continue to make a commitment to care for our aging loved ones.

~ with files from Roderick Bennis

- To advocate for more funding for long term
- care and senior care in general, contact local
- MPP and infrastructure minister,
- Laurie Scott, at 705-324-6654
- or by emailing [laurie.scott@pc.ola.org](mailto:laurie.scott@pc.ola.org).

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