

Headwaters CEO denies claims of kitchen staff assisting nurses

By Rob Paul

After the union representing frontline workers at Headwaters Health Care Centre in Orangeville suggested kitchen staff were being asked to help nurses in the hospital this past weekend, Headwaters President and CEO Kim Delahunt has released a statement calling the allegations false.

"I am compelled today to issue further clarification of the January 22 statement about false claims that continue to be shared in the media as a result of 'tips' and interviews by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)," Delahunt said. "To be clear, only trained health care professionals provide patient care at Headwaters Health Care Centre, regardless of external or internal circumstances. Some non-clinical staff may perform duties outside of their usual scope of work occasionally when necessary but rest assured that these do not include caring for patients."

The statement came after SEIU Healthcare president Sharleen Stewart backed up statements from anonymous Headwaters nurses about kitchen staff being involved in helping them due to being shorthanded.

"There wasn't much that dietary aids could do to assist them because what they need is all hands on deck, but they need to be the right hands, and that means that they need more nurses," said Stewart. "We've been ringing alarm bells for years about the situation, particularly in nursing - the crisis, the government has ignored it and now hospitals are literally left on their own."

The union represents over 60,000 healthcare workers and due to staffing shortages as a result of COVID-19, Stewart says kitchen aides were asked to help out and SEIU was contacted by nurses from Headwaters to express concern.

"In response to a baseless claim made by the SEIU, at no time have non-clinical staff been asked to, nor have they carried out any patient care duties," said Delahunt. "As a result of Directive #2 issued by the Province on January 5, requiring all hospitals to ramp down all non-emergency surgeries and procedures and other non-urgent diagnostic imaging and ambulatory clinic activity, we have been able to redeploy clinical staff from the areas impacted by the directive to areas of the hospital with the highest need for additional patient care support. We are very disappointed that SEIU has created a false narrative at the expense of the hospital and our hard-working staff, who have given everything they have over the past 22 months in the service of their community."

After Delahunt's denial of non-clinical staff being asked to help nurses, Stewart acknowledged province wide staffing issues are a problem but didn't rescind the claims against Headwaters.

"If they're worried about their reputation, I'm worried about the patients and the staff," said Stewart.

Delahunt was adamant in her statement that Headwaters can handle staff shortages and would never consider asking non-clinical staff to fill in when shorthanded.

"We at Headwaters are proud of our reputation as an exemplary place for residents in Dufferin-Caledon to seek health care, and we are dismayed to have to defend ourselves against flagrant lies. In challenging times, we count on our professional colleagues to work with us and rise to meet the occasion; our staff continue to go above and beyond, and we continue to be humbled by the courage, perseverance and resilience they have all shown.

"Unfortunately, inaccurate information in the media as a result of SEIU's claim has consequences. We are aware of at least one patient who needed to be transferred by ambulance to our emergency department who expressed hesitation about that because they 'didn't want to be cared for by kitchen staff.' It is dangerous for patients who need emergency care not to seek that at Headwaters as a result of blatant misinformation. The union's claims are baseless. We want to assure the public that Headwaters is a place they can continue to rely on for safe and compassionate care."

Nursing shortages have become a major topic throughout the pandemic, especially with Premier Doug Ford's government suppressing wages with Bill 124 which has led to health workers leaving the sector.

'The Premier needs to go into some of those organizations and stay the 14, 16, 18-hour shifts and then say 'Okay, this bill needs to be gone,' said Dr. Doris Grinspun, CEO of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario.

Almost five percent of the hospital staff, physicians and midwives at Headwaters Health Care Centre are currently off sick or at home self-isolating due to COVID-19.