

Promise of care beds unfilled

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by Paul Willcocks

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The campaign promise was 5,000 additional beds across the province by 2006, a 20 per cent increase

But in the Interior, there are now actually 333 fewer beds- a loss of about seven per cent of the total the Liberals inherited

The region started off with 4,700 beds. It closed 1,321 residential-care beds and has replaced them so far with 620 residential-care beds, the highest level of care, and 368 assisted living spaces

Overall, that leaves the region down 333 beds

At least, that's how the health region counts them. Health Minister Shirley Bond comes up with a higher number of beds by including the extension of high-level services to 53 people who aren't living in care homes. The region is renting beds in private facilities to help deal with the shortage. The quibbles over numbers don't really matter. The Liberal promise was a 20 per cent increase in care beds across the province by 2006. They said the beds were urgently needed and claimed there was a 4,200-bed shortfall at the time of the election

Now they have abandoned the campaign promise. Bond says the beds will be ready by 2008

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And in a period when the number of people in the province over 75 has increased by 13 per cent, the government has added - by the most favourable count - fewer than one per cent more beds. Across B.C., the government claims to have added 171 beds; the health authorities count shows a 274-bed decline from the time of the election

The numbers are tiny in all regions. The North has at best maintained the number of beds it had four years ago; the Fraser Health Region is down a few dozen beds; on Vancouver Island, the government has added two beds. In the populous and growing Vancouver Coastal region, it has added 33 beds. So much for the 5,000-bed commitment. There's lots of enthusiasm in the health authorities for the changes in seniors' care currently underway. Older, outmoded facilities are being closed. New centres offer a range of options, from residential care with full medical support to assisted-living homes that provide more independence. An emphasis on supporting people in their homes, or in other non-medical residential settings, is keeping people out of care homes. All these are positive changes that should eventually make life better for seniors

But in the meantime, no one is saying that the current bed supply is adequate for the needs of seniors and their families. Remember, the Liberals identified this problem in the election campaign, pointing to a major shortage of beds. They promised a plan to address the shortage - and they haven't delivered

The result is problems throughout the health-care system. If seniors can't get needed residential care, they end up in acute-care hospital beds. That means those beds aren't available for people who need surgery, or who should be admitted through emergency. In the Interior region, about 100 of the 1,200 hospital acute-care beds are occupied by people who should be in long-term care

Premier Gordon Campbell blames the broken promise on the NDP. The long-term care centres were in worse shape than expected, and more beds had to be closed

But the government completed a review of all the centres almost three years ago. The supposed plan for 5,000 additional beds was approved at a televised cabinet meeting in April 2002. And, until now, the government has insisted the plan was on track and the deadline would be met

That raises two concerns. Either government management was so poor that no one knew the plan was off the rails, or the government knew and kept silent

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Either way, seniors, their families and anyone who needed the health-care system has been hurt by this broken promise

FOOTNOTE: The Liberals are skittish about this issue, which has been a major sore point with smaller communities. The health ministry refuses to release its count of bed closures and openings by region. Bond won't say how many beds the province needs today, based on the ministry's best estimates