



## Caring but not cared for: How the federal government can protect live-in caregivers

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In the wake of the Toronto Star's investigation into abuses of the live-in caregivers program, the province has responded by creating a hotline and developing information sheets for workers, and it has promised to introduce legislation later this year that will ban placement fees and begin targeted enforcement of agencies that violate Ontario's labour laws.

It is now time that the federal government take steps to protect live-in caregivers from exploitation. From our point of view, one practical first step would be to make it easier for the caregiver to change employers by transforming the live-in caregiver program from an *employer-specific* program to a *sector-specific* program.

Every year about 5,000 live-in caregivers, mostly women from developing countries, are recruited to Canada to address a labour market shortage of caregivers for our children and elderly. After completing 24 months of live-in-care work within a three-year period, they are eligible to apply for permanent residency. This is the only federal low-skilled temporary worker program that provides a route to permanent residency – and for this reason, it is perhaps the best low-skilled temporary worker program we have.

Yet, as the Toronto Star investigation has revealed, many workers arrive to jobs that no longer exist. In some cases they have been deliberately deceived by employment agencies. But in other cases, the reasons are much more innocent. For example, the elderly relative they were recruited to take care of may have passed away, or the employer may no longer be able to afford live-in-care services because they have recently lost their job.

In these situations the caregivers are restricted to working for the employer that is named on their work permit. So they have to find a new employer and get a new work permit – a process that according to groups representing live-in caregivers can take up to six months. They will also have to pay additional fees to Citizenship and Immigration. (If they have already paid unscrupulous recruiters to come to Canada, these additional costs might be too much to bear.)

Making it easier for a caregiver to change employers would make the program more responsive to the changing health care needs of Canadians. It would also give flexibility to workers to find suitable employment when she (or he) has lost a job.

A *sector-specific* work permit would make it easier for caregivers to find appropriate employment because it would no longer be necessary to get a new work permit. The employer would still need to apply to HRSDC to ensure that no Canadians can fill this job. The live-in caregiver would also have to negotiate a contract with the employer that could be sent to HRSDC and CIC so that the departments could provide the necessary oversight. However, once this process was completed the employer could hire a live-in caregiver right away.

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Perhaps even more importantly, in combination with other measures, such as blacklisting employers who abuse the system, stronger enforcement of labour standards, and legislation banning the use of fees, it would go a long way to strengthen the live-in caregiver program.