

CAS budget slashed while Liberals throw away cash

Georgina

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Is it any big surprise?

By Tracy Kibble

Dalton McGuinty's Liberals have wasted more than \$1 billion of taxpayers' money in a failed attempt to streamline Ontario's health records.

Instead of improving the system, Ontario "is near the back of the pack" when it comes to electronic health records, having thrown away millions on under-used computer systems and overpaid consultants who didn't do much of anything, according to Ontario Auditor General Jim McCarter, who released his investigation into the eHealth agency last week.

At a time when people are struggling to make ends meet, this kind of frivolous misuse of public money delivers a stinging blow to communities and one that continues to shake our faith politicians will use our money wisely.

While families in Georgina pump an average of \$80 a week into their gas tanks to commute to work (the province is not willing to make the Hwy. 404 extension a priority - no cash, I guess), the Liberals spend our money foolishly and with little strategy or vision.

While the Georgina Food Pantry shelves grow lean under pressure to feed more than 120 families each month, the Liberals throw our money at wealthy people who bill us for coffee and muffins.

While many of us count our pennies each week to put food on the table, over-paid eHealth consultants (about 300 of them) billed us for fast food, booze and hotel rooms.

One \$2,700-a-day consultant, for example, charged taxpayers \$3.26 for a muffin and tea, reports show.

Can you imagine making \$2,700 a day? For nothing?

Another \$300-an-hour consultant billed us for reading an article on electronic health records given to her by her husband, another consultant.

Consultants were contracted at up to \$2,750 a day. They then billed taxpayers for out-of-pocket expenses that included \$1.65 for a cup of coffee and \$3.99 for cookies.

Now, let's get to the part that makes this scandal even more maddening.

While squandering \$1 billion without results, the Liberals have shaved agency budgets geared to help and counsel Ontario's most vulnerable citizens - broken families and children without guidance or parents.

York Region's Children's Aid Society and others across the province were told in June - about the time eHealth consultants were wining, dining and travelling on our dime - it must operate with millions of dollars less.

For example, the province chopped \$5 million from the region's annual \$43.5-million CAS budget.

York Region, one of the fastest growing communities in Ontario, serves 1,200 families and nearly 3,000 children each year.

Those numbers swell along with the province's mandated Places To Grow scheme where it tells communities how many people and jobs it must make available in the next 20 years.

It's unfathomable the government could take money out of the hands of needy children and social services in general while handing it blindly to fat-cat bureaucrats and over-paid consultants so they can scratch their heads.

The idea behind eHealth is to create electronic health records and, if done right, the auditor says it could save \$6 billion if implemented in every province and territory.

The report, however, heavily criticized the way governments have allowed eHealth and its predecessor, Smart Systems for Health, to let spending go out of control with little or no financial protection.

Meanwhile, York CAS executive director Patrick Lake says while cuts won't immediately affect families and children in need, the agency - and other across the province - have filed for review of the cuts. We can expect to learn outcomes of those reviews next month, he added.

While I know social services is not "sexy" when it comes to garnering votes at election time, I sure hope residents remember where the provincial Liberals' priorities lie.

It's not with transportation to create jobs in the more rural communities. It's not with our schools as the system grapples with bullying issues and shortage of classrooms and equipment and it's certainly not with our more vulnerable citizens; children.

It seems the Liberals' have different priorities.

Perhaps a high-paid consultant can help them figure it out.