

To: Community Living Renfrew Management

OPSEU Local 472
MPP – Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke
MP – Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke

Date: August 21, 2026

Subject: The Impact of the Ongoing Community Living Strike on Residents and Their Continuity of Care

Dear Community Living Management, Union Representatives, MPP, and MP,

I am writing as a small business owner in Renfrew and as someone who has had the privilege of providing a volunteer opportunity to a 40-year-old woman with Down syndrome. To protect her privacy, I will refer to her as “the resident” throughout this letter.

For the past two years, the resident has volunteered at my store. Her responsibilities have included hanging clothing, vacuuming, organizing toys and books, and interacting with customers. She has been an excellent customer-service ambassador and has taken tremendous pride in being able to contribute to our business and community.

On Monday, May 25, 2026, approximately 82 Community Living employees represented by OPSEU Local 472 went on strike. The strike has now continued for almost 13 weeks.

I understand that labour disputes involve important issues for both employees and management. However, I believe it is equally important that the impact on the residents who depend on Community Living services not be overlooked.

Before the strike, the resident was thriving.

She was happy, enthusiastic, and proud to come to work. She enjoyed interacting with customers and took great pride in helping around the store. She had a consistent routine and strong relationships with her regular Community Living support workers, particularly Kim and Linda.

With the assistance and encouragement of the regular Community Living staff, she had also obtained paid employment at a local factory one day a week. She was gaining confidence, independence, and a meaningful role in her community.

Approximately two weeks into the strike, I began noticing significant changes.

The resident became increasingly preoccupied and distressed about the absence of her regular support workers. Her attitude changed considerably. She became more

resistant to her usual responsibilities, increasingly difficult to redirect, and noticeably less interested in the activities she had previously enjoyed.

There were also repeated issues with communication and consistency from replacement workers.

Our store has established routines that have worked successfully for this resident for more than two years. One example is her lunch routine. She needs to take her lunch at approximately 12:00 p.m. and can become very upset if she has to wait while we are serving customers.

For this reason, we established a simple rule that she would bring a cold lunch that could be eaten at her scheduled time. This was not an unreasonable restriction; it was a routine established specifically to support her well-being and allow her to successfully participate in our workplace.

Unfortunately, replacement workers repeatedly disregarded this request.

While these may appear to be small issues to someone unfamiliar with the resident, consistency and routine are extremely important to her ability to function successfully.

Communication Concerns

On Monday, June 15, the resident did not attend her volunteer placement.

In the previous two years, this had never happened without the regular staff notifying us.

On June 16, I spoke with Shona, a Community Living manager, regarding the lack of communication and the noticeable changes in the resident's behaviour.

This was the first time in more than two years that I felt uncomfortable about continuing her placement because I was genuinely concerned about how the disruption was affecting her.

Shona assured me that she would speak with the house and address the concerns. She also asked me to please allow the resident to remain in her placement.

I agreed because we genuinely care about her well-being and did not want to disrupt another important part of her routine.

Unfortunately, on Monday, June 22, the resident again failed to attend her placement.

Once again, there was no call from the house or Community Living.

I again spoke with the house and with Shona about the situation and explained that I was becoming increasingly concerned about the decline in the resident's behaviour and attitude.

I was told that the resident had told the replacement workers that she did not have to come because it was a June holiday, and they accepted this explanation.

Regardless of how this misunderstanding occurred, I found it extremely concerning that the workers responsible for supporting her did not recognize that this was not a scheduled holiday and did not verify the information.

It demonstrated to me just how little familiarity the replacement workers had with her normal schedule and routine.

Once again, Shona asked me to give the resident another chance and assured me that she would speak with her and arrange for her to return.

I agreed.

The Decline Continued

Despite these efforts, the resident's behaviour continued to decline.

She was no longer the happy, bubbly, enthusiastic woman we had known for the previous two years.

She became increasingly stressed, defiant, distracted, and resistant to her usual responsibilities.

I repeatedly expressed my concern that the disruption caused by the strike was taking a significant toll on her and that these issues had not occurred when she was supported by the regular staff who knew her well.

I also expressed concern that the replacement workers did not appear to have the same ability to understand her routines, needs, and behaviours.

The Final Incidents

On August 18, the resident arrived at the store and did not follow her established routine of locking her purse in our office.

Instead, she left it on a chair near the front of the store, and it subsequently went missing.

The incident consumed approximately three hours of my workday. The resident became extremely agitated and paced around the store while we tried to locate her belongings.

I eventually found the purse in a toy box while cleaning at the end of the day.

On August 21, I spent approximately 30 minutes trying to redirect the resident back to the routine that had worked successfully for more than two years.

I explained that she needed to put her purse in the office and then begin her regular duties.

Eventually, I had to give her a choice: she could put her belongings away and continue with her work, or, if she was not able to participate that day, she could go home.

She initially put her purse in the office and obtained the vacuum.

I then stepped away briefly to assist a customer.

Approximately five minutes later, the resident had collected her belongings and left the store without speaking to either my husband or myself.

She left simply because she did not want to continue with her usual duties that day.

Approximately 30 minutes later, Tonya came to the store wanting to understand what had happened.

I explained the ongoing issues and my concerns about the effect the strike was having on the resident.

What was particularly concerning was that Tonya was unaware of the issues that had been occurring with the resident.

This raises a much larger question:

Who is monitoring the residents during this prolonged strike?

What We Have Lost

Prior to the strike, the resident was thriving.

She was happy to come to our store. She loved interacting with customers. She took pride in her responsibilities and enjoyed putting her own personal touches on the store.

With the help of the regular Community Living staff, she had even progressed to paid employment one day a week.

For approximately 11 weeks, we have watched a noticeable change.

The happy, confident woman we knew has become increasingly stressed, defiant, disengaged, and resistant to the activities she once enjoyed.

I want to make one thing very clear:

We love this resident. She has become like family to us.

Ending her placement is not something we wanted to do.

It was a gut-wrenching decision.

However, I am a small business owner. I am not a trained Community Living support worker, and I am not equipped to manage a significant change in behaviour without the support of the regular staff who know this resident and her needs.

Therefore, as of August 21, 2026, I have made the difficult decision to place her volunteer placement on hold for the duration of the strike.

This is not a punishment.

It is not because we no longer want her at our store.

It is because we want her to succeed, and we recognize that we cannot provide the level of support she currently requires while also operating our business.

My Concern Is Bigger Than One Resident

This experience has left me seriously concerned about other residents who may be experiencing similar disruptions.

Prior to the strike, I did not have concerns about the resident's care or support. She was doing exceptionally well.

The consistency of the regular staff was clearly an important part of that success.

I find it extremely concerning that a small business owner providing an unpaid volunteer opportunity has felt the need to repeatedly advocate for the continuity, routine, communication, and well-being of a Community Living resident.

That responsibility should not fall primarily on a small business owner.

I respectfully ask Community Living management, OPSEU Local 472, and our elected representatives to consider the following:

- How are residents' routines and continuity of care being protected during this prolonged strike?
- How are replacement workers being informed about the individual needs, routines, schedules, and community placements of the residents they support?
- What systems are in place to ensure that families, businesses, volunteer placements, and other community partners receive timely communication when a resident does not attend?
- How are managers monitoring the well-being and progress of residents during the strike?
- How are residents' employment and volunteer opportunities being protected?
- What is being done to minimize the emotional and behavioural impact of the disruption on residents?
- Once the strike is resolved, what support will be provided to residents who have experienced a significant decline in their routines, independence, and community participation?

The residents of Community Living did not choose this strike.

They did not choose to lose the staff members they know and trust.

They did not choose to have their routines disrupted.

And they should not have to bear the consequences of a prolonged labour dispute.

They deserve stability. They deserve consistency. They deserve communication. Most importantly, they deserve to have their well-being remain at the centre of every decision.

The resident I have described in this letter is a capable woman who was thriving. She was contributing to her community, developing independence, working, volunteering, interacting with customers, and building confidence.

It is heartbreaking to watch that progress disappear.

I sincerely hope this letter will not be viewed as an attack on individual employees or management. My concern is about the residents who have very little control over what is happening around them.

I am asking all parties involved to remember that while negotiations and labour issues are taking place, real people are living with the consequences every single day.

The resident deserves the opportunity to return to the happy, confident, and engaged person she was before this disruption.

I hope that once the strike is resolved, the focus will immediately turn toward rebuilding that stability and helping residents regain the progress and independence they worked so hard to achieve.

Thank you for taking the time to consider the concerns of a small business owner who has had the privilege of watching a remarkable woman grow and thrive—and who is deeply saddened to have had to step away from that opportunity because of circumstances beyond her control.

Sincerely,

Laura Wheeler
Small Business Owner
Renfrew, Ontario