

Bill Tieleman's 24 Hours Column

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HEALTH SCARE!

By Bill Tieleman

“There are few forces more ruthless than Americans doing good.”

- John W. Holmes, 1969

The BC Liberal government plans to award an American corporation a contract worth \$135 million or more over 15 years to run the BC Nurseline, a telephone healthcare service that handles more than 900 calls a day, **24 Hours** has learned.

An internal BC Ministry of Health Services email obtained by **24 Hours** states that three U.S.-owned corporations are short-listed to win the contract to run BC Nurseline.

The BC Health Coalition and the BC Civil Liberties Association are outraged at the decision to choose a U.S. company, which will not be announced until after the May 17 provincial election.

Those organizations also fought a controversial provincial decision to turn administration of the BC Medical Services Plan over to U.S.-based Maximus, one of the companies now short-listed to run BC Nurseline.

The Coalition and BCCLA have confidentiality and privacy concerns about the U.S. Patriot Act, which lets the FBI seize the records of American companies.

BC Nurseline employs 100 registered nurses and offers 24-hour health information and advice. It is currently operated by E-Comm, the Emergency Communications organization that provides police, fire and emergency dispatch services.

In addition to Maximus, a company criticized in several states for its “welfare to work” programs, U.S.-owned Clinidata Corporation and McKesson Health Solutions have bids to take over BC Nurseline. No Canadian-owned companies are being considered.

“I’m completely horrified. It’s a complete nightmare,” says Micheal Vonn, Policy Director for the Civil Liberties Association. “This could have a chilling effect on people seeking services from Nurseline.”

"It's incredible that there are no privacy concerns here. Under the Patriot Act the FBI has the right to seize whole databases and then centralize it to other agencies," Vonn said.

Joyce Jones, Health Coalition co-chair and a former registered nurse, said the possibility that people who call the BC Nurseline for medical assistance might then have those confidential records accessible to U.S. authorities could harm the whole service.

"I'm aghast that they would do this, breaking the confidentiality you have with a medical professional," she said. "The Nurseline is invaluable but I would have trouble telling anyone to use it because if this is going to be contracted to an American corporation you can't be guaranteed it will be kept confidential."

"Diseases like Hepatitis C, AIDS, mental disorders, suicidal callers – these would not be confidential," Jones said. "I think it will reduce the effectiveness of Nurseline because people will hesitate to make that phone call."

Joyce Murray, provincial Minister of Management Services, has previously argued that BC legislation and contracting only with Canadian subsidiaries of U.S. firms protects privacy rights.

Vonn disagrees.

And B.C.'s independent privacy commissioner David Loukidelis said in October 2004 that he remains concerned. "Our research and analysis led us to the conclusion that the USA Patriot Act knows no borders," he said.

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