Ontario’s troubled nursing home system is a step closer to fixing the problems exposed by a recent Star investigation.

A task force proposed by the nursing home industry last November — immediately after Star stories revealed a rape, beatings and neglect of vulnerable elderly long-term care residents — is now finalizing its plan to create change.

Veterans of the nursing home industry met last week with new task force chair Gail Donner, a health consultant and retired University of Toronto dean of nursing, to discuss its upcoming three-month probe of serious problems. The task force will hear from families, residents and workers on the best way to keep seniors safe.
In an interview, Donner said work is “well underway” at the Long-Term Care Task Force on Resident Care and Safety. The immediate focus is on the creation of a website with a survey they hope will elicit recommendations for change. It will be launched in roughly two weeks.

“The focus is on abuse, neglect, transparency and quality of care for residents in long-term care in Ontario,” Donner said.

Results of the survey will give the task force a “series of actions that are practical and do-able.”

Some members of the task force are breathing a sigh of relief that Donner is pushing the agenda forward.

“(The task force) will be under intense pressure to take strong action given the devastating revelations in the Star,” said one industry source.

It will give its action plan to Health Minister Deb Matthews, likely by the end of April.

When the stories were first published, Matthews demanded an emergency meeting with industry leaders and told them to fix the system. The ministry licenses and inspects nursing homes.

“I was very clear with the different parts of the long-term care sector how disappointed I was, how horrified I was, by the stories I read,” Matthews told reporters at the time.

That was two months ago. By mid-February, the plans for change will be made public — a significant step for an industry that has long denied problems existed.

It is unclear, however, how far the task force will go in examining its culture of secrecy, keeping problems inside the home instead of exposing them publicly, the industry source said.

Organized by nursing home operators like the Ontario Long Term Care Association, there is likely to be much debate among the 16 groups on the task force. They include staff, families and residents, along with industry groups like the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario.

A source of one discussion was the decision to isolate the probe to abuse only or also include the chronic neglect of residents in some homes, the source said. Members decided to look at both.

Another touchy issue has always been the number of staff caring for residents on each shift and the hours of care each resident is given. But, the source said, some nursing home operators agreed from the start that staffing was an issue that had to be dealt with “if there was to be an honest discussion about neglect and how it is to be tackled.”
The Star has been investigating nursing home issues for a decade. A series on neglect published in 2003 prompted then health minister George Smitherman to promise a “revolution” in nursing home care. That resulted in eventual changes to legislation, enacted in July 2010, creating new tougher enforcement standards and inspections.

Last fall, the Star obtained 1,500 of those new inspection reports and analyzed the results. Of those reports, serious problems were found in 900 cases. Roughly 125 were abuse related, 350 revealed neglectful treatment of a senior and the remainder found other types of poor care. There are 77,000 residents in Ontario nursing homes.

The investigation found that homes routinely tried to hide information about their problems from families and inspectors.

Some homes, for example, rationed the residents to one diaper per eight-hour shift and told staff they were not allowed to tell their families that they were left in soiled clothing. Other homes ignored problems with abusive employees or tried to hide incidents of employees roughing up seniors.

In one case, a helpless 71-year-old Toronto woman with advanced dementia was raped in her bed, allegedly by a male nurse identified months earlier by other staff at the home as someone who regularly disappeared on shift “without explanation.”