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Budget/Health

Little done for mental health, critics charge

Sweet, Barb

A year and a half after a scathing report on the province's mental-health system, critics say government still isn't putting much money into needed changes.

"It's a very small step forward," the Canadian Mental Health Association provincial executive director Geoff Chaulk said of Monday's provincial budget.

Mental-health services got \$1 million in this year's budget, the same as the last time around.

More spending

By contrast though, this year's budget brought out the province's chequebook rather than the chopping cleaver. It was also a health budget, although that didn't necessarily reflect on mental health services.

"Mental health is a poor cousin in health care," Chaulk said.

"We're grateful for \$1 million because it will help more people. But it's still a small drop in the bucket, so to speak."

The budget does set out a path for home support services, a demonstration project for 25 people. People with severe mental illnesses have not previously been eligible for home care services, unless they also had some other illness.

The budget will also result in an additional five or six case managers, Chaulk said.

"In the budget, the minister of health was quoted as saying mental health is as important as physical," Chaulk said.

"The spending doesn't support that."

New mental health spending on crisis response intervention includes transportation and training for ambulance drivers and constant observation during trips to the emergency room.

Other issues

Outside the budget, there are other issues that need to be addressed, Chaulk said.

The report by Judge Donald Luther on the Reid/Power inquiries examining the police shooting deaths of Norman Reid of Little Catalina, Trinity Bay, and Darryl Power of Corner Brook was released Dec. 22, 2003.

Power, armed with two knives and a hammer, was shot and killed by the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary Oct. 16, 2000. Luther ruled that death suicide by cop. Reid, 43, armed with a hatchet, was killed in a standoff with the RCMP Aug. 26, 2000.

The report concluded the five shots fired at Reid - two of them in his back- were not excessive and were consistent with "established police training and reality."

Luther's report laid the blame on the mental-health system, not the officers, and recommended sweeping changes, including increased community support and a new Mental Health Act.

That act is the oldest in Canada and Luther said government has no excuse for not having updated it.

That is supposed to be in the works, Chaulk said, although he has no idea when the act will be revamped.

"I don't think we're off the radar because of Judge Luther's report," Chaulk said. "(The act) does need modernizing. I actually think if we had a better community support structure. We'd probably would have to rely less on the Mental Health Act."

Chaulk said he was glad to see that mental health services

and addiction services have been treated together.

"Research does indicate there's a fairly high rate of substance abuse among people who have serious mental health problems," Chaulk said.

As far as addictions go, there was money for methadone drug addiction treatment, enhanced detox services, extra addictions counsellors for youth and a needle exchange program in the St. John's area.

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