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Telegram Forum

Recognizing the value of seniors' mental health

Geoff Chaulk and Frankie O'Neill

Newfoundland and Labrador has the most rapidly aging population in the country. People over the age of 65 comprise almost 14 per cent of our population, while people over the age of 50 total 35 per cent of our population. The population of the province is aging faster than other Canadian provinces due to factors such as increased life expectancy, the lowest provincial birth rate, and the much-talked about social reality of out-migration.

The vast majority of our seniors reside independently in the community (93 per cent) and almost 84 per cent own their own homes while struggling with the lowest average incomes in the country. Almost seven per cent of our seniors reside in long-term-care facilities, personal-care and community-care homes. This totals 4,500 people.

About a year ago, the Canadian Mental Health Association-Newfoundland and Labrador (CMHA-NL) embarked on a process of exploring the mental-health issues and needs pertaining to our seniors. In a review of the literature, we found that 50 per cent of people in long-term-care facilities show signs of moderate to severe depression. The literature also indicates that long-term-care facilities, in particular, are difficult environments for diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

Nationally, the story is much the same. In the Senate report on mental illness and addiction in Canada, released in May 2006, it is noted that 20 per cent of seniors have some form of mental illness. The Senate report goes on to say that 80 to 90 per cent of seniors in long-term-care facilities are afflicted with a mental illness or a cognitive impairment.

Further, the Senate report indicates that the mental-health and long-term-care service sectors need to catch up with the reality of who is being housed in these facilities and their related mental-health needs.

A field survey carried out this past winter by two social work students, on work terms with CMHA-NL, found that many frontline staff in long-

term-care facilities did not feel they had sufficient knowledge to work with seniors who had a mental illness and that they needed more education in this area. It was also noted while conducting the survey that mental illness and Alzheimer's disease were sometimes incorrectly considered synonymous.

With this information in mind, CMHA-NL hosted a roundtable of local experts to confirm that the facts and figures presented here ring true. They did. CMHA-NL sent proposals to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), the province's health boards and the United Way. From the PHAC and the health boards, CMHA-NL requested operating dollars for a one-year education program on seniors and mental illness for staff in long-term-care facilities. The response from the PHAC and the health boards has been disappointing to date. A funding request to the United Way of Avalon to develop a DVD-based education product which uses local experts to educate frontline staff on seniors' mental-health issues is about to be considered.

Perhaps it doesn't need to be said, but we all know that our seniors have made a huge contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador society and culture - from fishing the ocean, to teaching our children and ourselves, and to helping run the province and country.

Given the importance of good mental health for our seniors, and given there is still no help from the publicly funded system, we wonder - how much does Newfoundland society really value our seniors' mental health?

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