

# The Telegram (St. John's)

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Letters to the editor

## **Senate report is 'welcome relief'**

Geoff Chaulk

A Senate committee has released a bold and honest report on transforming mental health and addiction services in the country.

Given the stigma that still surrounds mental illness and addiction, the report is appropriately titled *Out of the Shadows at Last*.

For many of us who have worked in the field of mental health and/or live with a related illness or love someone who does, this report is welcome relief as it gives voice to what so many of us have been arguing for many years.

### **Uncovered major problems**

The committee pulled no punches and laid on the line some of the systemic and social embarrassments that have existed in this country for two or three decades.

Most embarrassing of all is how people with serious mental illness have been treated. It is still common for people with illnesses such as schizophrenia to exist in the community in substandard housing, eking out an existence on social assistance that leaves them living below the poverty line.

The report is full of staggering statistics, such as 30 to 40 per cent of people who are homeless in this country have mental health problems and 20 to 25 per cent have mental health and addiction problems. If these percentages were applied to people with cancer or heart disease who were homeless, I suspect we would have a less significant homeless problem in this country.

Between 1980 and 2000, the number of housing units

developed through federal government programs dropped from 24,000 to fewer than 1,000.

The senators came up with a significant plan for housing development. If a person is living with a serious mental illness it should be obvious to anyone how important a good and safe home is to recovery.

For many of these folks some level of personal support from a health-care provider will be necessary for some time. The committee suggested community mental-health support that has been very effective in helping people reach their own personal level of recovery, maintain life in the community and achieve such universal goals as higher education and work.

The lives of people with serious mental illness and many of their families will be improved if the senators' recommendations are implemented.

### **A road to recovery**

There is better treatment now for mental illness than ever before. We know that even people with the most serious illnesses can live successfully in the community and can start their own personal process of recovery.

The senators were spot on in terms of recognizing the recovery capacity for all who live with mental illness and how the concept of recovery needs to be embraced as it offers hope for everyone affected.

### **Funding scheme recommended**

The committee devised a funding plan for the housing program, community mental-health services and the 118 recommendations in the report. That plan is to increase the excise duty on drinks of higher alcohol content and lower the duty on lower-alcohol drinks. This taxation plan has been tried elsewhere with a "fringe" social benefit of less alcohol-related offences.

In a recent briefing with one of our senators, the audience was advised that funding and support had been approved by

the Conservative government to implement the 118 recommendations.

These recommendations include the establishment of a multi-million-dollar mental health commission for the country.

We were also advised that, although not noted in the report, Newfoundland and Labrador will have its own commissioner to bring forward our issues at the national level.

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