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These are positive times for mental health

Geoff Chaulk

In anticipation of Mental Health Week (May 7-13) and its theme, "Work-Life Balance: It's a Matter of Time," I've been mulling over where we are on these issues. It's my opinion that the mental health of the population, at the national and provincial levels, is receiving more attention than ever before. I think this is due, in part, to very effective political advocacy coming from unexpected places.

After touring the country and hearing poignant stories from patients (consumers), families and service providers, Senator Michael Kirby became a welcome and vocal advocate for improving the state of the nation's mental health services. At our annual general meeting last fall, Kirby spoke about keeping the pressure on the "new" federal government to ensure that a Mental Health Commission was established for the country.

Flash forward to the federal budget in February, and even with concerns about the equalization formula, \$25 million over a multi-year period has been allocated for a national Mental Health Commission. Kirby, a former liberal senator, is the CEO.

One of the people supporting the development of the commission is Michael Wilson, former MP and now ambassador to Washington. I had the pleasure of working with Wilson some years ago. He's a brilliant man and an old-style gentleman in how he handles his work and affairs. He comes by his passion for better mental health for the population in the most painful of ways - the suicide of one of his children.

Wilson is also the honorary chairman of the Business Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health. Concerned and progressive business leaders who recognized the impact of untreated mental illness and/or addiction on the workplace established the roundtable in 1998. Wilson saw the need for a national mental-health commission to support the provinces in providing enhanced mental health services and mental-health promotion programs to their citizens.

And Newfoundland and Labrador is right in there, trying to address the

same issues regarding service availability to those with mental illness and promoting the mental health of all our citizens. Since 2004, and in keeping with their policy framework, the provincial government has invested \$3 million on mental-health services and \$2.7 million on addiction services. Funding these mental-health services and supports was this government's way of making a genuine attempt at addressing the recommendations made by Judge Donald Luther in his investigation into the tragic deaths of Norman Reid and Darryl Power.

The government's commitment to enhancing service capacity, ensuring services and protecting the rights of those with serious mental illness was resoundingly echoed in Budget '07. This budget adds almost \$2 million to, among other things, develop mental-health services for those with serious mental illness that need higher levels of support in the community and rights advice when involuntarily admitted. There are also funds for a much-needed outpatient treatment program for people with eating disorders.

There is also much-needed funding allocated to address the unacceptable conditions at Eastern Health's Waterford Hospital.

So, as Mental Health Week approaches, I feel optimistic about the fact that community-based services for people with serious mental illness are getting priority.

One troubling case

But in my gut, something does not feel right. And it's this: an April 4, 2007 ruling by a tribunal of the provincial Human Rights Commission against the City of St. John's and CUPE. Contrary to all of what I described above - the progress, the high-level national and provincial support - the City of St. John's was found to have acted in a discriminatory fashion against a long-standing employee who had a serious mental illness. Employers have a legal duty to accommodate an employee with a disability unless undue hardship can be proven.

The city spent \$200,000 arguing the case. \$155,000 went to an outside law firm. The tribunal awarded the employee \$40,000. A call I made to the city's legal department left me uncertain as to whether or not the city will appeal the ruling.

Work-life balance: it's a matter of time. Very true, but there is a great deal of important work still to be done.

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