

Mental health care system filled with shortfalls, forum told

By NICK GARDINER , STAFF WRITER

A sorry picture of local mental health and addictions services was painted at a meeting Friday to discuss renewed efforts to raise a spotlight on the issue at the provincial legislature.

At a roundtable meeting hosted by Leeds-Grenville MPP Steve Clark, several speakers in a crowd of 60 people outlined grievances with the mental health care system before two authors of an all-party report proposing a major overhaul.



Progressive Conservative MPPs Christine Elliott (Whitby-Oshawa) and Sylvia Jones (Dufferin-Caledon) were members of an all-party select committee which produced a report that won the unanimous support of the legislature.

But more than one questioner noted similar reports have been prepared over the years, including one from Leeds and Grenville which was sent to then-PC health minister Elizabeth Witmer where it languished.

Sandra Lawn, who served as chairman of a task force on mental health reform that filed the report in 2002, said it contained "great information" and asked if it was considered during the select committee's 18-month study.

Lawn also expressed concern about the slow pace of transferring acute-care mental health beds from the Elmgrove Unit at the Brockville Mental Health Centre to the Brockville General Hospital, something that was recommended more than a decade ago.

Elliott said the committee did review existing studies as part of its 18-month study and also spoke with Witmer about her impressions of the issue.

Moreover, Elliott contends another recommendation from the committee study, to develop Mental Health and Addictions Ontario to co-ordinate services based on the cancer-care model, would encourage the transfer of acute-care beds to hospitals.

David North, executive director of the Tri-County Addiction Services, said the committee document "catches up with the current language in the field," but worried about the creation of another bureaucracy to oversee services which remain underfunded.

North said navigating between different services discourages people with addictions and mental health problems, but his agency and others use liaisons to avoid duplication and provide specific services needed by clients.

But he questions how the universal acceptance of the report at Queen's Park can be accommodated with the harsh reality of budget restraints.

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After a promise of a 2.25 per cent increase in operating funds from the South East Local Health Integration Unit, the actual increase amounted to 1.5 per cent in 2010, said North.

MPP Jones said it's important for health care professionals and community leaders to press their provincial representatives to implement the report and agreed it is time to move the matter to the front burner.

"We need to collectively make sure mental health and addictions stop being the 50th or 51st priority of the government," said Jones.

Upper Canada District School Board director of education David Thomas said training is needed for teachers and other school staff to help deal with students encountering mental health and addiction issues.

Elliott said the committee heard similar concerns on many occasions and noted a cross-ministry effort to address autism could be a model to follow for mental health.

"It is absolutely essential. We know schools are struggling with this on a daily basis."

Brockville Fire Prevention Officer Randy Burke said he'd like to promote open discussion with advocates and guardians of mental health patients for the safety of their charges.

Burke said it's not uncommon for mental health patients to disregard safety equipment such as smoke alarms, while advocates shrug off their responsibility for fear of breaking confidentiality agreements.

"Yet, all we're trying to do is help that person," said Burke.

Criminal lawyer Michael O'Shaughnessy said the local mental health care system is in "a state of crisis" that only the intervention of the Canadian Mental Health Association prevents from completely falling apart.

O'Shaughnessy lamented the need to use the agency to provide services that should be available from the province.

Steve Clark said he was pleased with the turnout of local health-care agencies, patient advocates and service providers.

"If we want to make it a priority, we have to keep talking about it," said Clark.

Elliott said the input of the audience was similar to many of the concerns raised previously to the committee.

She said it's imperative for members of the committee, fellow MPPs and the public to keep pressing the government for action.