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Disabled service searching for staff

Clients being asked to stay home due to shortage

GWENDOLYN RICHARDS AND SEAN MYERS CALGARY HERALD

An organization that provides programs for disabled adults is being forced to find new solutions to combat shrinking staff levels and stave off possible closure.

Over the last couple of weeks, the Springboard Centre for Adults with Disabilities has been phoning clients to see if they can stay home that day, said executive director Ann Sims.

"They've been co-operative, but one-day notice is not always easy to arrange," she said. "If this isn't doable, I don't think we can stay open."

Springboard is required to have certain staff to client ratios — up to oneto-one for those with challenging behaviours — but is so low staffed it is unable to meet those ratios, Sims explained.

"We really are desperate for a solution," she said.

At a meeting held Thursday night, parents, guardians and representatives from group homes tried to come up with ideas to deal with the problem. Suggestions included tapping parents to volunteer, fundraising to top up caregiver salaries and contacting local MLAs.

The only short-term solution the group agreed on was to have guardians keep clients at home or with their residential agency one day per week.

Some parents bristled at being forced to come up with their own solutions when they believed the government should come up with more funding for the Persons with Developmental Disabilities program so caregivers could be paid competitive wages.

"We have no obligation to let PDD off the hook and do their work for them," said David Hughes, whose 34-year-old daughter Joanna has a rare genetic disorder. "We need to make them live up to their words."

The centre needs about 12 more staff to bring them up to the levels required to run the program, Sims said.

But with wages around \$12.70 per hour, this and other organizations that offer services to people with developmental disabilities are finding it tougher to attract and retain staff.

"We have, on average, 18 to 25 staffing positions that we can't fill," said Odette Dantzer, CEO of the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre. "It's a revolving door in terms of trying to recruit and retain staff."

A booming economy where workers can make more money working at a fast-food restaurant is making jobs at these organizations less palatable.

"You can get more than that at Tim Hortons," said Vivian Laprise, whose 29-year-old daughter, Leanne, is a client at Springboard.

"My daughter . . . needs one-on-one care. If I have to stay home with her, who's going to pay for it? I have to work."