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Disabling boom

Difficult time for care providers

Published August 30, 2007 by Amy Steele in News

Organizations that help Calgarians with disabilities say inadequate government funding is forcing them to reduce services



Odette Dantzer, CEO of Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre, can't find enough staff

to those in need and negatively impacting the quality of care clients receive. Ryan Geake, executive director of the Scope Society of Calgary, which helps people with mental disabilities who also suffer from mental illness, describes the situation as "grim."

"It's been a pretty tough summer trying to keep staff and get staff," he says. "We're asking people to come here with a diploma or a degree, and we're paying the same wages as Tim Hortons." Geake says staff who haven't quit are working "ridiculous amounts of hours," which quickly leads to burnout. He says he could use 20 new staff members "tomorrow."

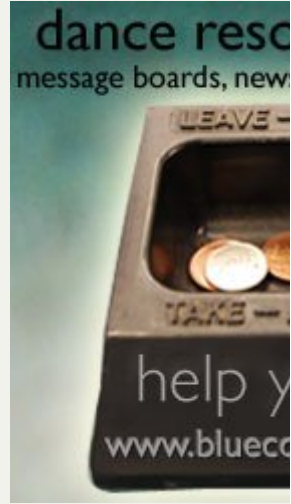
He's concerned that clients are suffering because high staff turnover means staff members don't have a long-term knowledge of a client's issues and therefore problems can go unnoticed. "(An employee) that might have stayed around for five years and worked hard and knew you, your health and mood swings and knew when to call a psychiatrist, they're turning over every three months," says Geake. "(Staff) don't have history with our client base anymore, so we're really missing the signs and those long-term caring relationships that I think are really critical to people. I think the quality of our service is being eroded."

The society has been forced to stop accepting new clients due to its staffing situation. "There are lots of families out there trying to figure out how to support their sons and daughters, and agencies are unable to provide that support," he says. "It would be a really terrible time to be a parent of a young disabled person because the likelihood of getting services you need is really minimal."

Geake says Alberta has had a strong reputation for providing high quality services to people with disabilities, but that's slipping. "A lot of us are feeling this is the worst we've ever seen in terms of trying to provide the quality services we promise people. It feels like we're going backwards. It's a disappointing time to be in this field," he says.

He can't understand why the provincial government isn't taking more action to respond to the crisis in the sector. "We know they have the information. We cannot figure out why they're not responding," he says. "It doesn't make any sense, especially in a province where there's so much money."

Odette Dantzer, CEO of the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre (DDRC) of Calgary, which helps people with mental disabilities, says her organization is experiencing similar problems. The DDRC has been forced to stop accepting new clients into a program that helps them find employment, because they can't find enough staff. Dantzer says 30 positions are now vacant. She says staff can't live on what the organization pays. "They're working two or three jobs to make ends meet," she says. "We can't compete. As service providers we need to be funded so we can pay competitive wages."



She says existing staff have extremely large caseloads, and clients have to continually develop new relationships with new staff members. “It’s frustrating and stressful. People are trying to do the best they can,” she says. “It’s hard to watch because you’re powerless to do anything.” She agrees with Geake that the government isn’t doing enough to help.

Mona Etcheverry, spokesperson for the provincial department of Seniors and Community Supports, says the Alberta government has allocated a “significant” amount of money towards the problem. She says the government has given agencies \$36.8 million over the last year and a half to address staff retention and recruitment. She adds that the overall budget for the Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program has gone up by 90 per cent since 1999. This year the province will spend \$526 million to provide services for 91,000 people.

“There’s only a certain number of people available to work, and everyone is in competition for them. The Alberta government is definitely concerned about this and looking at different ways to address it,” she says.

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