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## LOCAL NEWS

### Staff shortages taking their toll on families

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The shortage of trained support staff to work with people with developmental disabilities is taking its toll on clients, their families and other workers in the field.

For Ron and Merna Burr of the Lethbridge area, it means being able to take care of their developmentally disabled daughter Kristie, 32, when no staff is available. Kristie lives in her own home in Lethbridge with the help of support services.

"We as parents have been on short notice to pick her up and bring her home for the weekend. There have been weekends where as late as 5 p.m. on the Friday we find out they don't have staffing for the whole weekend," Ron said. "There have been instances where we have been made aware ahead of time where certain days wouldn't have overnight staff. They've been able to fill them, but it's been at the last minute, 9 p.m. or 10 p.m."

The Burrs typically have Kristie, who requires support staff around the clock, stay at their house for one weekend a month but the staff shortages have bumped up the frequency of those visits.

While the Burrs aren't able to make weekend plans in case they're needed, the shortage also affects Kristie.

"Kristie likes her own home. The one constant in her life is where she lives," Ron said. "Consistency in their environment is critical to their well-being. People like my daughter exhibit their discomfort with what's happening around them through behaviours."

The lack of staff puts pressure on existing employees, especially when they're asked to take up the slack.

Ron contends the reason for the staff shortage is two-fold. The Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD), the provincial body that funds services, has been underfunded since its inception in the '90s and therefore doesn't pay a living wage to workers. In Alberta's economy, better-paying jobs aren't hard to find, putting support agencies behind the eight ball.

"Across the board, I think everybody's feeling it," said Rebecca Remington, executive director of Greystoke Homes and Support Services. Greystoke has contracts with PDD, FSCD (Family Supports for Children with Disabilities) and Chinook Health.

Individuals funded through PDD have been affected the most since PDD funding dictates the wages that can be paid, usually less than what's available through other contracts.

"Because the wages haven't kept pace with inflation and other living expenses, there are fewer and fewer people going in to this field," Remington said.

The poor wages and devaluation of the profession by the outside world means few people are willing to spend money for a diploma.

"People will only work in a field they love for so long," Remington said.

No one is suggesting a return to institutionalization as was the norm decades ago, but the current challenges could spell a shrinking world for a vulnerable population.

"The bigger danger is people not being included in their communities, not having a quality of life and being stuck in their homes," Remington said.

The funding battle has been going on for years, she added, and a sustainable approach has still to be found. Part of the problem is support services aren't a universal need like health care.

"It doesn't hit close enough to home for everybody to take an interest," she said.

The problem will probably get worse before it gets better. The south region has been somewhat buffered from the impact given slower growth. The number of new people asking for service in this region has doubled in the last year, said Ed Hinger, chairman of the South Region Service Providers Council. The increase is due to a variety of factors, such as people moving from the school system into the adult system when they turn 18, people moving into the area and aging parents who can't provide the same support to their son or daughter.

"Some agencies are dropping services to certain higher-needs individuals because they don't have the staffing resources to provide services," Hinger said.

He's heard of some agencies having to close their doors in other parts of the province but, as far as he knows, local agencies aren't at that point. He's hopeful additional provincial funding will be forthcoming since it was mentioned in the recent throne speech. Increased and sustained funding to provide increased wages to workers is badly needed.

"We need something more than just a Band-Aid approach," he said.

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