

## Sister fears for future as home care falls short

### New deal sought to retain staff for the disabled

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Calgary agencies that help people with developmental disabilities and mental illness say service cuts are inevitable over the next several months if they are pushed to sign new, one-year government contracts that don't give them enough funding to halt their staff exodus.

Some agencies say they are being pressured into contracts that lock them into status-quo funding -- even though other parts of the province are being allowed more flexible contracts until the Tory government establishes its budget priorities.

Tyler Smith and her sister Margaret are feeling the loss, especially after one of Margaret's caregivers quit to take a higher-paying job at a Calgary supermarket.

Margaret, 46, has the mental capacity of a 10-year-old and suffers from Prader-Willi syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that results in an insatiable appetite and binge eating.

"I cannot in good conscience leave her alone," said Tyler, a payroll administrator.

"If I don't have those services for her, then I'm tied to her and my life is down the drain," she said. "These caregivers are a family's lifeline."

Doors on the fridge and cupboards at her home have to stay locked at all times, or Margaret will eat everything. In extreme moments she has picked off bits of her own flesh, including her nose and legs, and has also tried to consume hospital urine samples.

Near tears Tuesday, Tyler, 45, said her sister is supposed to receive round-the-clock care, but the agency that helps her doesn't have enough staff.

Tyler is picking up the slack.

The worker who watched over Margaret 24 hours a day, four days a week left the demanding job two weeks ago to take a position at Safeway for \$1.50 an hour more than the \$15 an hour wage she had been earning.

Ryan Geake, executive director of the Calgary Scope Society, an agency that deals with dozens of disabled clients, said even with a provincial funding boost in November, it's not close to being enough to attract and retain staff in labour-hungry Calgary. Services may be reduced, Geake said, and agencies won't be able to accept new clients.



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald

Tyler Smith, 45, has been filling the gaps in home care for her sister Margaret, 46, due to staffing shortages at local agencies.

"Do we let our services fall apart around us or should we draw a line in the sand right now?" Geake said. "If we don't get this settled this week, we'll have to sign a year-long contract because we want to continue to provide the services, but we sort of feel like we're being pushed into that."

The Calgary regional board agrees the agencies need more money in the upcoming year and there is a human resources "crisis." The board head said the one-year contracts contain clauses stating that terms can be renegotiated in six months if the funding situation changes.

When it comes to taking care of Albertans with developmental disabilities, the government funds regional boards -- in a manner similar to health regions -- and the boards contract out almost all of their work to non-profit and for-profit agencies.

More than 9,000 adult Albertans get services through the provincial program, which has a total budget of almost \$550 million.

Geake and others say after a provincewide outcry over funding, agencies in other parts of the province have been offered three or six-month contracts by their boards. They say shorter contracts give those agencies more leverage to negotiate rate increases.

Alex Hillyard, CEO of the Calgary regional board for persons with developmental disabilities, said his board shares the agencies' concerns about staffing.

But he said having 12-month contracts in place allows the regional board to assure families that services will be available.

"It doesn't put us into a pressure cooker," Hillyard said. "They have a legitimate concern about wanting to have sustainable services. We want to work with them to do that."

Hillyard noted that of 38 agencies in the city, 23 have signed the one-year contracts.

However, Ann Nicol, CEO of the Alberta Council of Disability Services, which represents dozens of provincial agencies, said that "it's very difficult to not sign a contract when you are really the only resource for this individual who is very vulnerable.

"But we often are being accused of sending mixed messages. 'If you're in a crisis, why do you continue to sign a contract that you know you are going to struggle with?' "

The Alberta Council of Disability Services commissioned a report by the Hay Group, a human resources company, which said more than \$180 million is needed annually to give staff parity with other public sector workers with similar qualifications.

"This year we see a real opportunity with a new minister. Budgets are just being developed," Nicol said.

A spokeswoman for Seniors and Community Supports, the department responsible for persons with developmental disabilities, said Tuesday there would be no comment on the matter until the new minister is appointed.

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