

Free the disabled, but give them help

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The province's controversial plan to shut a city institution for the developmentally disabled is winning support from some unusual sources, including disability rights activists and even one of the McGuinty government's fiercest critics.

Nepean-Carleton MPP John Baird, who once got tossed out of the legislature for calling the Liberals "liars," gives the government unreserved praise for closing the Rideau Regional Centre in Smiths Falls.

"This is a rare example of where I'll say the government is totally on the right track," says the Conservative MPP.

The government recently released plans to shut the Smiths Falls centre and two others like it. Residents will be moved out of the three institutions and into community settings like group homes or supportive-living apartments.

"One of these places, when it was opened, was actually called 'the home for imbeciles and idiots'," says Mr. Baird.

"We've moved beyond that. We understand these people are not sick, they are developmentally disabled."

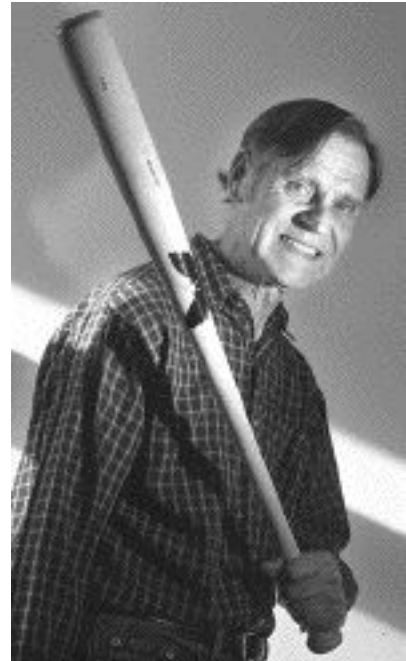
"The quality of life is certainly better for people when they're in the community," agrees Brian Tardif, executive director of Citizen Advocacy, an organization that has lobbied for disability rights for more than 30 years. He points to the broad-based consensus that disabled people are more likely to thrive when they have a chance to take part in community life.

Mr. Tardif says it all comes down to how society views people with disabilities; indeed, whether we view them at all.

"You don't hide people away because they're different," he says. "The community will benefit from seeing there are people who are different."

Dennis Stewart, 61, left Rideau Regional three decades ago but still remembers life there.

"At Rideau Regional, I had no freedom," he says. "You weren't allowed to leave the residence."



Bruno Schlumberger, the Ottawa Citizen

Dennis Stewart, who works in a baseball bat factory now, has nothing but bad memories of his time at the Rideau Regional Centre. All he did, he says, was 'look around and look at the four walls.'

Today, he lives in an apartment with a roommate. Social workers visit to check in on him. He is employed by an agency that provides jobs to the disabled. He helps make baseball bats for a city company.

"I like that better than what I used to do before," he says. "I didn't do nothing on the ward -- just look around and look at the four walls."

The closure plan has sparked spirited opposition from community leaders and relatives of Rideau Regional residents.

"I am concerned about the effect this closure will have on the residents, their families and the staff, but I'm even more concerned about what it will mean for my town," says Smiths Falls Mayor Dennis Staples.

"On top of all her disabilities, my sister has serious heart problems and other medical conditions," says Pat Jackson, whose 60-year-old sister, Theresa, has lived at Rideau Regional almost all her life. "I am terrified about what will happen to her."

Amy Abell knows exactly how they feel. Her 57-year-old daughter, Sarah, left Rideau Regional several years ago.

"We hated to see her leave all that after 50 years. It was her home," says Mrs. Abell.

Mrs. Abell, 93, says Sarah still thinks she may return to Rideau Regional one day. She says the move was difficult. "It's quite scary for the poor patients."

"But we're lucky to have her in the community where her family is," she says. "We're very fortunate with where she is now. We were very fortunate with the help she got to be integrated in her new bungalow."

This is one of those issues where it's hard not to instinctively agree with what everyone is saying.

Yes, community integration is a better principle, but what is the impact on the residents? How can one not feel empathy for a 93-year-old mother who worries about her daughter's care?

Part of what is fuelling opposition is the lack of confidence many people feel about whether needed community supports will, in fact, be available.

We've all heard the stories about the deinstitutionalization of those suffering mental illness, leaving many with nowhere to go. Take a walk around downtown any day of the week -- you can see it.

During the 1990s, we saw the closure of hospital beds without, first, the needed investment in community services, such as homecare or nursing homes. That resulted in backed-up emergency rooms and hospital deficits.

Indeed, there are currently about 400 people on waiting lists for agencies that provide services to the developmentally disabled in Ottawa. These include group homes, home-sharing, day programs and employment opportunities.

About 70 people need such services right now. To build confidence in the closure plan, the government needs to whittle down that waiting list and make sure the people who are already in the community get the help they need. The waiting list is not the McGuinty government's fault, but it is now its responsibility.

Brian Tardif says: "Just because we can't do it now, doesn't mean we won't be able to do it in five years if there is the redirecting of resources."

But he agrees with closure critics that, if the promised community-based services don't materialize, then Rideau Regional will have to stay open.

"If the government doesn't make that reinvestment, then they need to back off."

However, even Mr. Baird -- not one to generally promote confidence in the McGuinty government -- doesn't believe that will happen.

"They will not close the institutions until everyone has a place to go to."

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