

Close institutions for mentally challenged, advocacy group says

BY LAURA STONE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE DECEMBER 4, 2009

The three remaining large-scale institutions for Canadians with intellectual disabilities should be shut down, says an association that helps mentally challenged people in Canada.

The Canadian Association for Community Living said Thursday it wants institutions housing some 900 people in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan to be closed down. In their place, the association asked for community-based options, such as public housing and more government-funded care workers to assist those with intellectual disabilities to live on their own.

"Living in an institution is not living," said Bendina Miller, president of association, which is based in Toronto but has 420 branches across the country. "We would urge the government of Canada to work with those three provinces to, in fact, have those institutions closed."

Anna MacQuarrie, director of policy and programs for the association, said it costs an average of \$100,000 per person per year to house someone in an institution.

"It's really expensive to keep people in institutions," said MacQuarrie. "If we can find supportive community options, it's actually way cheaper for everyone involved." She said an institution might house 250 people but have 500 staff, who could be helping people live in their own homes.

In 1986, there were 31 institutions across Canada. While the association said it was pleased many institutions have been shut, it said many provinces still house people with intellectual disabilities in group-type facilities, such as nursing homes, seniors homes and long-term care facilities, rather than let them choose their own housing.

Caroline Matte lived in an Ottawa group residence for three years. "I had a tiny room(with)a metal bed in the basement, along with another 30 people in the building," said Matte, who has difficulty remembering and executing multiple tasks.

"It did not cure my loneliness and only increased my disconnection from the community. My life was about eating and sleeping."

Matte, 43, now lives with a roommate in a subsidized apartment with affordable rent geared to her disability cheque. She is visited a few times a week by a support worker and frequently travels the city on her own. While Matte cannot find a job and is on a strict budget, she has resumed her painting hobby and says she is happier and has more independence than when she lived in the home.

The plea for the closure of institutions follows the association's release of its third annual report card on the inclusion of Canadians with disabilities.

The report found that while some progress has been made toward improving the quality of life for those 750,000 people with intellectual disabilities, including Down syndrome, some forms of autism, and those who struggle with processing and understanding information, not enough has been done to help them live as well as other Canadians. When combined with their family members, some three million Canadians are affected by intellectual disabilities, said the association.

The report estimates that almost 75 per cent of working-age people with intellectual disabilities who live on their own do so in poverty. Statistics show far fewer people with intellectual disabilities have jobs, and those who do work make about half as much money as other Canadians.

In Parliament on Thursday, Defence Minister Peter MacKay tabled the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which seeks to reaffirm human rights for disabled people worldwide, to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

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