

January 31, 2011

Mental Health Issues – in the News and at the Door-step

Mental health issues have been much in the news recently – and I hear a lot about mental health on door-steps throughout Leeds-Grenville.

The news stories were not happy ones; a person with Alzheimer's wandered out in the cold and froze to death; high profile crimes were committed by people experiencing a mental health crisis. These stories tend to equate mental health with violence, adding to the stigma for all concerned.

The Globe and Mail recently had a major article on the futility of warehousing people with mental health issues in our prisons – where they get no treatment. An estimated 18% of prisoners have mental health issues (and 40% of women).

Secure treatment for mental patients is sorely needed. I agree with Senator Bob Runciman when he states that it is wrong to treat mentally ill offenders at psychiatric centres located within prison walls and calls for a secure treatment facility for women.

Brockville is on the front line here – with a secure treatment facility for male prisoners. Increasing the capacity to accommodate female prisoners makes perfect sense; we have experienced health care professionals in our area and the jobs would be welcome.

More broadly, we can improve the lives of those with mental health issues – while making our communities safer. This makes more sense than simply building mega-prisons as is Stephen Harper's plan.

Most people have not experienced the difficulties of dealing with mental health problems. I have listened with compassion to many heartbreaking stories.

A mother of a pre-teen son with autism talked about placing him in a facility because he spins out of control and beyond her capacity to cope.

A Grandmother told me about her 25 year old grandson who has a severe case of Tourette's syndrome: he cannot think through the consequences of his actions, will not take his medicines and is currently in jail.

More hopefully, I spoke with a woman whose autistic son has talent. He is close to graduating from high school and she is seeking a university that can provide the support he needs to continue learning.

I have seen men and women caring for spouses suffering from Alzheimer's. They are tired, afraid to sleep because their spouse gets up during the night, and worried because they know that it will only get worse. Sometimes these care-givers are unwell themselves.

Michael Ignatieff talks personally about how his father cared for his mother during her years with Alzheimer's – and how his respect for his father grew as he witnessed his dedication. Perhaps this partly explains why a key commitment of the Liberals is to give support to families who are struggling to take care of family members at home.

The Liberal's Family Care Plan will do two things. It will provide six months of Employment Insurance and job security to working Canadians who need to take time off to care for a gravely ill family member. It will also create a Family Care Tax Benefit – putting cash into the hands of low and middle-class family caregivers who provide essential care to a family member at home. This money can be used to pay for what is needed in addition to the services already provided from capable local agencies – for example, more hours of outside help, respite care or transportation.

Treatment and assistance for families will not relieve all of the pain and turmoil caused by mental illness. But based on my discussions, they are much needed to support families in their time of need.

-30-

Contact: Marjory Loveys 613 865-7871