

Dr. Brian Hennen,
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Honourable Stephen McNeil,
Office of the Premier,
7th Floor, 1 Government Place,
1700 Granville Street,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 1X5

May 5, 2017,

Dear Premier McNeil:

The Community Homes Action Group (CHAG) expresses our deep disappointment with the very slow progress in implementing the Roadmap for transforming services to persons with disabilities.

It is coming on four years since the release of the Roadmap report "Choice, Equality and Good Lives in Inclusive Communities" by the joint Community-Government Advisory Committee, co-chaired by Wendy Lill and your current Deputy Minister, Lynn Hartwell. The report described long waiting lists for services, significant over-reliance on large congregate care facilities and a serious lack of community-based, supported living options.

Encouraged by Nova Scotia's support for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities the joint committee recommended a five-year time frame for transformation. The government of the day extended the time frame to ten years, a period adopted by your government. Given the extent of the challenges facing Nova Scotians with developmental disabilities we were let down. However, we are even more distressed by the slower pace of change since 2013.

We have expressed these concerns through two province-wide surveys and two failing Report Cards on the progress of transformation. And, in several presentations to the Standing Committee on Community Services we had encouraging dialogue. But, judging by last week's provincial budget and several public statements prior to the budget by the minister and program director I am afraid that we have not been heard.

The budget indicates that we are settling into an unfortunate pattern. For the second budget in a row the government is following the Roadmap with its foot firmly on the brake. Last budget, Roadmap money amounted to \$3.0 million, with \$2.2 million allocated to "help Nova Scotians with disabilities transition out of facility-based care into the community," and \$800,000 for day programs. This election year in which your government is proposing new or increased funding for a range of projects, funding dedicated to achieving the goals set out in the Roadmap increases only slightly to \$3.9 million, \$1 million for day programs and \$2.9 million for community-based supported housing.

More troubling is that the new funding will increase the capacity in small option homes by

only 12 to 16 beds, while the flex program supporting those fortunate enough to have some, though not sufficient, family or community support - may assist another 25 individuals. This would be in addition to 16 individuals reportedly moved to new community homes last year.

While it is encouraging to see the addition of those community living options, it is simply not enough. As your minister has noted, waiting lists have grown in the past year from about 1,100 to 1,341. This includes an increase from 380 to 443 individuals currently receiving no services and an even larger increase - from 720 to 898 - in those seeking a different form of support. In the majority of cases, the preferred choice of those wait-listed is a small option home. To approach close to the Roadmap goals, it is clear that the pace must be stepped up dramatically.

It is unfortunate that unspecified "tragedies" in other provinces are being used to justify the snail's pace of change. In particular, references to Alberta's Michener Centre attribute unproven (and unprovable) assertions that some former residents died as a result of their relocation upon closure of the centre.

It is always worthwhile to take into account policies and processes in other provinces. No other province places as much reliance on congregated care facilities as Nova Scotia. This is a distinction Nova Scotia surely does not want to maintain, particularly when the Department has acknowledged that a significant number of individuals in these large facilities would function well and achieve better outcomes in the community.

In the specific example of the Michener Centre the closing indeed was likely too precipitous, with insufficient time to prepare residents for homes in the community. However, the Michener Centre example calls not for slowing down in Nova Scotia but for a managed strategy. A timeline for closure of large facilities in Nova Scotia should be developed and announced as soon as possible so that there is a clearly planned schedule to develop community-based options, with full participation by residents and the staff, family and community members who support them. Such collaboration is most likely to result in the earliest, most effective and most humane approach to provide appropriate homes for Nova Scotians with disabilities

As the Community-Government Advisory Committee of 2013 was well aware, successful transformation requires a more robust fiscal commitment in the short term to provide better, more cost-effective services in the long run. The Department's own data, obtained through freedom of information, show that over the past five years costs-per-case in the eight institutions have been increasing at a much faster rate than community-based options or group homes. Running two systems is more costly. As the Roadmap suggests, reduced reliance on large institutions and a much enhanced community-based residential system must go hand in hand.

The budget you are presenting to the electorate as the basis of a new mandate falls too short of what is needed to achieve the goals agreed to by the this government and the previous one. We are making our concerns public and sharing them with leaders of other parties to encourage them to state their views.

Respectfully,

Brian Hennen, co-chair, Community Homes Action Group

cc. Jamie Baillie, leader of the Official Opposition

cc. Gary Burrill, leader of the New Democratic Party

cc. news media

