

Mental Health for All – A Statement on the Waterford Hospital

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December 17, 2020

Through our work and community, we became aware of the recent tragedy at the Waterford Hospital. I offer humble and heart-felt sympathies on behalf of CMHA-NL to family members, and all members of our community impacted by this loss, including the health care workers affected.

Our community has been waiting, watching, and yearning for a change to the Waterford Hospital. There have been statements made, news articles published, and reports written about the hospital: on its physical disrepair, its approach to healthcare, and ideas for change. It is obvious the Waterford is physically outdated, and that part alone makes it difficult for recovery and healing. CMHA-NL believes building a new psychiatric hospital is not the catch-all solution. We require a larger mental health system transformation. We need the *social* architecture of our community and mental health system to be re-built. We must change and reshape our perspective on mental health and mental illness as a social problem and not solely a medical one.

The Waterford Hospital needs urgent change, but the promise of a new hospital in itself does not transform the type of care provided. The All-Party Committee in 2017 proposed that mental health and addiction services be redesigned, commenting that "... psychiatric facilities similar to the Waterford Hospital provide in-patient treatment for only 1.5 to three per cent of the population with mental illness." They proposed that the provincial government instead "...investigate options for replacing the existing hospital with in-patient services as well as more services provided in community and closer to home". That is the current plan. We know a new psychiatric



Pictured: Protesters gather in front of the Waterford Hospital in St. John's, NL on December 9, 2020.

facility is being constructed at the Health Sciences site, but we know far less about the new and essential companion community-based services to be implemented.

The medical understanding of mental illness cannot stand alone as the only solution. Psychiatric hospitals continue to fail to meet our needs time and time again, but are not necessarily cold, uncaring, or offering only band-aid solutions. They are proof that the medical approach to mental health services is inadequate alone. Mental illness is a social justice issue. To address it properly, we must adopt a more holistic approach, one which takes into account the life experiences, social situation, and social structures that put barriers in place for us to achieve health. Our community must recognize mental illness as a shared concern and not simply an individual medical issue. "In a society that screams self-care! self-heal! self-direct! We must continue to assert the value of community care, collective healing, and community direction." (Embracing Experiences, CMHA-NL forthcoming).

Little is known about exactly how this most recent tragedy occurred at the Waterford Hospital. Whatever the specifics, we should be heeding the many commissions and councils that have, time and again, called for rethinking and redesign of psychiatric care, moving it out of large institutions and into communities. "Research shows", wrote *Towards Recovery*, "that the provision of a *full range of quality community-based services* would mean less reliance on psychiatric hospital beds and allow a larger number of individuals to be served. A community-focused approach would also provide treatment closer to home and a better quality of life for individuals." We are all accountable for the improvement of care and quality of life in our communities, no more so than for the care of our fellow citizens who are unable to care for themselves.

At this time of year, CMHA-NL asks our communities, including individuals, families, and healthcare providers, to be vigilant, compassionate, kind, and to connect. We are thinking about you during the holidays and wishing you safe and peaceful times ahead.

Impending communications from community members are welcome. Please contact me directly at breid@cmhanl.ca.