

Hospice officials await N.B. response



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Telegraph-Journal - Published Monday December 10th, 2007

SAINT JOHN - Premier Shawn Graham has visited twice and Hospice of Greater Saint John executive director Sandy Johnson knows for certain that a residential hospice has the solid backing of all of Saint John's MLAs and cabinet ministers.

In fact, Saint John region caucus leader Roly MacIntyre has pledged he'll do everything in his power to make the necessary funding happen.

Now, with the province's long-term health care strategy and seniors plan poised to be announced next month, Johnson and other hospice supporters are in wait-and-see mode.

"I'm optimistic," says Johnson.

"I think the premier is committed to getting his government to provide the funding somehow.

"It fits in with government's push towards partnerships, community initiatives, self-sufficiency and innovative health care."

Earlier this fall, Johnson says that Quispamsis MLA Mary Schryer - who has since been named Family and Community Services minister - told Johnson that she should expect the residential hospice to be part of the new seniors plan.

"What I took from that is that government is moving in the direction of finding the operational funding to get this residential hospice open," says Johnson.

Shortly after that, Hospice officials were invited to final consultations about the seniors plan, Johnson said, and sat at the table with nursing home, special care home and other groups.

"One of the outcomes that day was the inclusion of residential hospice as a key initiative," says Johnson.

"The idea was welcomed with open arms."

Proponents of a residential hospice for the West Side argue that a homey residence where dying people can spend their last days is cost effective because it would free up 200 of the Saint John Regional Hospital's acute care beds - beds that are now being used by palliative care patients and cost \$1,000 a day when occupied. Compare that to the cost of caring for a patient at a hospice is \$300 per day, say proponents, because, apart from medical staff, many workers are volunteers.

"This residential hospice would care for those who are appropriate to be here whether they're seniors or not," says Johnson.

"I think it's key that we get it into the public policy and into the new strategy."

Hospice is asking government to fund \$200 a day per patient, with Hospice providing the additional \$100 co-pay.

The average length of stay in a residential hospice is two to three weeks.

Hospice of Greater Saint John has raised about \$350,000 of its \$1-million goal and hopes to have reached the halfway mark by the time its Realize a Dream campaign is launched in February.

"I really believe government wants to make this happen," says Johnson. "I think they're trying to move us through some doors."

In the event there is no mention of a residential hospice when the long-term care strategy is released next month, Johnson has an alternate plan - she's collected nearly 2,000 signatures on a petition in favour of the facility "just in case things don't work out."