

Hospice takes step forward

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Sandy Johnson, executive director of Hospice of Greater Saint John, holds plans for renovations to accommodate a residential Hospice on Dufferin Row

On Sept. 29, the keys to Bobby's Hope House, a stately west side home, will be given to Bird Rideau Construction, who will renovate the home to accommodate 10 palliative-care patients and their families at a cost of about \$1.5 million.

And that's even before Hospice has a commitment from the province that the \$800,000-plus they need each year to run the facility will be included in the budget.

"We're hopeful, given Minister (Michael) Murphy's comments very recently about government's commitment to form alliances with partners who can help to reduce wait times and deliver quality sustainable health care," says Hospice executive-director Sandy Johnson.

"We do have the building and the infrastructure and we're ready to partner with them. Our project will provide community care to 150 people each year who would otherwise occupy acute-care beds at the hospital."

The residential hospice, at 385 Dufferin Row, will provide palliative care for people suffering from any terminal medical illness, such as cancer, heart and kidney disease or severe stroke. The average length of stay in a residential hospice is two to three weeks.

Hospice has asked to be included in the provincial budget for 2009/2010 and Johnson has just sent Murphy, Social Development Minister Mary Schryer, Premier Shawn Graham and local MLAs an update about where things stand, along with another request for funding.

"If we are able to secure project funding, we will be open in 2009," says Johnson, who expects that she will have discussions with government departments sometime this fall if the project is to be included in the next provincial budget.

Hospice has been lobbying government to fund up to 80 per cent of the project, with money to cover the remainder of the program's cost coming through fundraisers.

The hospice board has been adamant that there will be no co-pay to patients; under its plan, the government would fund \$200 a day per patient, with hospice providing the additional \$100.

Hospice contends that the residence would allow more than \$2.28 million a year to be reallocated to acute care services.

They argue that a homey residence where dying people can spend their last days is cost-effective because it would free up 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, which is \$300 per day, say proponents, because, apart from medical staff, many workers are volunteers.

So far, Hospice has raised \$750,000 - the cash needed for renovations, which include bringing the building up to meet fire and building codes, installing a sprinkler system, fire-rated doors and an elevator.

It will cost an additional \$100,000 for beds and furniture to equip the residence, says Johnson.

"We believe the timing is right," she says. "If government is true to their word and they really want to find partnerships to reduce wait times and to provide sustainable health care, we are here with the structure and the building and capacity to partner with them and make this possible."

Renovations, which are set to begin next month, will be completed in about five months, said Johnson.

"We're trying to meet the expectations of our community and our donors," said Johnson.

"Our donors want this in their community. There's an expectation that we move forward."

Hospice will take up temporary residence at Brunswick Square, courtesy of Fortis Properties, while the renovations are made.

"If it doesn't happen this coming spring, it will put a great deal of pressure on government coming into an election year," says Johnson.