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*Hospice Greater Saint John program co-ordinator Ruth Hill, left, and executive director Sandy Johnson outside the hospice's new home on Dufferin Row on the West Side. The hospice purchased the building, which was formerly St. Joseph's Convent, from the Sisters of Charity.*

## **Hospice group gets home**

### ***Group hopes to get money from government to run the facility***

Ashley Joannou

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Hospice Greater Saint John is one step closer to starting Atlantic Canada's first residential hospice even though it has no guarantee of being able to fund it.

The group, which runs day programs and makes home and hospital visits to terminally ill patients, has purchased the St. Joseph's Convent on the city's West Side from the Sisters of Charity.

Hospice executive director Sandy Johnson hopes the three-storey building on Dufferin Row will eventually become the 10-bed residential hospice the group has been trying get up and running for months.

*"The second floor is absolutely perfect for the 10-bed hospice," Johnson said. "The rooms are already there, we just have to update it a little."*

The residential hospice would provide 24-hour medical care, as well as holistic and spiritual support, for people with long-term terminal illnesses and their families.

The charity bought the building for \$250,000, about \$500,000 less than what it's worth, and expects to move its offices and day programs in to the building by the beginning of July.

*"The Sisters of Charity have always supported the work that we do and this is a significant donation on their part. It will make a . . . difference in what we are able to do to help people,"* Johnson said.

Even with the nuns' generosity, Johnson is realistic about the amount of money needed to run the hospice.

She estimates it will take about \$800,000 a year to run and will house about 150 people annually.

The group hopes to copy a similar program in Ontario where the provincial government pays about 70 per cent of the annual costs to run residential hospices. At that rate, New Brunswick taxpayers would be on the hook for about \$580,000 a year.

Johnson is hoping Health Minister Mike Murphy will include funding in the 2010 budget.

*"He was here in December and seemed genuinely impressed with what we do," she said. "I think he realized it was important."*

The charity had been hoping to launch a two-year pilot project that would cost about \$1.9 million.

But funding for the pilot project has been equally as hard to come by.

The group recently received a letter from William King, the chief of staff for federal Health Minister Tony Clement, saying it did not qualify for funding under the Health Department's plans to reduce patient wait times.

*"We're not really surprised, I assumed it would be pretty rare for a group like ours to get direct federal funding,"* Johnson said.

But they're not out of ideas just yet.

Saint John MP Paul Zed, who has been a longtime supporter of building the hospice, said Clement suggested the group look to the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency to fund the pilot project.

*"This project makes good economical sense,"* Zed said. *"It makes good business and social sense to try and keep people out of hospital beds into a place where they can be more comfortable."*

Zed said he only found out last week about the group's being turned down for federal funding and will meet with ACOA soon to discuss its possible involvement.

Zed said the Ontario equivalent of ACOA, FedNor, has funded similar pilot projects in Ontario making him hopeful such funding could happen in New Brunswick as well. If that fails, the group has requested that Murphy include funding for the pilot project in his new health plan to be released in the fall.

Steve Benteau, spokesman for the provincial health minister's office, said Murphy believes funding for the pilot project should be a federal issue and has *"worked hard to put the group in contact with the federal minister."*

Benteau said if federal funding is not possible, the minister might consider funding it in the upcoming plan.

Even if funding for the pilot project doesn't come through, Johnson said she does not regret purchasing the new building.

*"We are willing to take the risk,"* she said. *"It is important we show that we are ready as soon as the funding comes through and I am optimistic that will happen."*