



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

INFORMATION BULLETIN

THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION – SURVIVOR'S STORIES

January 23, 2023

In May of 2021, SSAO distributed an editorial on Creating Change in an Entrenched Long-Term Care System: Lessons From the Past (SSAO, 2021). It details that where we are now with the mass institutionalization of elders is exactly where we were in 1971 with the mass institutionalization of people with developmental disabilities.

Except that things are even worse now.

On March 5, 1971 Frederick Elijah Sanderson, a man with a developmental disability living at the Rideau Regional Hospital School in Smiths Falls, hanged himself. Jean Marie Martel, who had been officially discharged from the same institution in April of 1968, was found on February 18, 1971 walking on a roadway. His nose, ears, fingers, and toes were frostbitten.

A horrified Premier asked Walter B. Williston, a Queen's Counsel, to inquire into "the whole area of treatment and care of the mentally retarded" and "emphasized to him that he wanted him to provide some clear direction as to both government and public responsibilities towards such persons" (Williston Report, 1971). Mr. Williston's report, among many other recommendations, discussed the advantages of smaller residential facilities.

That was in 1971.

The Welch Report, written by the Hon. Robert Welch, Provincial Secretary for Social Development, followed the Williston Report in 1973 (Welch Report, 1973). It set out the blueprint for the development of a whole community-based system of developmental services in Ontario to facilitate the transfer of people with developmental disabilities to the community from the institutions - a Minister who took action to implement the Williston Report's recommendations.

The Welch Report did something else that was very important. It shifted the focus from a medical hospital school model to a social care model and therefore created a social services Ministry to accomplish that task. There was a fundamental recognition that developmental disability, like aging, is not a disease, and that segregation and exclusion from community is not a good idea.

Where Are We Today?

Fast forward fifty-two years to the situation in which elders currently find themselves – mass institutionalized in segregated facilities, excluded from their communities and systems of social support. Over 4500 dead during the pandemic because they lived in congregate settings where

COVID infections were rampant. A history of abusive and neglectful treatment in Ontario's nursing homes documented in inspection reports and in books (Baum, 1977) for decades.

What is THIS Premier's response?

Delay providing requested information to the COVID-19 Commission, then curtail its work, forcing it to report before having finished its inquiry (Howlett, 2021).

Shield the long-term care companies from class action lawsuits by families of the dead, forcing them to meet a higher legal standard to obtain justice (Wilson, 2020).

Build 30,000 more institutional beds instead of using the integrated community-based developmental services system as a model to build a similar community-based service system for elders (Ontario Government, 2022).

Promise to build an 'Iron ring' around long-term care then give even more beds to the companies with the worst track records during the pandemic (Brown, 2020; Oved et al, 2022).

Force passage of Bill 7 removing the fundamental rights of elders and people with disabilities to choose where they will live and to give informed consent to their transfer, thereby creating a situation where the beds found in the facilities with the worst track records are now likely to be filled with Alternate Level of Care (ALT) patients from hospitals (CBC News, 2022).

Compared to the Conservative government of Bill Davis that introduced public policies to build a modern system of care for people with developmental disabilities in 1973, this Conservative government has taken support and services for elders back over fifty years.

It has:

Undermined the work of its own Commission;

Legally shielded companies that own facilities where thousands died;

Strengthened an archaic institutional system by greatly expanding it;

Introduced legally enforced mass institutionalization.

The Story of Huronia Survivors

On Sunday, January 29, 2023 at 8 PM CBC + GEM will air Unloved: Huronia's Forgotten Children. We at SSAO urge you to watch this documentary by a sister of one of the former residents. It tells an important story of what residents endured in this facility, but also demonstrates the horrific impact of institutions, and how they are, by their nature, dehumanizing.

These were government-operated institutions, with well paid, full-time staff. Yet they engaged in the most abusive treatment of those in their care.

When advocates, many of whom are now founders of SSAO, pushed for the closure of these facilities, the union representing staff fought the closures in an attempt to protect union jobs in those institutions at the expense of the vulnerable people living there.

Today, we see much the same - suggestions that raising wages, staffing, and creating full-time positions will somehow fix a fundamentally flawed institutional system built on an 18th century poor house model that congregates hundreds of devalued people in one place.

You can't fix institutions. History has shown us this over and over again. Residential schools, orphanages, lunatic asylums, hospital schools, nursing homes. Ignoring the lessons of history means we are doomed to repeat the tragic mistakes of the past.

It is time that there was a universal effort to do what the Davis government did in 1973 – establish a non-profit, community-based long-term care system that finally answers the call of elders to live out their lives in their own homes and communities.

The story of Huronia is a deeply tragic one. The story of tens of thousands of elders forced to live in today's institutions – nursing homes – is also a deeply tragic one.

It is time that that this story was finally over.



REFERENCES

- Baum, D. J. (1977). Warehouses for death: The nursing home industry. Don Mills, Ontario: Burns and MacEachern. https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/faculty_books/245/
- Brown, D. (November 13, 2020). Ontario building ‘iron ring’ around long-term care after 71 deaths this week, health minister says. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/long-term-care-home-deaths-covid-19-second-wave-1.5801804>
- CBC News. (August 31, 2022). Ontario passes controversial long-term care bill without public input. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/bill-7-passes-ontario-long-term-care-1.6568125>
- Howlett, K. (January 5, 2021). Ontario rejects extension for probe into LTC homes after commission blames province for ‘significant delays’. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-commission-seeks-extension-on-care-home-investigation-as-it-struggles/>
- Ontario Government. (April 21, 2022). Ontario on track to build 30,000 long-term care beds. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1002083/ontario-on-track-to-build-30000-new-long-term-care-beds>
- Oved, M.C., Wallace, K., Tubb, E. (May 27, 2022). Doug Ford is spending billions to expand nursing home chains with some of the worst COVID-19 death rates. <https://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/2022/05/27/doug-ford-is-spending-billions-to-expand-nursing-home-chains-with-some-of-the-worst-covid-19-death-rates.html>
- SSAO. (May 5, 2021). Creating change in an entrenched long-term care system: Lessons from the past. <https://inclusion.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SSAO-Editorial-3.pdf>
- Welch Report. (1973). Community living for the mentally retarded in Ontario: A new policy focus. <https://www.communitylivingupperottawavalley.ca/userfiles/file/2018/Welch%20Report.pdf>
- Wilston, C. (October 21, 2020). Ford defends Bill that critics say shields long-term care homes from lawsuits. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ford-defends-bill-that-critics-say-shields-long-term-care-homes-from-lawsuits-1.5154847>
- Williston Report. (1971). Present arrangements for the care and supervision of mentally retarded persons in Ontario. <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/79519c7d/files/uploaded/Williston-Report.pdf>