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Mental illness falls through health care cracks

By ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE Don't Get Me Started

AFTER my Mom passed away, I had thought I was finished with the role of caregiver for a while. I'd also thought I was finished with the constant battle I'd faced to find the right kind of care and support for an ailing senior in this city.

Unfortunately, a dear relative of mine has fallen ill, and I'm now caring for him in my home until I can get him the kind of help he'll need to return to his own home, safely.

It's been a frustrating experience so far.

The frustration begins at his family doctor's office. The doctor herself is incredibly kind and caring, and she has been an absolute godsend through this crisis, but she is so massively overburdened with patients that it's difficult to get access to her, even when a problem is urgent.

Then there's the provincial system of "Continuing Care," which is supposedly designed to help Nova Scotians deal with just this kind of healthcare crisis, and to help them get the support they need to stay in their homes. Unfortunately, it has taken three weeks to even get an appointment with a care co-ordinator who will assess the situation (even though I've called twice and suggested the situation was urgent). I'm told it will take another six to eight weeks to get any kind of care in place.

Next, there's the problem of dealing with an illness that's simply not recognized or understood by many people. In this case, we are dealing with a mental illness; a level of depression so crippling that it renders my beloved relative incapable of caring for himself.

But most people seem to think it means he's just a little down. I honestly think that if one more "well-meaning" person tells me that all he needs is to get out for a good walk, I may punch that person square in the face.

When I phoned Veterans Affairs, for example, to find out what kind of help he might qualify for from them, the dull-witted youngster who was manning the phone line asked what the nature of his disability was.

"Mental illness," I said. "Clinical depression." And she said, "No, but what kind of physical disability does he have?"

I will confess that I rather lost it on the phone. No matter; he doesn't qualify for their help, anyway.

There is a Seniors Mental Health Program at Capital Health, but it can only be accessed through a doctor's referral (more waiting) or, as we finally had to do, through a visit to the emergency room. I have high hopes for that program, but our date with them is still another week away.

My point, I guess, is that unless you're willing to dig hard, and unless you know where to look, there's no easy point of access to care.

I've spent the better part of the past three weeks interviewing respite care providers and private homecare providers, exploring seniors' day programs and tracking down mental health resources in Halifax. I've sat for hours in various offices and waiting rooms getting medical, legal, and financial advice.

I did find one excellent resource in a service called Caregivers Nova Scotia (caregiversns.org or 431-3297). Dr. Jodi Brown, who answers the support line there, offered me an extensive list of suggestions, and, perhaps most importantly, some sympathy.

Caregiving is a tough job, but one I've taken on out of love and loyalty. I could use a little help, though. Unfortunately, it feels like we've fallen into a gaping hole in the healthcare system.

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