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Turning up the heat

Posted By Ronald Zajac, Staff Writer

Posted 23 hours ago

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) is turning up the heat in its campaign to reverse bed closures at the Brockville Mental Health Centre (BMHC), with its local president suggesting the head of Royal Ottawa should resign.

In a letter to the editor to The Recorder and Times Wednesday, David McDougall, president of OPSEU Local 439 at the former Brockville Psychiatric Hospital, says Royal Ottawa Health Care Group president and chief executive officer George Weber lacks the "compassion and empathy" needed for mental health administration.

"Step down now. I am sure that your salary alone would prolong the worklife of a half dozen or more mental health professionals who truly care about our patients and our community," McDougall's letter concludes.

When reached later Wednesday, McDougall said the call for Weber's resignation is part of the union's attempt to "rock the boat" in the fight to preserve the local transitional treatment beds.

"I think it's time to tip the boat over," he said. "I think the gloves are off now."

OPSEU plans to ramp up its campaign with a town hall type meeting next month, added McDougall.

"We're looking forward to the fight and we hope people will be engaged and help us," he said.

Weber was out of the country on Wednesday and could not be reached for comment.

Royal Ottawa announced in June that the BMHC will close its transitional care unit by March 2011, taking the equivalent of 136.5 full-time jobs out of the community. OPSEU argues the actual number of people left jobless will be much higher.

The 64 transitional treatment beds include 24 for dual diagnosis (patients who suffer both from a developmental delay and a psychiatric disorder) and 20 each for rehabilitation and psychogeriatric services.

Last week, OPSEU president Warren (Smokey) Thomas accused Royal Ottawa of ignoring its obligations to workers facing the loss of their jobs by not setting up a human resources labour adjustment plan.

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McDougall said workers facing a layoff hope to follow their work as it's divested from the Royal Ottawa, and the institution is not helping them do that by not following a labour adjustment plan it already has in place, as required by the province, for its Ottawa facilities.

Weber last week said applying the labour adjustment plan to this situation is "a little bit of apples and oranges being mixed up," a contention McDougall yesterday rejected.

The union has filed a grievance over the issue and a provincial hearing is expected in late January, said McDougall.

Meanwhile, McDougall's letter questions a proposal spearheaded by Leeds-Grenville MPP Bob Runciman to use the BMHC's Oxford Unit for the treatment of federal inmates, or as a secure treatment unit for female offenders.

"I don't believe they (projects) have legs at all," said Thomas. "I don't think we should be giving people false hope."

McDougall said Thomas is expected to attend a town hall meeting in September to which community leaders will be invited.

It will be part of OPSEU's efforts to step up its campaign against the bed closures once the summer holidays are over, said McDougall.

"When everybody's back, we'll probably ramp it up in September," he said.

Cal Crocker, Royal Ottawa's acting CEO in Weber's absence, said the labour adjustment plan applies to cases in which entire services are transferred from one institution to another.

Such is the case with the BMHC's transfer of the Elmgrove Unit to Brockville General Hospital, noted Crocker, and there is a labour adjustment plan in that case.

But the template does not apply for the transitional care beds, said Crocker.

In that case, he said, patients are moving not to a single institution, but to a wide variety of places, including the community.

Royal Ottawa will do its best to ensure Brockville employees get hired for those jobs that remain within the organization, said Crocker.

He also confirmed that Royal Ottawa will have a plan for voluntary resignation and early retirement packages by the end of September in an attempt to reduce the number of layoffs.

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Crocker said Royal Ottawa is committed to finding alternate uses for vacated portions of the Brockville site.

For his part, Runciman rejected another claim in McDougall's letter, which says the MPP "agrees" with the bed closures, noting he had long sought to prevent them in meetings with Weber.

And while the female offender treatment unit is by no means assured for the site, Runciman said such a facility would bring other OPSEU jobs to Brockville and the union should not be dismissing the idea as a false hope.

In fact, said the MPP, OPSEU can help make such a centre a reality instead of engaging in its current tactics.

"They've got a pretty narrow view of this," said Runciman.

"He (McDougall) could help to make sure that it (the project) does have legs by OPSEU getting involved in that process."

The provincial union should be well aware that female offenders suffering from mental illness needs a secure treatment centre, said Runciman.

"I think OPSEU can help us at the provincial level," he added.

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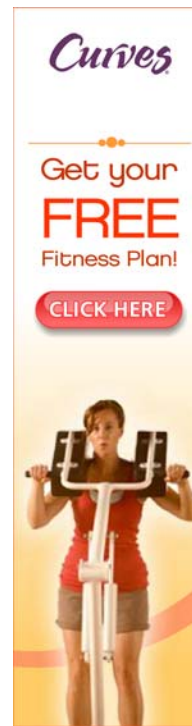
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