

When I first was approached about speaking at this town-hall meeting, I immediately said yes to this wonderful opportunity. I thought it would be so easy to speak about a subject that's been close to my heart for a long time. Then I sat down to write what I could say and I discovered that despite a wealth of information, it wasn't going to be as easy as I had initially anticipated.

I knew that I wanted to speak about how waiting lists affect families. Families are in crisis mode by the time they are referred. Depending on the coping skills of the parents, children could be put at risk. Depending on the age of the child, they could be putting themselves at risk. Children's mental health issues are life-time issues; consistency and continuity are very important. Parent education is important. The services available are in a deplorable state, thanks to little new funding, not enough funding, the list goes on and on. The bottom line is that parents, schools, protective services can't deal with these issues alone.

I thought maybe I'd speak about how difficult it once was for parents when the old nature versus nurture debate ran rampant. You know, back in the days not too long ago I might add, when the parent was responsible and the environment was the cause of children's mental health issues. There were many disillusioned and brokenhearted parents during this time period as family, friends and society said, 'what are you doing wrong?' And would then, without waiting for an answer, proceed to tell you exactly what you were doing wrong. Not particularly helpful when everyone's opinion differed and conflicted and seemed to conspire to make parents feel much more inadequate than they already did. The stigma attached to the blame caused massive shame and many parents responded by isolating themselves even further from friends, family and society adding to the isolation that their challenges had already created. In an environment of isolation the stress on marriages, siblings, social networks, work environments became unbearable and intolerable.

Then it was discovered that many of our children were born with a predisposition for mental health issues and that life altering events would exasperate the underlying physiological condition. Children's mental health agencies had treatment beds where our children could be treated with 24/7 behavior models by professionals who didn't burn out. They received intensive cognitive therapy working with such issues as self esteem. And we parents were mentored by these same professionals into the parenting changes we needed to make and the styles we needed to adopt. Schools, attempting to understand the special needs of the behaviorally challenged student had educational assistants to help the classroom teachers cope with the 1 in 5 ratio of children with mental health issues within an ordinary classroom. Protective services with a mandate to keep families together, and striving to understand that a child with mental health issues, 'could push a saint to abuse', offered parents respite, parental aids, and educational programs. Correctional services tried to intervene at a younger age when diversion and alternative sentencing arrangements were viable. Hospitals understanding the children's mental health issues would become adult mental health issues had bed space available should the need arise for the being whose mental health situation led to suicidal ideation. In short, every agency touched by children with mental health issues were all trying to be on the same page in coping with a segment of our

population that had these special needs. Far from perfect, we as a society were on the right path. And then the axe fell.

Government who didn't live with our children, didn't work with our children, having absolutely no idea what was needed to turn our children into functioning self-reliant members of our society came up with the idea of amalgamation and the streamlining of services. We, as parents were governmentally promised that our children, our families wouldn't suffer by this happening but in actuality would be better served. And that the monies saved would then be put into other programs to make life even better for our children. A series of incredibly serious betrayals began.

We were told as residential beds had to close, that C. A. S. would be specially trained and individual beds would be open especially for our children with their needs in mind. In reality, we lost the treatment beds, and private group homes were contracted to warehouse our children until they turned 16 and could be legally shoved out into society without treatment and without the skills to be on their own.

We were told that satellite offices of our children's mental health agencies would ensure less wait time, and more children serviced. In reality, wait times have lengthened to a minimum of six months and the numbers of children falling through the cracks are unacceptable. Are the agencies at fault. No. The government hasn't kept up with their promise to put whatever monies saved by amalgamation, if any, back into the basic services necessary for our children. Now instead of only disillusioned parents, we have disillusioned case workers who went into the field to be successful, having to become creative, and do much more with so much less resources.

Cuts made to the education system has led to the centralization of services, meaning that instead of helping the child with mental health issues in a regular classroom setting, segregation is occurring. Children with mental health issues are being made to wait up to five years from the time of referral for assessment to the time of the assessment being done.

Cuts made to the health care system means that fewer beds are available to the child who wants to commit suicide. And God forbid, should that child/youth has taken to self medicating, because the hospital staff will immediately assume that the drugs are causing the problem as opposed to being a symptom of the illness. Not that they're at fault. In a society where funding has been cut so drastically, and funds have to be competed for, is it any wonder that the buck gets passed. If the money doesn't get spent now, it will have to be spent later. That's the reality facing us.

Government decided that we as parents needed to utilize our informal support networks, for respite assuming that geographically everyone has family surrounding them, which couldn't be further from the truth for most of us. And also assuming that we have family or friends who feel up to the challenges of dealing with our children.

Mind you, if you are affluent you can get the care your child needs. Privatization has the services that were lost to the majority of the public. This is just not an acceptable alternative.

I know that I am angry. And I know that I'm not the only one. It is time to make the government accountable. I am the only one accountable for getting the best possible care for my child. I am the only voice my child has. We, as parents, need to make our voices

heard. And we are stating loud and clear that changes are not only necessary but mandatory. We are demanding that children's mental health issues be recognized for the serious societal issue it is. These are life long issues, that aren't going to go away, just because the government doesn't get it. How many children have to die by their own hand or by the hand of a mentally ill child or youth before we are taken seriously? How many times does the prime minister's house have to be broken into before it is understood that early intervention makes for well managed care as the child transitions into adulthood? How overcrowded do our jails have to become before it is realized that early mental health treatment and hospital mental health beds, would ease this problem?

We, as parents, demand that the ministries right across the board. The ministries of child and youth, education, health care, protective services, health and welfare, and corrections prioritize children's mental health issues. All of the ministries need to be put back on the same page. Re-invest in our children. Put the money back, put the programs back. Trust the professionals whose lives work has been our children. Trust us to know what our children need.

I have always ascribed to the first nation's credo of 'it takes a community to raise a child.' As a community we have watched the child and youth services sector ravished by a government who doesn't realize that 'these very same children are our future.'

We, as parents, demand. Do something that many governmental agents have shown us to be undone. Put the children first. Keep your promises. Have some integrity. And once you have our vote, treasure it and do what you're expected to do, what you promise to do. For every one child with mental illness that is counted, add two more people, their parents, add two more people, their siblings. Mental illness doesn't discriminate. It can, if left untreated destroy entire families. Do the math, the numbers are staggering. We, need a government who will recognize the importance of being a part of the community that it takes to raise one child. The buck stops here. Are you up to the challenge?