

More concerns, suspicions about Alberta Hospital cuts

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Mental-health advocates and people who use Edmonton's Alberta Hospital and continued to voice concerns Wednesday about where patients will turn once the psychiatric facility starts closing acute care beds.

The Alberta government announced last week it is closing parts of the hospital and moving more patients into community-based care. The transition is expected to take up to three years.

Austin Mardon was admitted to Alberta Hospital when he was first diagnosed with schizophrenia 17 years ago. The well-known mental health advocate and recipient of the Order of Canada has his illness controlled with medication, but worries the hospital won't be there if he needs it.

"I'm scared because it affects me personally and it affects a lot of the people I know, and there has to be a place where people can go to reboot."

Others are concerned the changes were announced without any consultation with mental health groups. When the downsizing was announced Friday, no details were given about how many beds would close or how many patients would be affected.

An official with Alberta Health Services said bed closures would be accompanied by a corresponding shift of services and staff into community-based services, but admitted it was still too early to say how the plan would unfold. No one will be moved unless they are ready to go and no one will end up on the street, officials insisted.

The lack of detail has raised suspicion among people in the mental-health community about the reasons behind the cuts.

Dennis Anderson, a member of the Edmonton Police Commission and a mental-health advocate, said he fears the changes were made only as a cost-cutting measure to deal with Alberta Health Services's huge debt.

"That consultation should have happened beforehand," he said. "So I know of none with the mental-health organizations that I'm affiliated with. I know of none with the people who are directly involved. And certainly there is no indication of any dollars that would be saved from the cut in Alberta Hospital."

Anderson is calling on Alberta Health Services to announce immediately how much money will be put into community services and how it plans to make the transition.

Edmonton psychiatrist Lorne Warneke shared Anderson's concerns.

"I'm very, very suspicious about the government. I know that the government usually like to build buildings.... There's something concrete there to show the voters. They very seldom like to pay money for staff and for programs that go into a building," he said. "I doubt very much that we're going to see much of that money going into any kind of community program."

Some patients simply need the specialized programs and supervision offered inside Alberta Hospital and would not do well in community care, Warneke said.

"The compliance rate is going to be reduced. It's less likely they're going to take their medication than in a hospital, and their quality of life is going to be much, much less than it is now."