

AUPE ads not trying to promote fear of mentally ill

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Re: "Don't make bed closures an issue of public safety; framing Alberta Hospital debate in those terms does disservice to patients," by Austin Mardon, Ideas, Oct. 28.

I appreciate the concerns about the stigmatization of mental illness expressed by Austin Mardon. In fact, this stigma has been a key concern from the very beginning of our campaign to stop the closure of beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton; it is why Mardon was the first person we invited to speak at our town hall meeting on Sept. 2.

We at the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) understand that some believe our recent TV advertisements may have increased worries about public safety if beds close at Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

We have done nothing to promote such fears, but recognize that the long-standing public attitudes associated with mental illness may result in such interpretations.

For the record, our advertisements featured:a defence lawyer who too often finds that her clients ended up in the criminal justice system precisely because of inadequate mental health care options; a psychiatrist from Alberta Hospital Edmonton expressing her concern that the beds at the hospital are "always full";and the sister of a patient who worries what will happen if her brother can't get treated at Alberta Hospital Edmonton the next time he is a "danger to himself or maybe others."

The people in our advertisements are all real people, expressing their own legitimate and genuine concerns about the consequences of bed closures at Alberta Hospital Edmonton. Above all, their concern is for the safety and well-being of their patients, clients, and loved ones. To dismiss these concerns as fearmongering or "NIMBYism" misses the point.

From our earliest consultations with AUPE members who directly or indirectly support the programs at Alberta Hospital, and throughout our ongoing consultations with other health professionals, mental health advocates, housing and service providers, it has been clear that Alberta has a severe shortage of both hospital-based acute mental health-care beds and community-based mental health-care options. We fully support well regulated, publicly delivered and funded programs in both settings because our members and other

medical health professionals, patients and families at Alberta Hospital have told us that is what is needed.

Alberta Hospital Edmonton is a caring community unto itself.

Nonetheless, we know that some patients there would be served well by off-site mental health-care services. Increasing such care options could shorten the waiting lists that currently exist at the hospital with absolutely no negative affect to the community.

What worries us is the suggestion that off-site care options can replace the acute care resources provided at Alberta Hospital for those in the greatest distress.

Alberta Hospital Edmonton provides secure treatment options to those who are, in the assessment of a mental health-care professional, a danger to themselves or others. Such treatment facilities are a necessity, not an option, and they don't exist anywhere else in our city. We cannot shy away from the fact that without the secure treatment beds at Alberta Hospital, some who suffer from a mental health crisis could easily fall through the cracks, ending up homeless and at greater risk of being victimized on our city streets.

We also need to recognize that the very best community treatment programs in our province have been developed and administered by the mental health team at Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

To break up such a valuable resource would do irreparable damage to both community and hospital based treatment options for those suffering from mental illness.

Hundreds of Albertans have sent us copies of the letters they have written to their MLAs opposing the plan to close beds at Alberta Hospital Edmonton. Overwhelmingly, the fears expressed are for the patients who will be endangered by such cuts. I applaud those who have written such letters and encourage those who haven't done so to put a pen to paper. There is still hope that we can save Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

Guy Smith, president, AUPE, Edmonton