



Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office

Bureau de l'intervention en faveur des patients des établissements psychiatriques

2007 Ontario Election:

Talking to Provincial Candidates About Mental Health Issues and Priorities

Introduction

Over the past few years, the Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office (PPAO) has heard from patients, families, consumer survivor organizations, health practitioners and others that there are many issues that require the immediate attention of the government. This paper highlights some of these concerns and you may wish to share them with the politicians seeking your vote in the upcoming provincial election.

Ontarians go to the polls to elect a new provincial government on October 10, 2007. This year, you will be asked to vote for a candidate to represent your riding and also to answer a referendum question regarding the transformation of our electoral system and how politicians are elected. Information on the voting process is available on the Elections Ontario website at www.elections.on.ca, by e-mail at info@electionsontario.on.ca or by phone at 1-800-677-8683.

Elections are a good time for citizens to raise matters of concern with candidates and to secure their commitment to take action, if elected, on addressing and resolving issues and priorities in the mental health sector. You can also ask candidates how their political party platform addresses and prioritizes mental health issues. You may find that those seeking office are more willing than usual to listen and to make a commitment to change the current system.

Now is the time for you to use your vote and your voice to bring important issues to the attention of individual candidates and the various political parties. You have power in your vote and you may want to use it to be a catalyst for change.

The following topics relate to issues that have been at the forefront of the PPAOs work in recent years. They may provide you with information that you wish to discuss with candidates, or give you ideas about changes that you feel need to be made by the new government following the election. You will see that most sections have a list of possible questions for your local candidate. To learn more about patients' rights and our systemic advocacy work, visit our website at www.ppaogov.on.ca.

The Right to Vote

It is important to note that the struggle for equity in voting rights for individuals with a mental illness is part of a relatively recent history. As a rights protection organization, we are committed to assisting our clients in reducing any remaining barriers to exercising the right to vote.

Respecting the October 2007 referendum, the Chief Electoral Officer has been given the responsibility of providing clear and impartial information about the referendum process, the date of the referendum and the referendum question.

The government of Ontario has acknowledged that “sometimes people fail to exercise their right to vote because our election laws have not kept pace with the realities of people’s lives.” One of these realities is being hospitalized in a psychiatric facility on election day. Another reality experienced by many mental health consumers is the many obstacles they encounter when attempting to exercise their right to vote. Recent amendments to the *Elections Act* failed to remove some of the most significant barriers. For example, individuals are still required to provide proof of identity and residency; many individuals with mental illness do not have access to their identification because it is often kept by the facility in which they are being held.

Recovery

Recovery is facilitated when individuals have access to needed and wanted mental health services and support. However, recovery cannot flourish in an environment that denies consumer choice, opportunity, independence and autonomy. An environment that creates and sustains power imbalances, denies choice, erodes legal rights and undermines individual autonomy impedes recovery. We believe that all individuals with a mental illness have the capacity to identify, direct and achieve recovery on their own terms. We further believe that Ontario should adopt and promote a recovery framework for its mental health sector.

1. Do you believe that individuals with mental illness can and do recover from mental illness?
2. Do you or your party have a comprehensive mental health strategy that incorporates the principles of recovery?
3. What steps would you take to ensure that all individuals with mental health have access to the supports and services that they require in a timely manner and in their own community?

Access to Care and Treatment

We often hear from individuals with mental illness, or their families, that they are unable to access “bed-based” mental health care in their own community. All too frequently, they are told that there are “no beds” or that they “do not require” admission to hospital. Unfortunately, this denial of service sometimes has tragic consequences; the human cost is great for families and communities touched by the suicide of a loved one who has been denied appropriate mental health care and treatment.

Individuals with mental illness must be able to access a full spectrum of mental health services and supports in a timely manner in their own communities from providers that will meet their individual needs. Individuals with mental illness must be able to have a "provider of choice" and a system that is responsive to their unique and individualized needs with a recovery and client directed philosophy.

1. What steps would you/your party take to ensure that all individuals have access to “bed-based” mental health care?

2. What will you/your party do to ensure that individuals have timely access to a full range of mental health services and supports?

Access to Medication

Numerous and costly medications are often prescribed to persons with a mental illness. While some of these medications are covered by the Ontario Drug Benefit Card, other newer and more expensive medications are not. Individuals with mental illness should have access to a full range of medications and treatment modalities which are covered by a publicly funded health care system. There should never be a question about "cost" with respect to prescribed treatments. Rather, we should ask how we can support individuals with mental illness who are in need of a particular treatment regimen but cannot afford it.

1. What steps would you/your party take to ensure that individuals have access to the medications they need or require and which support their recovery?
2. Will you/your party ensure that each of these medications that support wellness and recovery are included in the Ontario Drug Benefit Program?

Independent Advocacy and Rights Protection

For more than two decades, the PPAO has provided independent advocacy and rights advice services to inpatients in the ten current and divested provincial psychiatric hospitals. Since 2001, we have also been providing rights advice in all but a few of the community hospitals with mental health units, as well as individuals being considered for placement on a community treatment order, and their substitute decision-makers, if any. Last year, the PPAO provided approximately 21,000 first rights advice visits and worked to resolve more than 3,500 individual advocacy issues.

However, as mental health reform has progressed, with care and treatment migrating from hospital to the community, rights protection mechanisms have not kept pace. As a result, many vulnerable individuals with mental illness no longer have access to independent advocacy and rights advice services. An independent and partisan advocate could support individuals with mental illness and give a voice to their issues when they are unable to speak for themselves, in addition to addressing systemic issues and providing advice to the government on mental health and addiction matters.

1. What steps will you/your party take to ensure that independent advocacy and rights protection services are available to all individuals with a mental illness in Ontario?

A Provincial Mental Health Strategy

Ontario needs to develop a comprehensive provincial mental health strategy to assist and support individuals with mental illness. This would allow individuals to have access to a seamless delivery of mental health services and supports from childhood to adulthood and provide consistency in the care and treatment received from qualified health practitioners. The government of Ontario should work with stakeholders to develop such a strategy as a public health priority requiring immediate intervention.

1. Have you/your party developed a comprehensive mental health strategy for the province of Ontario? If no, will you do so in the future?
2. How did/will you include consumer-survivors in the development process?

A Suicide Prevention Strategy

Ontario requires a comprehensive suicide prevention strategy as part of its provincial mental health strategy. Greater awareness and public education is needed; individuals should know where to go for assistance, care and support. To achieve this goal, mental illness needs to be demystified. Emphasis should be placed on the education system to reach out to at risk children, youth and young adults. There should also be specific approaches for northern, rural and remote communities. Suicide cannot be ignored as the human cost of suicide is too great for communities and the province.

1. Have you/your party developed a comprehensive suicide prevention strategy for the province of Ontario? If no, will you do so in the future?
2. How did/will you include consumer-survivors in the process?

A Housing Strategy

Due to the cyclical nature of mental illness, individuals may need different types of housing with varying levels of support at different times to live independently. Over the years, we have seen the "revolving door" cycle of hospital readmission and homelessness – people are housed, admitted to hospital, faced with homelessness upon discharge before maybe obtaining housing again. Each time people lose their homes and their possessions, they must start over again. This only serves to isolate people from their communities and undermine their physical and mental well-being. Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) policies often perpetuate this cycle by preventing individuals from paying their rent during periods of extended hospitalization, thereby leaving them vulnerable to eviction.

A significant number of clients report that their housing situation is inadequate or substandard. Others advise us that a disproportionate amount of their income is used to secure decent and safe housing.

If home care were more readily available to individuals with mental illness, many people could continue to live independently in their own homes. ODSP rates should also be raised to reflect actual market value rents so that no individual with a disability or mental illness has to live in unsafe or inadequate housing. Being concerned about having a roof over your head or living in an unsafe environment can undermine both mental health and quality of life. Investment by the government in a range of housing options should be both encouraged and supported.

1. What steps will you/your party take to increase the number of supportive housing units in Ontario?
2. How will you/your party increase access to home care services for individuals with mental illness so that they can remain in their own homes?
3. What steps will you/your party take to guarantee that ODSP rates will reflect actual market value rents across Ontario?

Employment and Education

For most Ontarians, employment and financial security are of the utmost importance. There is little doubt that having meaningful employment is important to all of us, but it is particularly significant to those recovering from mental illness insofar as it promotes self-esteem and supports community membership and inclusion. Accordingly, having a job can be an integral component of recovery and reintegration into the community. Unfortunately, there are few supports for finding and maintaining employment for individuals with disabilities in Ontario. For those people with jobs, they are often only paid minimum wage and the work is of a menial nature. If individuals with disabilities are employed, they risk losing access to some ODSP benefits. These disincentives must be eliminated as they represent a barrier to inclusion for people with disabilities.

A labour market environment that is inclusive, responsive and welcoming of employees with disabilities must be fostered and supported by the government. This can be achieved via vocational rehabilitation supports combined with educational opportunities, job coaching, mentoring programs, job shadowing programs and support services. Education of employees and employers about the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* is also important.

1. What steps will you/your party take to reduce the unemployment rate amongst people with disabilities with the ultimate goal of full employment for those wishing to have employment?
2. What plan do you/your party have for supporting individuals with disabilities to pursue educational and employment opportunities?

Consumer-Survivor Initiatives

Ontario has in word, but not deed, stated its commitment to consumer-survivor initiatives and their involvement in all aspects of the mental health sector. Regrettably, this has not happened.

Consumer organizations and initiatives need to receive increased funding. Increased involvement in the mental health sphere can also be supported by requiring all government agencies who receive funding for the delivery of mental health and addiction programs to hire and work with consumer-survivors.

1. Do you/your party believe that consumer-survivors must be included as full and equal partners in the mental health sector?
2. What steps will you/your party take to require all mental health services providers to have consumer-survivor involvement at all levels of their organizations?
3. What additional investments will you/your party make in consumer-survivor initiatives?
4. Would you/your party support a requirement that all funded mental health agencies have peer support workers available to their clients?

An Adequate Income

Individuals with physical and mental disabilities in Ontario are often subjected to a life of poverty – a barrier to inclusion and full participation in society. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* defines a barrier to “mean anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability,

including...a policy or practice.” Poverty is the most formidable barrier to inclusion and full participation in society. The government of Ontario could eradicate poverty if it had the desire to do so.

Government policy has forced people with disabilities living on limited incomes to make difficult financial choices that negatively impact their physical and emotional health, eroding self-confidence and personal effectiveness. Individuals living at or below the poverty line must often choose between paying the rent or feeding their families, or sending children on class outings or paying utility bills.

Constantly worrying about not being able to provide their families with food, shelter and clothing takes its toll on the mental health and well-being of individuals. For some, it will result in hospitalization, while others will simply become immobilized by stress. If the government is to truly support wellness and recovery, a significant investment will need to be made to provide people with the resources necessary to achieve recovery. The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* is a legal commitment to eliminating all barriers for people with disabilities, including poverty, and it must be honoured.

1. What steps will you/your party take to increase ODSP rates?

Transportation

Some individuals with mental illness participate in a range of social, vocational, rehabilitation and recreational programs that are either hospital or community-based. These activities help people in their quest for wellness and recovery, to engage in meaningful activities and to interact with others on a social level. Other individuals with mental illness must attend regular appointments with many different health care providers, including psychiatrists, social workers, case managers and outreach staff, but they are often are not provided with sufficient financial assistance for transportation to attend these meetings.

Each of these rehabilitation, social and treatment activities may play an important role in the person's life and in keeping them connected to their community. Unfortunately, many of these programs do not provide financial assistance for transportation nor does ODSP provide full subsidies to cover the costs so clients find it difficult to participate in the very programs that keep them well.

1. What steps will you/your party take to ensure individuals with disabilities receive financial assistance so that they can attend the programs that support their wellness and recovery?

Conclusion

By bringing mental health issues and priorities to the attention of provincial candidates, you will be making a difference by working to improve the quality of care and life of all individuals with a mental illness. As a community, we must take greater responsibility for the health and well-being of some of the most vulnerable amongst us. Please discuss these important issues during this election to make a difference for you, your loved ones and your communities.