

MEDIA RELEASE

Canadian Mental Health Association

Alberta Division

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LONG WAIT LISTS ENDANGER MENTALLY ILL

Edmonton, Alberta, March 26, 1999—

“People with serious mental illness are waiting over a year to receive much needed services,” says Dennis Anderson, President of the Alberta Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association. High priority children in Edmonton, some of whom are suicidal, wait an average of 72 days for service; there is an eight month plus wait for community services, and an average wait list of over a year for residential programs, according to the CMHA informal study released today.

Alexis Reiter, whose husband has been on a wait list for a hospital bed for three months, wonders “How many people are out there who are not getting help? My husband seems to be getting worse. He is sleeping up to 20 hours a day, and is often unable to attend appointments with his psychiatrist. That is the only help he’s getting.” Dennis Anderson said concerns like this prompted the Association to investigate wait lists for community mental health services.

“We know that many people delay seeking treatment for mental health services, due either to the stigma involved, or a lack of information about available services. It is tragic that, more often than not, their first contact with a community agency becomes a discussion of how long they must wait. Untreated mental illness damages people, and disrupts family life,” said Anderson.

“Even in Medicine Hat, which is the one bright spot in our survey, there are long wait lists for adequate and affordable housing,” Anderson said. “A critical shortage of housing is a concern in all communities we surveyed. People waiting for housing may be in hospital beds blocking access to more seriously ill people.”

Anderson called on the Provincial Mental Health Advisory Board, Regional Health Authorities and the Ministers responsible for health, housing and children’s services to take immediate steps to deal with this crisis in mental health. “At least three steps must be taken,” Anderson said. “They are (a) monitor wait lists for mental health services on an ongoing basis; (b) immediately put enough resources into urgent wait list situations to alleviate the current problem; and (c) develop a long-term plan for mental health, in consultation with consumers and community agencies.”

This wait list report follows an Alberta Medical Association report released in the summer of 1998, which showed, among other things, that it would take an acute care patient over three weeks to see a psychiatrist. The recommendation for an overall plan for mental health was also addressed by the Alberta Health Council report publicly released in January.

The CMHA surveyed key informants in Edmonton, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat on wait lists for community mental health services. The Association also reviewed Calgary’s 1998 statistics. “This is a snapshot of community mental health services, not a comprehensive survey, but it tells us there is a major problem,” said Anderson.

CMHA is a non-profit organization speaking for mental health consumers in Alberta since 1954. The Association has seven regional offices and a budget of 7.8 million dollars.

Dennis Anderson and family members who have been affected by wait lists will be available on the 5th floor of Capital Place, 9707 - 100 Street at 10:00 a.m.