

Provincial candidates get to hear from service providers

By Bill Rea

When it comes to human services, things like transportation, housing and availability of services and opportunities are still big factors.

That was a point that came out repeatedly from four of the candidates running in Dufferin-Caledon in next week's provincial election.

The observations were made during a Roundtable Discussion hosted by Caledon Community Services (CCS), and it involved input from representatives of various community agencies serving the riding.

All four candidates agreed the discussion is an important one. And while there were efforts to keep the partisan political talk to a minimum, such points were prominent throughout the discussion.

Liberal Bobbie Daid said her party would put people and communities first. Addressing health services, she said her party would partner with business to put up \$30 million to help business in order to aid disabled people realize their full potential. As well, there are Liberal promises for support of front-line wages in the health sector and more support services for home care. Daid stressed they want to make Ontario the best place to age actively.

Progressive Conservative Sylvia Jones said she has sat on a Select Committee on Developmental Services at Queen's Park, adding she introduced legislation aimed at encouraging volunteering by allowing the results of the same criminal background check to be used by more than one agency.

Green party candidate Karren Wallace said she was raised on a family farm, adding she has been active in local agricultural affairs. She said she helped create a miniature interactive barn for fairs that was fully accessible for kids. She also pointed to the roughly five years she spent in the successful fight to prevent the proposed 2,300-acre quarry from going into Melancthon Township.

'We have it stopped for now,' she remarked, as she also took a shot at Jones, charging the incumbent was not on hand when needed. 'I want to be the MPP who's going to be accessible to you,' she said.

New Democrat Rehya Yazbek stressed her 25 years as a social justice advocate.

'I'm the person who will be listening and talking to (NDP Leader) Andrea (Horwath) about all your issues,' she vowed.

She also stressed it's very important that families and regular people get access to all the services they need.

The agencies making presentations included Bethell Hospice in Inglewood. Senior Manager of Volunteers and Facility Administration Louise Stinson was appreciative that all parties in the Legislature support increasing funding for the service from 60 to 80 per cent.

'We are all going to die,' she stressed, pointing out the main question is when and how.

Stinson also commented on the reality of an aging population, meaning there are going to be more people in need of end-of-life care. People prefer to either die at home, or in a home-like setting. She added care in the community is more economical than hospitalization, yet there are many times when people in crisis are taken to hospital when their care could be managed at home or close to it.

Bethell Hospice is the only such residential facility in Peel Region or Dufferin County, although Stinson said there are efforts in the works to have more. She pointed out it costs on average \$450 per day to keep a person in a hospice facility, but \$850 per day to have them in a hospital.

In addition, she pointed out hospice care allows family to get rest, go to work, stay healthy and say goodbye to their loved ones.

Stinson said there are also efforts to increase public awareness of the program, since there are a lot of people who are not aware of it.

Jones commented her widowed father has told her about hospice programs for survivors. 'It's much more than just helping the patient at the end of life,' she observed.

She also lamented such service is not available in every riding.

'It works for the patients, it works for the families and it works for the bottom line,' she declared.

Wallace commented that education is key. She recalled working in New Tecumseth when there were efforts to have a hospice facility put in place, and neighbours were upset at the prospect.

Yazbek said she cares for her 80-year-old father and appreciates the service.

'It's good to know that it's out there,' she remarked.

Cathy Lepiane, community relations manager with Caledon Meals on Wheels (CMOW), repeated the demographics of an aging population are increasing the demands on this agency too.

'They've done so much for us,' she said. 'How can we not turn around and give them what they need?'

Lepiane also observed there are many people who don't realize their service is available all over Caledon and in Orangeville too. The aim is to keep people in their homes as long as possible, and maintaining sound nutrition is an important part of that. Daid agreed with the aging demographics, noting the problem is going to get worse. She added she would like to see red tape cut to facilitate getting health care where it's needed.

Jones pointed to the unique value of the service, with volunteers being knowledgeable about other programs available. She also said they are well-placed to notice shifts in clients' conditions.

Yazbek said her father required CMOW over a couple of years, and the regular visits were "very, very meaningful."

Caledon-Dufferin Victim Services were represented by Executive Director Dorothy Davis. She said government is talking about cutting 31 per cent of the funding of local agencies to meet increased demand in other places, adding the agency's funding has not increased since 2007. Davis said a cut like that would mean they wouldn't be able to deliver the same level of service.

That was important to Daid, who commented that bringing service to a large riding like this one is hard. "The issues are very different," she observed, adding cutting funding is not the answer.

Wallace agreed when government talks about efficiencies, it means cutting. She stressed the need to keep the heat on from the grass roots.

Yazbek commented of the level of service delivery. "If you don't have that funding, you're not going to have it," she said.

Carine Strong, executive director of Volunteer MBC, commented on the changing trend in volunteerism, as seniors are leaving and young people need to know what's in volunteering for them. There are also some barriers against youth volunteers, such as them having transportation to get around. She said that could be addressed, possibly by an agency like CCS providing rides or reimbursement for mileage. She pointed out the availability of volunteer drivers in Caledon is at an all-time low because mileage reimbursement is not keeping up with the cost of gas.

Strong also said outreach is a problem, as she pointed out a lot of people don't volunteer because they have never been asked. Another issue she cited is the fact that volunteers are not free, as they need guidance and training.

Wallace said one solution could be better community planning. People who are able to work close to home might have more time to contribute, she said.

Jones reminded the meeting it was a PC government that brought in the required volunteer hours for high school students. Daid agreed there needs to be training for volunteers. She also said business has to be brought on to make sure employees are encouraged to volunteer.

Norah Kennedy, executive director of Family Transition Place, commented on the importance of the shelter they operate, pointing out its resources are stretched. She also said prior to the latest budget from the government (just before the election was called), they had been told more money would be coming. She asked the candidates to live up to that commitment.

"It's a matter of life and death, in some cases," she said.

"I hear exactly where you're coming from," Yazbek told her.

Jones said a lot of agencies were told there would be good news in the budget, commenting what government promises and delivers on are two different things.

Daid countered money was built into the budget and it was the opposition that voted it down.

"It is challenging," she said, adding the money is there she promised to work to get it to the agencies.

Andy Willemsen of Brampton Caledon Community Living said there are more families facing the decision of which parent quits work to take care of a disabled child. He asked the candidates what their party would do.

"Everyone's struggling," Yazbek observed, adding her party has a plan that will work. She said the recent Liberal budget sounded great. "It sounded like an NDP budget," she said.

Wallace said she's heard of cases of young people who will need care when they get older, but they can't get on a waiting list until their 18. She said money can be raised to enable them to get on the list sooner.

Jones said she spent three years on the committee looking into developmental services. A report from the committee called for getting rid of the lists.

"I intend to continue pushing this issue," she said.

Daid commented PC Leader Tim Hudak has announced plans to get rid of 100,000 public service position, and she said that will mean early childhood educators and personal support workers. She also said these issues were addressed in the recent budget. "We need to get it back on the table," she said.

Nora Martin represented Caledon Seniors' Centre, expressed appreciation for government funding.

She also pointed to the aging population, and the fact that demand for seniors' service is sure to increase. She also observed that agencies like CMOW do a lot to help, but these people still need to get out occasionally, and that can be a problem. CCS does offer transportation, but just getting them to the centre can cost \$8, and that's in addition to paying program fees and the cost of lunch. She said some sort of subsidy is needed.

'Transportation is really the key,' she remarked.

Martin also commented on the need for affordable housing for seniors.

Wallace said municipalities have all the tools they need to bring in affordable housing. 'That fortitude needs to come from the local council,' she said.

Jones commented on the need to look into what programs work and those that don't.

She also didn't see the value of the province getting into building homes, commenting that was tried under the NDP.

'It was an unmitigated disaster,' she said.

Daid agreed the municipality is in the position to provide affordable housing, adding she would work with them to make it happen.