

Wanted: Inclusion of developmentally-disabled in Caledon

For anyone with a developmentally challenged family member, it will come as no surprise to hear that services for the disabled in Ontario are lacking.

There has been tremendous upheaval recently due to changes in how provincial funding and services are delivered and this has caused considerable stress for those who care for anyone with any type of disability. When the province decided to close the large institutions that housed those with intellectual/cognitive/developmental delays, the money used for the operation of those sites was supposed to go to communities to support programs and housing for the developmentally challenged where their families lived. This is simply not happening.

We hear again and again of the desperate situation many families are in as their disabled children start to 'age-out' of programs and there is nowhere to go. In general, although not perfect, the school system in Ontario provides a safe and stimulating environment for developmentally-disabled children. There are many wonderful special needs teachers and programs, and facilities that accommodate them very well - until they turn 21. Then, for many of us with developmentally-delayed children who are out, or almost out of high school, there is a big black hole.

In the Town of Caledon, Brampton-Caledon Community Living (BCCL) used to be involved in setting up group homes, but not anymore. BCCL does work hard to try to provide some day and evening programs. Their funding is very limited however, and they can only offer a few hours of activities and supervision during the week. It certainly does not fill the same hours as school does. Nor is there a practical public transportation system to allow all these people to travel in a timely fashion to the programs that do exist. The Town's recreation programs have friendly, helpful staff and may comply with the province's accessibility laws, offering special needs swimming lessons and camps for children, but they have not exactly been welcoming when it comes to adult-aged, special-needs residents. The Caledon Centre for Recreation and Wellness has imposed age-restrictions, and have made it clear that not everyone is welcome, nor permitted, to attend all the adult classes in the gym and pool.

So, in a nutshell, once a developmentally-challenged person living in Caledon finishes the last possible year of high school (age 21), there is nothing much to do, and very few options for housing besides their parents' home. Just to apply to create a group home in the Town of Caledon costs \$5,000, with absolutely no guarantee of getting one. One parent wished to donate her home so that her 25-year-old developmentally-disabled daughter would be able to live in it with others like her. She changed her mind when she found out that her own daughter would not necessarily get a spot in the house. The bureaucracy and regulations are ridiculous and paralysing.

Several families facing these difficulties have by chance found each other and have formed an informal support group called CAFFI (Caledon Area Families For Inclusion). The members of the group wish to stay in Caledon, their home, but many are starting to feel that they may have to move to find housing and programs for their developmentally-delayed adult children. The group's goal is for Caledon to be inclusive, where all residents are welcome and where they are allowed to be active participants in their own community (ie. don't have to drive to Brampton for day programs). The members want their adult-aged developmentally-disabled children to have somewhere they can live relatively independently, and have some sort of meaningful activities or work within the Town of Caledon. To that end, the CAFFI group would like to find any other Caledon families facing the same uncertain future and who would like to work together to find ways to keep our developmentally challenged children in our own community.

If you have a developmentally-challenged child and are interested in meeting other families in the same situation, you are encouraged to attend the Nov. 4 CAFFI meeting, where we will be collecting comments, questions, concerns etc., regarding the process of getting a group home in Bolton and /or day programs for people with intellectual disabilities. Even if you do not have a developmentally-challenged family member, but just feel the lack of suitable housing, care and programming needs to be addressed, please come to the meeting and share your ideas and energy with the group. We hope to use the questions and ideas to prepare ourselves for a meeting with representatives from L'Arche, the group home model inspired by Jean Vanier.

The next CAFFI meeting will held at 7 p.m. Nov. 4 at Christ Church on Nancy Street in Bolton. The group will focus on how to get a group home for developmentally challenged adults, possibly a L'Arche home, in Bolton.