

Good morning. We would like to welcome you all to our forum “Freedom, Reconciliation and Community Living for All”. This is the first event hosted by the Deinstitutionalization Coalition of Saskatchewan. The DCS was formed in the spring of 2006 when SACL and PFS decided to officially partner to tackle this issue together. Deinstitutionalization is obviously a very important and very personal issue for members of PF. Many have first hand experience of life in institutions. Deinstitutionalization is also the very reason that SACL was created.

Valley View Centre in Moose Jaw was opened in 1955. It was that same year that a group of parents, who rejected institutions for their own children got together to form SACL. They knew that an institution was not the place for their children and knew that although there were no other options at the time, that options could be created. They had nothing but hopes and dreams and the belief that their children needed to be brought up in loving homes with their families and to be included in their communities.

In the years since, we have made some great gains in our goal of full inclusion for everyone with an intellectual disability. Services and supports were indeed created, and have developed and evolved over the years. We continue to improve on what has been available in the past and will continue to create new and better supports and services and move closer to the reality of true community living for all.

We have not, however, resolved the one issue that started this whole movement. We have not been able to close the institutions and ensure that every person has their needs met, in homes of their choosing, in the community. Fifty-two years later and VVC still exists. This is unacceptable!

We can look back 50 years with a certain amount of forgiveness and know that people did not know better at that time. We cannot say that now. We know and have known for many years now, that everyone, regardless of their support needs, can live successfully in their own homes. What has been missing is the commitment and imagination to look at the individual and to plan and appropriately fund what is right for them.

The government is quick to say that they are fully supportive of community living and you will find this in many of their documents. They say they truly believe, and yet, fail to provide what is necessary to make it a reality for everyone. They claim to want “no one left behind” and yet are knowingly doing just that. They are quite prepared to close VVC by “attrition”. Once everyone has died they say they will be more than happy to close the facility.

They claim to want to be able to transition people out of VVC but struggle with coming up with the necessary solutions for all. Inadequate funding is part of the problem, we must push for the government to do better. Developing new and creative options is also necessary. And with this we can help! We have offered to help! They have refused our help!

We don't want to just close the doors as quickly as possible and say “it's done”. We want to be actively involved in the process so that we can assist in the planning and the

transitions in order to make each and every one as successful as possible. We want to make sure it is done right and that the individual and their needs and desires are front and centre through the whole process. This is about more than plugging someone into an empty group home spot somewhere in the province if and when something becomes available.

One of the goals of the DCS is to get a spot on the transition team and to be involved in this process. It is important that we are there. Another goal is to have closure of VVC by 2010. This gives us the time to create the options that are required. Both of these goals are realistic and the DCS will continue to work to achieve them.

Another of our goals is to raise awareness of this issue with the people of SK. Unfortunately, many if not most people in SK are unaware that VVC still exists. Most people, while they are aware of the fact that individuals with intellectual disabilities used to be institutionalized, believe this to be a thing of the past. And why wouldn't they? Look around. Throughout this province people with all levels of needs are indeed being supported and included in society. It would just make sense then that there wouldn't still be institutions, ... wouldn't it? The government certainly doesn't want people to know about VVC. They certainly don't advertise the fact that it is still there. They know it is not needed as well and would rather the general public was unaware of how they have failed these people.

And they are people!!!

They are human beings.
They are not a commodity to benefit the economy of Moose Jaw.
But that is how they are treated.

They are human beings.
They are not pawns in a political game to see who can win the 2 seats in Moose Jaw.
But that is how they are treated.

They are human beings.
They have human rights.
These rights are being denied.

It is time to acknowledge the fact that these are people, people who have something to contribute to our world. These people are capable of having hopes and dreams. I say capable, because in reality, if you've spent most of your life in there you probably haven't been allowed to hope and dream. We need to give them that chance.

Some time ago I read a presentation by Kent Ericsson of Sweden. Sweden closed all their institutions in 1999. The outcomes from Sweden have certainly proven just how beneficial this has been for all people with intellectual disabilities, even the most severe. When Ericsson was doing his study on the outcomes he said one comment kept coming up over and over, people would say "they've become a person". This is what institutions

do, they rob you of your personhood, your identity, your individuality. We must work to give back what has been stolen from these people.

Ericsson also spoke of the need to work on “closing the institution in our minds”. He was referring to the shift in attitudes that was necessary to see these individuals as citizens of the community with the right to be here.

This phrase stuck with me and I’ve thought a lot about it since. This is certainly a big part of the obstacle that we face. There still exist too many real institutions in our country, ones that are made of bricks and mortar, ones that you can walk up to and touch. But there are many, many more “institutions in our minds”. I have spoken to far too many people who have these. Some are aware of them, others not. On one hand there are people who staunchly believe that institutions are a good and necessary thing, that they are an option that should be available and these individuals are prepared to fight to keep them open. On the other hand though, there are also many people who believe in community living, who want their children included in all aspects of their communities, but... Maybe “some people” still need the institution, ... maybe “some people’s” needs are too high Maybe “some people” have lived there too long to realistically be given a chance at a real life. Maybe, maybe, but, but, but....

These are the “institutions in our minds”. The belief that somehow, for some people, institutions can be justified. We know that experience and research have proven over and over that this is just not true.

There are many of us across this country, and many are here with us today, who will continue to fight to close our remaining institutions and to push for the development of new individualized supports in the community to replace them. This may take us some time, but we will succeed. We are very fortunate to have a dedicated group who will never give up on this issue.

But today we have an opportunity, right now, even in an election year, to close some of the “institutions in our minds”. That is what we can achieve today. That is what our forum is about. I invite you all to listen to our speakers today who will tell you why deinstitutionalization is necessary and how best to go about it and discuss some of the issues related to it. This afternoon I invite you all to listen to the individuals who lived far too many years inside of institutions and who are now successfully living in the community - hear their stories. By the end of the day it is my hope that if anyone here has an institution in their mind, that they will be ready to close it. I would then invite you to join with us and help others to recognize and then close their own institutions. It is my belief, that if we can succeed in closing enough of those “institutions” the bricks and mortar will fall.