



B.C. shows inspired leadership in addressing mental health

By Michael Kirby and Louise Bradley

British Columbians should be proud that their province is taking a strong leadership role in Canada's national effort to improve the mental health of its citizens.

We saw evidence of this leadership last November when the provincial government released *Healthy Minds, Healthy People*, an excellent 10-year plan to address mental health and substance use.

We believe this plan strikes the right balance between prevention and support, calling for more to be done to prevent mental illness as early as possible and at the same time ensuring that people who are experiencing mental illness are better supported to lead meaningful lives in the community.

The plan is very consistent with the direction and priorities of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), which is helping governments and policy makers craft a national and coordinated mental health strategy that will transform Canada's mental health system.

The MHCC today is taking action with a range of partners—NGOs, governments and the private sector—to advance mental health and mental illness issues and find real, tangible solutions so that people who suffer from mental health problems can thrive and lead fulfilling and productive lives. In this case, too, we are seeing great leadership and grassroots commitment in British Columbia.

The Bosman Hotel Community in downtown Vancouver is an outstanding example of this.

The MHCC, working with a large and exceptional group of partners here, officially opened the Bosman in August last year as part of our *At Home/Chez Soi* national research project to address mental health and homelessness. *At Home/Chez Soi* is the largest project of its kind in the world whose ultimate goal is to identify the best course of action to help more effectively some of our most vulnerable citizens.

This groundbreaking research project is also well under way in four other Canadian cities: Moncton, Montréal, Toronto and Winnipeg. Over 2,200 homeless mentally ill Canadians will benefit from this project. Of that number, more than 1,300 people who are currently living on Canada's streets will receive housing.

Launched just over a year ago, the research project has already caught the attention of groups overseas. We have fielded inquiries from Europe and Australia from people wanting to replicate our example.

In Vancouver, *At Home/Chez Soi* is trying to find the best ways to help those who are mentally ill and have concurrent substance abuse and addiction issues. During the course of the research project, 200 people will receive housing throughout Vancouver, and an additional 100 people will benefit from housing at the Bosman Hotel Community.

In addition to good-quality housing, *At Home/Chez Soi* participants are receiving support ranging from medical care to finding jobs and helping them reconnect with family.

Robert Glass, President of the Downtown Vancouver Association, and several DVA directors toured the Bosman last month. In a letter to us, he called their visit “inspiring”.

“To see hope in the faces of the residents and how generally happy everyone was in their new, clean and safe environment was very moving,” he wrote.

Robert also told us they were impressed and encouraged to see surrounding businesses giving positive support to the Bosman project. “It’s very easy to say ‘not in my backyard’, “ he wrote. “This demonstrates to us that Vancouver is indeed maturing collectively as a city and deserves its designation as one of the most liveable cities in the world.”

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is extremely grateful to all the individuals and organizations that are supporting the project in Vancouver, including our 19 private-owner and property-management partners.

We are also grateful to all British Columbians who are actively involved in the mental health cause. The leadership we are seeing in British Columbia, as well as the vision, civic mindedness and caring of its people, can be an inspiration to all Canadians as, together, we take concerted action to bring the subject of mental health and mental illness out of the shadows forever.

Michael Kirby is Chair and Louise Bradley is President and CEO of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, which is holding its Board of Directors meeting in Vancouver this week.