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The Canadian Press(CP)

March 19, 2007 Monday

GENERAL AND NATIONAL NEWS

486 words

Michael Kirby named to head new Canadian Mental Health Commission

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TORONTO (CP) _ Finance Minister Jim Flaherty called for "respect and dignity" for people with mental illness as he announced in the budget Monday the establishment of a Canadian Mental Health Commission.

"Health care goes beyond physical well-being," he said as he addressed the House of Commons in Ottawa.

"We must reach out in practical and compassionate ways to those struggling with mental illness."

The new commission will be led by retired senator Michael Kirby, who is chairman of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.

Bill Wilkerson, CEO and co-founder of the roundtable, said there will be \$10 million in funding now, and \$17 million a year for the duration of the commission's existence _ a minimum of 10 years.

The commission will have its headquarters in Calgary, he said.

"This will be the first time in Canadian history that there has been a high level, a strongly-led national body supported by government but arm's length from it to be the catalyst for the advancement of research, improvements in clinical care, prevention of (mental) illness, and in fact the prevention of disability," Wilkerson said in Toronto.

Kirby will provide leadership in the area of reducing chronic job stress as well as bring together the scientific and business communities that need to be part of the solution, said Wilkerson.

"The commission is not intended to be a large bureaucratic enterprise," he said.

"It will function as a catalyst and as a unifier to make sure that all those parties in the mental health field come together around prevention, recovery and education."

There are five priority areas as the commission revs up, including mental health in the workplace, aboriginal and children's mental health, the creation of a Knowledge Exchange Centre and stigma reduction.

The home care organization VON Canada applauded the government for recognizing the importance of individuals suffering from mental health issues.

"Treatments, supports and services vary greatly from region to region so it is vital that a Mental Health Commission be put in place to address the current disparate system and develop a national approach to mental health issues," VON Canada president and CEO Judith Shamian said in a statement.

Wilkerson said the economic costs of mental illness exceed \$35 billion a year in terms of lost industrial production alone.

Thirty-seven per cent of Canadians experience a mental illness in the course of their lifetime, he added.

The most vulnerable are those in their teens and early to mid-20s.

"Depression today is the fastest growing source of disability in the Canadian labour force, representing 75 per cent of long-term disability and about 40 per cent of short-term disability," he said.

While VON Canada congratulated the government for the mental health funding, it called for more money to be allocated to home and community care support services.

March 20, 2007

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