

This week I had the opportunity to attend the general meetings for the Federation of Community Social Services. I am a board member for this association and every time we meet I am overwhelmed by the amount of outstanding work that is done across this province by social service agencies.

The plain truth is that we do this work with very little money and limited resources. Most of the member agencies are contracted by various government ministries to provide direct services to the people of British Columbia. Contracting services is cost-effective for the government because we get paid less than civil servants.

By necessity, contracted social service agencies are creative in finding affordable facilities, furnishings, and equipment to offer our services efficiently. We face challenges related to recruitment and retention due to disparity in wages and in some cases, benefits, although many agencies offer benefits at this point by joining group plans.

What does all this have to do with family life? Well, that question may be the problem. Who are we and why are we important?

We all seem to be keenly aware of the role of health services in our communities and most of us get the implications of all levels of education on our society. At election time, it is common for the polls to report that people are talking about health and education as their priorities. They want to see more money invested in both of these mammoth sectors.

I can't remember ever hearing someone say, "My biggest concern is the need for more social services."

The reality is that we in social services have a critical role to play in addressing the everincreasing demands on health and education. Numerous studies in Canada and the U.S. state unequivocally that health issues are rooted in the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of the individual. The social environmental well-being of each of us is salient to our overall health.

As a society, we have embraced the idea that smoking puts us at risk for health issues. Excess consumption of alcohol and the use of drugs are also on the radar as risk factors. We understand how extra weight contributes to overall health concerns. What is still unclear to the general public is that factors such as stress, violence, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, poverty, and broken family relationships have as great an impact on health status and projected health issues. All of these issues, if left unattended, will likely result in chronic health issues and lower life expectancy.

Social services are vital to every community. Direct services for any of the issues mentioned is in fact a preventative action for better health and educational outcomes. Imagine yourself trying to learn and achieve in the school system when you or your parents have ongoing mental health issues, or when you do not have nutritious food on a regular basis.

The next time someone asks you what your priorities are for the province, think about the role that social service providers play to support healthy communities and how we reduce costs for health and education.

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