



# The Brief

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## Connecting the dots for youth with complex needs



By NAJAT ABDOU-MCFARLAND

Over 1,000 people wearing white t-shirts each adorned with a black dot gathered at Wilmot Park in Fredericton on a crisp day in early December 2010 to show their support for a New Brunswick treatment centre for youth with complex needs (defined as mental health illness, challenges, and/or behavioral and conduct disorders). The action was organised by Development of Treatment Services for Mental Health in New Brunswick (DOTS NB), an organization dedicated to generating the political will needed to improve mental health services for children and youth.

Supporters filed along King Street and, holding hands, formed a human chain stretching from the Victoria Health Centre to the NB Legislature in order to literally connect the dots between the needs of youth with mental illness, and the gap in services available to them. The participants then marched to the legislature where they were welcomed by Premier David Alward and Minister of Social Development Susan Stultz who said they would review and consider the recommendations put forth by DOTS NB.

Maureen Bilerman, founder of DOTS NB and a New Brunswick mother whose child suffers from mental health issues, said, "No family should ever have to go through the suffering that mental illness brings when the necessary services are unavailable, especially in matters of life and death. Ashley Smith's family knows this all too well. It is our hope that we can help create a better future for other families struggling to secure services for their children. It is all we can do. But we cannot do it alone."

In *Connecting the Dots: A report on the condition of youth-at-risk and youth with very complex needs in New Brunswick*, New Brunswick's Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate, Bernard Richard laments the lack of mental health services for youth. Richard recommends establishing a Centre for Excellence to treat youth with complex needs.

Currently, youth with mental health challenges are sent to one of three places in the province. The Moncton Hospital, which has a child and adolescent psychiatric unit that is only designed for assessment purposes and not for long-term stays; the Restigouche Hospital Centre, where youth mix with

adults in the adult psychiatric ward; and the New Brunswick Youth Centre in Miramichi, a correctional facility for delinquent youth that offers therapeutic services. Even though this is a youth facility, approximately two-thirds of the beds are currently occupied by adults due to overcrowded New Brunswick prisons.

Indeed, many point out that the lack of government investment in services for marginalized populations is a contributing factor in Canada's burgeoning prison population. Prison justice activist, Justin Piché has noted that the over-representation of marginalized populations in prisons, such as people living in poverty or First Nations peoples "indicates our inability to use appropriate services to address the needs of [these] populations. These populations are over-policed, over-prosecuted, they are sentenced in a disproportionate fashion, and this basically leads to their over-representation in prisons."

Youth with complex needs are among the marginalized populations found in prisons. "It costs more to imprison people than it does to put money into community programs, which actually address real social ills," continued Piché. [The Dominion, 17/12/2010-Issue 74] According to the Parliamentary Budget Office, the average cost of an inmate in 2009-2010 was \$162,373.

From this perspective, the Harper government's commitment to spend more money on prisons while slashing social spending is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Correctional Services Canada's net annual budget is predicted to reach \$3.12 billion in 2012-2013. A large portion of this money is expected to go towards building new prisons. According to Richard, New Brunswick's prison system is nearing over capacity.

The next step for DOTS NB, according to Bilerman is to create a board with the task of envisioning mental health in New Brunswick that builds on the conclusions in Richard's report. In addition to a Centre for Excellence, Richard also advocates for the creation of specialized foster homes that can care for youth with complex needs.

Among the programs Bilerman recommends for the proposed Centre are temporary places for youth and children in crisis, consistent support for families dealing with a child or youth with complex needs, and better access to services for children and youth with complex needs including psychologists, social workers, educational liaisons and other professionals.

## Remembering the Christmas Mountains

By TRACY GLYNN

Almost twenty years ago, New Brunswickers began a battle to save the Christmas Mountains in northern New Brunswick in what many recall as the largest mobilization for the forests in the province.

Today, the Christmas Mountains, located 70 kilometres west of Miramichi, are on the minds of those who love the area as another piece is carved off and clearcut; this time along the North Pole Stream.

"The North Pole Stream is a prime salmon spawning grounds and should be protected. North Pole Stream got its name for it's cold temperatures that are needed by the salmon. Besides, the area should be protected for its natural beauty," said David MacDonald, a resident of Moncton and board member of the Conservation Council.

The mountain range was once home to one of the few remaining large tracts of old growth Acadian forest, but now they are largely patchy clearcut remains.

Centuries before the region was named Christmas Mountains and its rounded peaks were named after St. Nicholas, the North Pole and all of Santa's reindeers (except Rudolph) in 1964, the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet people travelled through the spruce and fir forests to trade, and to bury their deceased.

U.S. pulp and paper company, Repap, began cutting the first trees on Mount Comet and Mount Prancer in the late eighties. In 1993, Repap placed a full page notice in the Miramichi Leader announcing their plan to clearcut an area in the Christmas Mountains.

The plans to clearcut the mountains mobilized Aboriginal people, students from Mount Allison University, environmentalists, biologists and concerned residents across the province. The endangered lynx, the rare northern bog lemming, rare plants and the nest of a Cooper's hawk had been spotted in biological surveys in the 1990s. Biologists noted that at least thirty species in the mountain range could not exist in a younger forest.

Repap threatened a lawsuit against members of the Friends of the Christmas Mountains and staff at the Conservation Council for damages that the company incurred as a result of a protest tent that a group of mostly university students had set up to stop the clearcutting. The groups threatened a counter suit, which led to Repap dropping their suit.

(STORY CONTINUED ON OTHER SIDE)

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