



The Brief

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Hospital worker blows whistle on spread of New Brunswick’s mystery illness: Bombshell report

By TRACY GLYNN and ADITYA RAO



Premier Blaine Higgs during the 2021 state of the province address. Photo from the Government of New Brunswick.

A Vitalité Health Network whistleblower has told *The Guardian* that previously healthy young adults suspected of having the mystery neurological illness are experiencing rapidly deteriorating health and that the number of cases are growing.

Twenty- and thirty-year-olds in New Brunswick, some of them caregivers, are reporting brain atrophy, muscle wasting, hallucinations, and insomnia, all neurological symptoms that are usually rare in young adults.

The whistleblowing hospital employee also does not believe it’s a New Brunswick disease. The employee told *The Guardian*’s Leyland Cecco in a story published on January 2: “We’re probably the area that is raising the flag because we’re mostly rural and in an area where people might have more exposure to environmental factors.”

Meanwhile, the Government of New Brunswick is blocking federal scientists, who are standing by to help, from supporting research into the mystery neurological illness dogging parts of New Brunswick.

According to a federal scientist quoted in *The Guardian* story, there are teams waiting and ready to begin conducting the research needed, but “New Brunswick has specifically told us not to go forward with that work.”

This bombshell report follows incendiary stories by *Macleans*, *The Walrus* and the *Globe and Mail*, in addition to another story by *The Guardian*.

Still, questions persist. Why is the Premier not allowing federal scientists into the province to investigate?

With at least nine cases involving two people in close contact, why is the Premier not launching an environmental study of the illness?

Caregivers of patients suspected of having the illness, including a nursing student in her twenties, have developed symptoms. What is the province doing to protect caregivers from the illness?

There are also unanswered questions about reporting the number of cases of the illness on the government’s website. The number, 48, has not changed since spring 2021. Multiple sources suspect that the cluster is likely to be as high as 150. This number does not take into account the cases involving young people still under investigation.

What will the government do differently to alert the public of a disease cluster in the future? Remember, the only reason we know anything about this mystery illness is a leaked memo to the press.

In a recent report by *CBC’s Fifth Estate*, several people within the cluster region who felt they were experiencing symptoms found it impossible to see a specialist because of long wait times. They also felt that practitioners dismissed their concerns.

The government, on the other hand, after continuously botching their COVID response, including over the Christmas holiday, has unsurprisingly offered no strategy to tackle this mystery illness.

Instead of calling for all hands on deck to investigate this mystery illness, the Premier is preventing scientists from doing their job, fighting healthcare workers who deserve fair wages, and forcing hospital closures.

The Premier and his friends at the Irving-owned Brunswick News are focused on a completely different priority: enriching their business executive friends by promoting privatized health care, never mind overwhelming evidence that a robust publicly-funded health care system would serve us all better.

New Brunswickers deserve answers and leadership. But it has become abundantly clear that Premier Higgs does not believe himself answerable to us – he answers only to the Irvings.

Tracy Glynn is an editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op. Aditya Rao is a board of director member of the NB Media Co-op.

Tiny homes: A tiny solution to a big problem

By ADITYA RAO and TOBIN LEBLANC HALEY

It seems everyone in New Brunswick is talking about tiny homes.

Fredericton entrepreneur Marcel LeBrun shared the stage with Social Development Minister Bruce Fitch and Fredericton MP Jenica Atwin on January 6 when they announced \$1.4 million in forgivable loans for a 96 tiny home development near the northside Walmart. LeBrun’s 12 Neighbours Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that will provide affordable housing for 100-200 people in Fredericton – no small number.

The first 36 homes are scheduled to be operational soon. Tenants will pay no more than 30 per cent of their income in rent, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s cut-off for affordability. The difference in rent will be covered by the provincial rent supplement program.

While tiny homes may provide affordable housing to some, this model is not without its limitations. Limitations that merit careful consideration as the popularity of tiny homes grows while the housing crisis deepens.

Tiny homes emerged in the 2010s as a (perhaps not so) green and minimalist alternative to suburban sprawl in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Municipalities, primarily in the US, turned to tiny homes to provide housing to folks experiencing homelessness. Canadian communities have recently been following suit, with Fredericton being the latest.

There are positive features of LeBrun’s homes. They will be insulated and connected to the city’s power grid and sewage system – a critical feature missing in many tiny home villages in other parts of North America. The project plans to include wrap-around services, meaning residents would be supported by a team of social workers, counsellors, and other professionals.

Still, LeBrun acknowledged in the press conference that these homes can support only one or two individuals at a time and are not meant for families or children. This means tenants in the 12 Neighbours community who wish to have children or live with their children will likely have to leave.

Women, who as a group shoulder more of the parenting work, will be disproportionately excluded from this model. Yet, lone female parents in the province experience some of the highest rates of unaffordable housing. Parents, generally, face discrimination in the rental market. Indeed, nearly 20 per cent of tenants who responded to the province’s 2021 rental market survey said that they could not find housing because they had children.

Living in tiny spaces can also carry health risks, including a specific risk of causing psychological problems. It is not easy to pack one’s life into a 250 square foot box. In an op-ed for the *New York Times*, a resident of a “micro-apartment” painted a rather grim picture of what life can look like in a tiny home. “Here, even smell takes up space,” Gene Tempest, the author, wrote.

These limitations suggest the project is not a Housing First project, but a transitional housing project. Yet, it has been positioned within the evidence-based Housing First philosophy, which advocates for permanent housing as an immediate first step to solving homelessness.

Unsurprisingly, Barbara Poppe, a leading expert and an Obama White House advisor on homelessness, advised the city of Seattle against funding tiny homes (they did anyway),



Marcel LeBrun, founder of 12 Neighbours Community Inc., with a tiny home. Photo from the Government of New Brunswick.

continued on page 2

Rotary panel ponders local news drought and Irving media empire

By BRUCE WARK

Concerns about the disappearance of local news and the dominance of the Irving media empire bubbled up on January 10 when the Sussex Rotary Club held an online panel discussion entitled: “New Brunswick, News Deserts and Democracy.”

“Our aim in this conversation is to take a reading on the health of the local news business across the province and to connect that, in turn, to the health of local democracy,” said moderator Michael Depp.

“Does New Brunswick have enough local news?” he asked a panel of four journalists participating online via Zoom.

“Are people across its communities getting sufficient news to honestly stay informed of what’s happening?”

“The short answer is no, we don’t have a lot of news and we do need more, especially independent,” answered Vicki Hogarth, news director at CHCO TV, a non-profit, community television station in St. Andrews.


Hogarth explained that on the one hand, some would argue that New Brunswickers are lucky to have the Irving papers to provide local journalism while others would see the dominance of the Irving-owned company, Brunswick News, as a problem.

“You have one major owner who is in charge of most of the news in New Brunswick, so there aren’t a lot of diverse perspectives,” she added.

James K. Irving’s Brunswick News, which publishes three dailies and about a dozen weeklies, owns every English-language newspaper in the province except for the Saint Croix Courier. Its publications include two French-language weeklies. In addition, the John Irving-owned Acadia Broadcasting operates 15 radio stations in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, four of them in New Brunswick.

Two other panelists echoed Hogarth’s concern about the lack of media diversity.


“I think Vicki hit the nail on the head,” said Erik Gingles,



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founder of the online video news magazine Buzzlocal.tv based in Moncton.

He acknowledged that there are other provincial news sources such as the CBC, but suggested there aren’t enough points of view.

“The slippery slope is that if you only get one side, then you just believe that’s the way it is,” Gingles said.

He added there are many rural areas in the province that rely on social media because they aren’t getting any local news coverage at all.

“We are certainly in a bit of a media desert,” he said.

Tracy Glynn, co-ordinating editor of the non-profit NB Media Co-op, argued that the province does not have “a healthy media landscape” partly because stories about injustice, inequality and oppression aren’t being covered.

“At the NB Media Co-op, we are embedded in a variety of social movements,” she said.

“We work with groups of people who experience poverty, the housing crisis, temporary foreign workers and such, and we know that their stories are not being told,” she added.

In an apparent reference to the Irving media empire, Glynn said, “I don’t think we can trust that the billionaires — billionaires that are especially implicated in the climate crisis — can deliver a story about the climate crisis.”

Moderator Michael Depp picked up on Glynn’s comment as he directed a question to Jackson Doughart, editor-in-chief of Brunswick News.

“Jackson, Brunswick News is owned by Irvings, speaking of billionaires, the province’s largest employer, an absolute powerhouse in the province across multiple industries.

“What is your editorial policy about covering Irvings’ businesses and political interests?”

“When there’s a matter that we think journalistically is of public interest, we cover it the best we can,” Doughart replied.

“Jackson, Brunswick News is owned by Irvings, speaking of billionaires, the province’s largest employer, an absolute powerhouse in the province across multiple industries. What is your editorial policy about covering Irvings’ businesses and political interests?” asked Depp.

“I’ve been editor-in-chief for almost two years and I’ve never been told what to write,” Doughart answered.

When asked if Irving’s economic interests coloured the coverage of environmental issues as Glynn had suggested, Doughart said Brunswick News tells both sides of the story.

“If you look at something like glyphosate, which is a big issue, I mean, we covered the public hearings about it,” he said.

“We include voices from environmental activists and experts who are against spraying and Indigenous groups as well,” he added.

“We also cover the group that is pro-spraying as well. A lot of these big public debates deserve to be told from both sides and I think that we do a pretty good job of doing so.”

Financing local journalism

When the Rotary panel was asked how their outfits pay for local journalism, their answers were mixed.

Vicki Hogarth said CHCO’s main source of revenue is TV bingo, although the station is starting to receive small donations. She explained that her own salary is paid through a federal local journalism initiative grant.

Erik Gingles said his local digital TV operation doesn’t qualify for government grants. Instead, it depends on advertising, but he said it’s a struggle to woo advertisers away from bigger media outlets.

Tracy Glynn said the NB Media Co-op is financed by donations from its members as well as from unions that represent a variety of workers including bus drivers, postal workers and health-care workers.

Jackson Doughart said Brunswick News is mainly financed by advertisers and subscribers. He said the company does not allow readers any free access to online news and that its tight paywall has been in place for about 10 years.

“In order to fund our operations in the long term, we need to continue to grow the digital subscription business and that starts with making it that people have to pay in order to read it,” he explained.

He also said that coverage of local news would depend on people’s willingness to pay.

Doughart added that the outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated the Brunswick News online business and that now, about half of newspaper readers are online and the other half subscribe to the print editions.

Local news in decline

Figures published last month by the Local News Research

Project at Ryerson University show that between 2008 and December 1, 2021, a total of 450 news operations have closed in 324 communities across Canada.

Those closings have been offset somewhat by the launch of 177 new local news outlets in 125 communities.

The figures also show that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 64 local news outlets have permanently closed including one online/digital news source, one TV station, 10 radio stations and 52 community newspapers. One of those community papers was the *Sackville Tribune-Post*.

One positive launch in the Tantramar region has been the launch of a community news service. With the help of a local journalism initiative grant administered through the Community Radio Fund of Canada as well as donations from its listeners, CHMA, 106.9 FM, has launched its Tantramar community news service overseen by Erica Butler.

Bruce Wark worked in broadcasting and journalism education for more than 35 years. He was at CBC Radio for nearly 20 years as senior editor of network programs such as The World at Six and World Report. He currently writes for The New Wark Times where a version of this story first appeared on January 12, 2022.

continued from page 1

A tiny solution to a big problem

arguing that the money would be better spent on permanent housing. Similarly, the Homelessness Hub maintains that “any social housing project using the [tiny homes] model would have to...offer it as an option only to those who would be interested in that kind of living.”

It remains to be seen whether LeBrun’s project will survive the problems that other such tiny home villages have faced. His development, with its connections to power and sewage, is tackling key problems. There is research suggesting that tiny home projects show promise to combat homelessness if they can sustain a strong community, hold public support, secure funding with few restrictions, and ensure affordable housing for individuals when they transition out of the tiny home.

So where will people go when they transition out of LeBrun’s tiny homes?

Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) and other predatory corporate landlords are fixated on extracting as much rental income as they can from New Brunswick’s extremely unregulated market. One REIT alone plans to take 1,300 units off the affordable housing market to turn into high rental income properties.

At the same time, we are hearing about astronomical rent hikes nearly every week while there remain nearly 6,000 households on the affordable housing waitlist.

The main problem New Brunswick faces, as scholars have pointed out, is the financialization of housing, not a lack of supply. Governments can throw as much money as they like at the problem through programs like rent supplements, but without effective rent controls these programs function as a wealth transfer to landlords who have no reason to keep rents low.

And as Saint Thomas University sociologist Kristi Allain has argued, the popular yet simplistic solution of cutting the so-called “double-tax” will not work.

The authors of this article hope sincerely that 12 Neighbours Inc. can overcome the obstacles that similar projects have faced in the past, and that the tenants will thrive with the promised “dignity, community, and opportunity.”

But we want to caution decision-makers against the erroneous conclusion that we can tiny home our way out of the housing crisis.

Aditya Rao is a Fredericton-based human rights lawyer. Tobin LeBlanc Haley, PhD is a community-engaged scholar and an assistant professor at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John. They are founding members of the NB Coalition for Tenants Rights.

David Gordon Koch joins the NB Media Co-op as manager

The NB Media Co-op is happy to announce that we have hired David Gordon Koch to be our manager. David, formerly a reporter for the *Times & Transcript* in Moncton, will be managing our website, social media, membership and finances.

David is a multimedia journalist with a commitment to social justice. He holds a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, and previously worked for CKUT 90.3 FM, the campus-community radio station at McGill. He has written articles for *Briarpatch Magazine* and *The Dominion/Media Co-op* and was a reporter for the Campbell River Mirror in BC where he reported on salmon farming, climate change and wildfires, forestry, addiction services and the opioid crisis. He has also worked with the Immigrant Workers’ Centre in Montreal where he coordinated the production of Migrant Voices, a radio series and podcast on the experiences of immigrant and migrant workers.

David has also joined CHMA, the Sackville community and campus radio station, as a news reporter. We look forward to working together to create a more healthy media landscape in New Brunswick.

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