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The Edmonton Journal  
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T5J 0S1

Attention: Allan Mayer, Editor in Chief

**Letter to the Editor**

New, Expanded Geriatric Mental Health Program at Villa Caritas

Dear Mr. Mayer,

Over the past few months, comments about the upcoming transfer and expansion of Alberta Hospital Edmonton's Geriatric Psychiatry Program to Villa Caritas have overlooked some significant factors that will bring tremendous long-term benefits to some of Alberta's most vulnerable citizens.

Villa Caritas will address a gap in care for seniors who have complex mental health and medical issues. These elderly citizens struggle with such mental health challenges as Alzheimer disease or age-related dementia, long-term effects of addiction, depression, or psychiatric disorders while trying to cope with such medical conditions as chronic disease, wounds that won't heal, cancer and other complications impacting their physical health.

As the senior's population grows, the need for specialized care for these seniors has exceeded the capacity of Alberta Hospital Edmonton's Geriatric Psychiatry program. Last year, 179 seniors were admitted to the geriatric program at Alberta Hospital Edmonton. Another 150 patients over the age of 65 were admitted into mental health units in other Edmonton hospitals.

At the same time, a significant proportion of the seniors who come to city emergency departments each day, including those who are admitted to medical units, have mental health needs. Too often, our seniors remain in hospital for long periods—sometimes several months—due to growing demands on appropriate continuing care or transitional care.

The transfer of 106 Geriatric Psychiatry beds from Alberta Hospital Edmonton to the 150-bed Villa Caritas represents a 42% increase in our capacity to respond. The expanded program will provide appropriate, timely intervention and care options for these seniors—and will free up acute care hospital beds for other purposes. The expanded program will focus on marshalling the resources of the system to treat the complex needs of these seniors and transfer them back home or to an appropriate care setting, depending on their needs.

Villa Caritas will also expand and enhance our continuing care system, with thirty of the 150 beds dedicated to specialized continuing care. This aspect of the program will be designed to enhance successful placement of residents with mental illness in long term care, will support care teams in caring for residents with mental illness and will avoid hospitalization of residents when their mental health deteriorates.

The transfer of the Alberta Hospital Edmonton Geriatric Psychiatry Program to Villa Caritas provides tremendous opportunities for this well-respected, quality program to grow in scope and impact. Alberta Hospital Edmonton's Geriatric Psychiatry program is hampered by a number of fundamental issues in its current setting—including an outdated care environment with multiple bed wards, an isolated location impacting involvement of family and friends, and lack of access to the acute care health system for ninety percent of patients, who have complex medical needs.

Villa Caritas provides a state-of-the-art environment for caring for these patients. The Misericordia Community Hospital, located on the same grounds, provides access to specialty services and supports to address the spectrum of their medical, psychological, spiritual and social needs. Strong connections to other acute care and continuing care resources, expertise, research opportunities will further strengthen and enhance care.

Villa Caritas supports best practice in treating patients with mental illness in a community-connected, integrated model of care with health care providers working together with patients, family and community supports. Villa Caritas brings significant improvements to quality of life, patient safety and care. It offers a modern, safe and supportive environment focused on patient needs with enhanced privacy and dignity in a less remote and institutional setting.

At Villa Caritas, each patient and resident will have a large private room and bathroom; there are no four-bed wards. The building is suffused with natural light and is designed to address Alberta's climate and the needs of seniors—especially those who are fragile, less mobile or have special care needs—with wide hallways and large windows in spacious rooms and common areas and secure outdoor courtyard spaces.

Dedicated therapeutic space for recreation, life skills and rehabilitation services, multipurpose rooms and a chapel all promote quality of life and the engagement of families and community.

In addition, the building includes \$5 million in enhancements—related to security, safety and care requirements—to meet the specific needs of the geriatric mental health program. This represents a small fraction of the costs needed to create this kind of modern care environment at Alberta Hospital Edmonton.

Villa Caritas brings the excellent work and expertise of the Alberta Hospital Edmonton team together with Covenant Health's strengths as a significant provider of a full range of health services to create a world-class program in a patient-centered facility. Staff, physicians and volunteers of the Geriatric Psychiatry program at Alberta Hospital Edmonton will have the opportunity to move with the program to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the expanded program.

As co-chairs of the Villa Caritas Steering Committee, we are working with a group of dedicated leaders from Alberta Health Services, including Alberta Hospital Edmonton, and Covenant Health who share a common vision to ensure Alberta's seniors receive quality care with compassion, dignity and respect.

In the coming months we look forward to working with all involved in this transition to ensure the program at Villa Caritas meets the needs of our patients, staff, residents, families and communities—and to greatly enhance geriatric mental health in Northern Alberta.

Regards,



Patrick Dumelie  
President and CEO, Covenant Health



Marianne Stewart  
Vice President, Edmonton Zone, Alberta Health  
Services