

OPINION **MIKE KIRBY**

'Godfather' of mental health in Canada, Kirby wins prestigious award

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Under former Liberal Senator Michael Kirby's leadership, the Mental Health Commission of Canada produced Canada's first national strategy for mental health. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright



FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER JOHN BAIRD

OTTAWA—Mental illness is a quiet, lonely struggle. People suffering from mental health problems endure not only the hardship of their illness, but often an overwhelming social stigma and discrimination. For many, the stress of living in the shadows can be unbearable.

But with help comes hope. For millions of Canadians, help comes thanks to the unrelenting efforts of former Liberal Senator Mike Kirby, the founder and first chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada and tireless champion of those caught in the shadows. For the hope and the glimpse of light he has brought to those affected by mental illness in Canada, he's the recipient of this year's Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians Distinguished Service Award.

I extend my warmest congratulations to Mike for the honour. Few have been more deserving.

His dedication to improving mental health of Canadians has been unflagging for years. As chair of the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, he led the production of the first national report on mental health and addiction issues. When he stepped down from the Senate in 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper asked him to lead the creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada and to be its first chair.

Under Kirby's leadership, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (the commission) produced Canada's first national strategy for mental health. This important work has led to groundbreaking mental health reform in Canada and has begun to break the back of stubborn stigmas surrounding mental illness. The commission soon after produced an important report that showed governments how to best support and shelter those with severe mental illness. Using a \$110-million grant from the government, Kirby launched the At Home/Chez Soi project and changed how governments at all levels in Canada invest and provide support and services to those living with serious mental illness who are chronically homeless.

Kirby's tireless work was also efficient. What was a 10-year mandate for MHCC, Kirby accomplished in five years. He left to become the first chair of Partners for Mental Health in 2012. Entirely privately-funded, his new organization aims to mobilize Canadians to come together to improve the lives of those living with mental health problems and illnesses.

With Kirby at the helm, I can't imagine it won't succeed.

One of Kirby's top priorities is a project, called Right By You, which aims to raise awareness of youth mental health issues and address the gaps in mental health care that leave three in four youth without adequate mental health services.

For those 75 per cent of suffering youth, for those without a roof, for those lost in shadow, Kirby is a candle in the dark.

In the years I have known him, I've always been inspired by Kirby's passion for his work. Whether in meetings or chance encounters in the airport, Kirby has impressed me with his knowledge and devotion to his cause. I know of no other Canadian who advocates as relentlessly for the well-being of Canadians suffering from mental illness.

But for a man who is known as the "godfather" of mental health in Canada, I have never known him to be anything but humble and sincere.

Kirby has always worked to help those who can't always help themselves. For this service, he deserves all the plaudits he receives. For his passion and devotion to the cause, he has my highest admiration. And for the countless futures he has saved, he deserves the gratitude of all Canadians.

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