

Westman Aphasia facing permanent closure

BY KAREN MCKINLEY

Westman Aphasia will be forced to close at the end of the year unless the non-profit organization can fill its board positions and secure enough funding to cover operational costs, says Susan Cable, volunteer chief administrative officer and board chair.

The organization, which has been operating for more than 14 years, supports people with aphasia, a communication disorder, as well as their caregivers by providing resources to manage the condition.

Cable recently stepped down from her positions after years at the helm, but the organization is now having trouble filling those roles.

Westman Aphasia receives public donations and funding from organizations like the United Way, Cable said. The COVID-19 pandemic stunt-

ed public donations, even though Westman Aphasia saw a steady stream of people seeking its services and participating in group discussions.

While the organization currently serves about 40 people directly, the closure would likely affect thousands if you factored in the broader reach of the non-profit, Cable said.

Funding from the United Way supports programs and services, but public donations are needed for operational costs, such as running an office and keeping a mailbox.

“We need a board chair and a CAO to run our day-to-day operations, and right now there just isn’t anyone to do that,” she said. “Combined with funding, this led to the decision to close permanently.”

Since announcing her resignation, Cable said the group has been unable to find people to fill both positions. As well, they need a board of vol-

unteers with business knowledge and experience to move the organization forward.

It’s a devastating situation for the group, Cable said, but it’s even worse for those who are trying to manage the condition, as well as the caregivers and loved ones trying to help them. They are running one more seminar on Nov. 5 and offering their services up to their scheduled last day, Dec. 31.

If Westman Aphasia is forced to close, clients will have to turn elsewhere for support. The next nearest programs are in Ontario, Cable said.

Most of Westman Aphasia’s clients are either referred to the organization or link up with the non-profit directly.

The organization has been struggling for years, she said, but the past two have been particularly hard. Westman Aphasia has also been unsuccessful in securing grants

since most of them are geared toward programs and services, not staff wages.

“We are pretty small compared to a lot of other organizations, but we are who we are, and a lot of people don’t know about aphasia, and we helped them learn about it and live with it,” she said. “It’s not an end-of-the-road situation. We give them hope and encouragement. Once we are gone, they won’t have that anymore.”

More attention was directed to the little-known condition earlier this year when actor Bruce Willis announced he would retire from acting and public life after being diagnosed with aphasia. At the time, Cable said Westman Aphasia received more inquiries and traffic on its website and social media, but that tapered off.

One of Westman Aphasia’s main messages is that this

isn’t a cognitive or intellectual disorder. Aphasia is a breakdown of a person’s ability to communicate with words and they may lose the ability to comprehend, speak, write or read.

In previous comments, Cable said about one-third of people who have a stroke will get aphasia. For 50 per cent of those people, the aphasia will be chronic and lifelong. Other causes are dementia, Alzheimer’s disease, brain tumours and injuries caused by blows to the head.

Communication skills can improve over time if the aphasia is caused by a stroke, but with progressive conditions like dementia, those skills deteriorate irreversibly.

The organization is the only one in the Westman region that provides services and support for people with aphasia and their caregivers. It runs support groups and programs,

courses in communication and provides information on aphasia. The non-profit helps people work on managing the disorder and develop communication techniques.

This deterioration of language skills can be frustrating for both the person with aphasia and the people around them, which is why people with aphasia and their caregivers need to develop a communication system, Cable said.

Anyone interested in helping Westman Aphasia is encouraged to contact Cable at susan_aphasia@mymts.com. More information is available on the organization’s Facebook page and at westmanaphasia.ca, or email at westmanaphasia@gmail.com.

» kmckinley@brandonsun.com, with files from The Brandon Sun
 » Twitter: [@karenleighbmcki1](https://twitter.com/karenleighbmcki1)