

York Support Services expands services throughout Region, South Simcoe

Assistance offered by York Support Services Network can now be accessed in more areas of York Region and South Simcoe after the global pandemic proved a game-changer for both them and clients.

York Support Services Network (YSSN) has provided myriad services to residents for more than 40 years, but pivots made at the height of COVID-19 opened new paths forward to offer supportive services that are tailored to those who use them.

YSSN's re-tooling includes expanding services in communities where clients live, including increased access in South Simcoe and York Region's southern tier. In addition to crisis beds between Bradford and Alliston, and down to Thornhill, YSSN is also increasing its collaboration with like agencies to offer a full menu of services.

Our organization is really focused on connecting people to services to help support their unique needs, says YSSN Executive Director Kimberly Thorn. We support people with serious mental illness, children with complex service needs, and people with developmental disabilities. Through that, our crisis service, no surprise, particularly through the pandemic, has been extremely busy.

We operate 1-855-310-COPE, which is a crisis call line where people who are experiencing anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, call us for support and before the pandemic we were serving about 11,000 people a year calling into that call centre. Last year, we supported 19,000 people: a significant increase and we're seeing even though relatively speaking the pandemic is over, people are still experiencing a fair amount of distress for a variety of reasons.

That being said, while they're still seeing high call volumes, this uptick hasn't resulted in a similar rise of people looking to access the existing crisis beds.

Clients, she said, would speak through the call centre about their situation and they would talk them through whether or not a short stay in one of their beds would help them. Doing so, says Thorn, allows their team to offer one-on-one support and help to develop a wellness plan.

A lot of people were not interested in the service and we were trying to understand what that meant, says Thorn. We had four beds in the Newmarket location and I think people's worldviews on the pandemic has changed: how they view themselves in the community, people have experienced a lot of isolation and they don't want to necessarily leave the connections they have in their own community. It has always been our approach to work with partners and we want to make sure people are connected to the services that can support them when they need it most. Rather than have one location which we expect people to travel to, which we thought was centrally located, we decided we would partner with other agencies who have different expertise and offer those same four beds but across the [area].

This, she says, could offer further opportunities closer to home but a chance to maintain community ties the client might find vital.

On the flipside of the coin, having beds in more places allows clients to get the support they need outside their home community if they want a break from whatever is stressing them out at that point in time.

We're really looking to expand options for people, we want to give them increased access to other services and agencies because we're partnering with other organizations and there are other services under the same roof that's really the impetus behind it all, says Thorn. We're expanding our partnership with Krasman Centre; it is peer led in terms of people with lived experience with mental health issues, addictions issues, being vulnerably housed. We are actually expanding our partnership with them so they will be providing support to folks who are in those beds. It gives them a non-clinical support that could then when they leave the beds continue to access the Krasman Centre for outreach services. We are attempting to leverage our partnerships to really meet people where they are.

The pandemic, says Thorn, has led to 'far-reaching implications' in many aspects of people's lives, she adds, and it's hoped that this new move will ensure people have a destination they can go to when they're feeling distressed.

'We're hopeful we will see some people divert away from emergency rooms by having these beds across the region, that way people have a service closer to home,' says Thorn. 'It's not unlikely that people who weren't in Richmond Hill may have gone to Mackenzie Health when they were feeling distressed. Even though they may have been appropriate for a bed in Newmarket travelling may have been a barrier for them. We're hoping we see some impacts on the emergency room having fewer people come in who are seeking some kind of mental health support, who may not need an in-patient or medical intervention.'

'We also are hopeful that people that may not be calling 911 for support is that happens where people are calling 911 because they don't know where else to go. By having the ability to work with our partners, the partners that we have can also be communicating the benefits of the program in the community, so we're having a wider reach because our partners can also speak about the services that are now under their roof as well.'

For more information on York Support Services Network, visit YSSN.ca, or call 1-866-257-9776. For access to services, call 1-855-310-COPE (2673).

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