

## Youth Mental Health Fund will have lasting local impact: advocates



The Government of Canada's newly-established Youth Mental Health Fund will pay local dividends, according to area mental health advocates.

Mental health leaders from across the community gathered at York Regional Headquarters last Thursday afternoon to participate in a roundtable based on the recently-announced fund and the impacts it will have within the Region and well-beyond.

"This is a really amazing program we're launching and one where we really need community input to make the money go as far as we can," said Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, who hosted the July 18 event. "As many of you in this room know very well, navigating complexities of modern life presents unique changes to the youth. The times, not just with COVID, have a huge impact, but also climate change; the stresses of trying to find jobs and housing in an environment where things are really difficult right now; and all of the conflict and division that is going on globally and within our own country. We look around and all those things just compound and create a lot of anxiety and stress for young people. Those health challenges can lead to really poor outcomes if they're not treated early and impact not just our young people, families, communities and all of us. This Youth Mental Health fund that was found in Budget 2024 is so important."

The \$500 million pot is dedicated specifically for youth mental health, covering ages between 12 and 25. The mission going forward is to look at where the gaps are through a local lens, how they can be addressed "step by step," and planning ahead for the future.

Watching closely and helping steer programs going forward will be the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe. (CMHA-YRSS)

Rebecca Shields, CEO of the CMHA-YRSS, said the new funding "represents a significant and much-needed commitment to mental health for our nation's youth."

"At CMHA York South Simcoe, we have always focused on care for youth and there are a couple of crucial reasons. First and foremost, 70 per cent of serious mental illness begins before the ages of 17 and a recent study published in [a leading journal] found that three quarters of that 70 per cent of youth in Ontario with a psychotic disorder have at least one mental health service visit within the three years prior to their first diagnosis," she said. "Early detection and diagnosis is critical because year after year, the rates of youth anxiety, depression, addiction and substance and behavioural addictions are increasing."

"Youth, as we know, are really challenged and they are more susceptible to the challenges MP Leah Taylor Roy talked about: the financial insecurity, about the racism they're facing, climate change, social isolation, intense "significant screen time and social media. These factors have contributed to a concerning decline in mental health, making a need for accessible mental health care

more urgent than ever.

What if we don't do anything? Like all illnesses, because mental illness is an illness, and mental health is health like any other illness, it worsens over time and the results are tragic. We talked about missed years of school, they have unfulfilled dreams and subsequent under-employment, social isolation, high risk of poor health outcomes and what scares us all the most, the risk of suicide and lives lost. The good news is we're here today in this collaborative space because the solutions are out there and some of them are happening already.

This collaborative aspect was touched upon by Lisa Gonsalves, Commissioner of Community & Health Services for the Region of York, who said supporting the mental health and wellbeing of residents was a key priority for the Region.

She noted efforts have focused on collaborating with service providers to provide a seamless continuum of care for all ages and strategies of life.

As people serving people, our teams are making every effort to ensure mental health services are accessible to all; for example, outreach programs and mobile units are used to reach those who might otherwise face barriers to accessing care, and prevention and early intervention services can address mental health issues before they escalate, Gonsalves said. This proactive and comprehensive approach to supporting mental health has served our communities well. However, we also recognize there is more work to be done in enhancing youth access to mental health care and reducing barriers to seeking help and support.

Communities thrive when our youth are healthy, and with the generous support of the Government of Canada, we continue to collaborate with partners who fill the gaps and further connect youth to our programs and services that they need. Today's roundtable discussion marks another important step forward in creating a Region where everyone can be healthy and live to their full potential.

The beauty of York Region, said Shields, is that it's a place where we can catalyze and transform systems together and a prime example of this going forward is the York Region Mental Health Community Care Hub, which was announced by the Province, Region and CMHA-YRSS earlier this month.

We have a vision of what needs to be changed so somebody's first crisis will be their last, she said. This exciting opportunity is going to be open for youth aged 12 and above. It's one space where we can consider what has to change for people in school, for people who are with their families, for people who are in core services. [The question is] what do they need to know, How do we help them when they return, and how do we prevent crisis in the first place?

**By Brock Weir**