

OJHL's First-Assist Program going virtual

The Ontario Junior Hockey League Foundation's First Assist Program has become a virtual tool.

In the third year of the program, this year's version is modified to adapt to the mental distress of COVID-19 for all 507 elite-student athletes in Junior hockey.

Assistance will be provided via Zoom calls and players will have access to this tool on their smartphones and laptops.

"We couldn't deliver it the way that we did so we actually revamped the programming," said Rick Morocco, Executive Director of the OJHL Foundation.

"Our programming will be done virtually and it's changed a little bit. We have the mental health refresher, but we're really trying to focus on all of these mental health issues and how, maybe, they've become more apparent as a result of what COVID's impact has been."

The program will help athletes who are suffering from challenges such as loneliness, isolation, stress and simply coping with the virus itself.

For those seeking help, sessions will run 1.5 hours with "interactive discussions," focusing on team-building exercises. These sessions will also direct a player on where to seek help.

The official document written on March 21 by the First Assist Program is available on the OJHL website.

"The mental wellness of our players has always been a top priority of the OJHL and is a major reason why, in 2018, our Foundation went to industry experts to develop a mental wellness program designed specifically for Junior aged hockey players," said OJHL Commissioner Marty Savoy in a statement.

This program was discussed far before its creation in 2018.

In 2013, an individual on a team in the league, suggested there should be a not-for-profit foundation encouraging the mental wellbeing of players.

But the program was sidelined for three years until Morocco was hired.

His effort essentially catapulted the program into where it is today.

The OJHL Foundation worked closely with Glenn Crichton from The Coping Centre and PhD Rebecca Pister from the Canadian Mental Health Association to tie this all together.

"We really tried to break down the barriers and the stigma of mental health. Working with Glenn, he put together a team, including Rebecca Pister, who sought to develop a program we ultimately went with," Morocco explained.

"She started by sending a request for information from our players, asking a number of questions and, based on that feedback, we started to put together that program. That program was meant to be interactive and developed as a campaign."

This program was also meant to be run in a classroom setting. A handbook was published each year and handed out to the players. A campaign-style call to action was installed that if any of the players have experienced thoughts where they need support, they have an outlet.

Players who chose to remain anonymous, were completely funded by the OJHL and are directed by Crichton on where to go for the help itself.

?We'd like to think we've helped everybody. That's what our goal is. I can tell you there has been a dozen players that have required some intervention in our league,? Morocco said.

?We've always said if we can help one player in the trajectory of their life that we feel it's been a success.?

Morocco added the program is continuing to expand and discussions are currently being held with regards to helping staff and coaches. Although no coaches have reported difficulties mentally, Morocco says this expansion is necessary.

By Robert Belardi