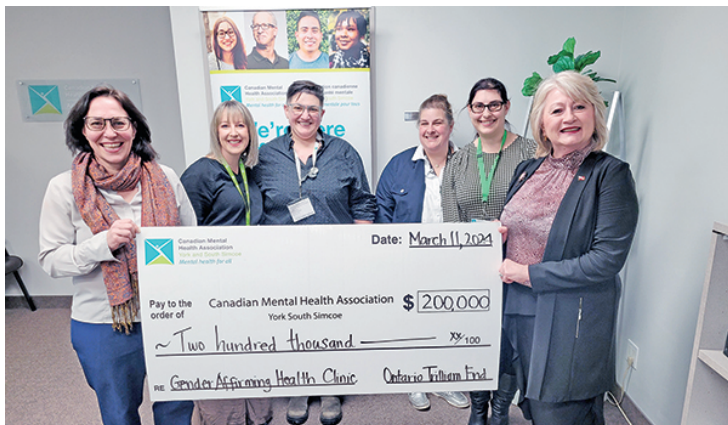


CMHA's Gender-Affirming Care Clinic receives boost from Province



Truly living in an inclusive society means fostering an environment where everyone feels they belong ? and providing supports that enable people to ?live their best life? regardless of their situation.

This is a guiding principle for Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe (CMHA-YRSS) and the organization she leads ? and it's also a cornerstone of their Gender Affirming Care Clinic.

Now in its fifth year, the Gender Affirming Care Clinic recently received funding from Ontario's Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport and its Resilient Communities Fund to further its reach into our communities.

The \$200,000 grant will go towards supporting additional staffing and administration costs, the purchase of new equipment and training for staff related to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

?We are grateful to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for this generous investment that will empower CMHA to expand our Gender Affirming Health Clinic to provide care for more trans and gender diverse individuals in our community,? said Shields. ?This funding will enable us to open up the long wait list for this much-needed, innovative program and adding CBT-Affirm to our list of Clinic services will be life-changing for our clients.?

Speaking to The Auroran last week, Shields says the program has indeed saved lives since it was first established by CMHA-YRSS's Michelle Hermans back in 2019.

?We heard of a woman who came into our service who had been struggling because she had been kicked out of her family for transitioning and wanting to live a different life,? she said. ?She had been couch-surfing and homeless, and it's very hard to have a job when you're doing this. We were able to support the person certainly with primary care needs and hormones, but also supportive counselling [so that] the individual ended up going back to school, and they are now doing a Masters program and thriving. Many people feel very isolated and alone.

?We also have a binder program where people who may not be undergoing surgery ? think of it as a bra or tensor bandage to compress you so you can look more like the body you want to be seen in. For a lot of people, maybe they are too expensive, but you need to know how to wear them properly. We provide these for people so they have access to this stuff and they can feel more confident in who they are and how they present to the world. We have had so many people just be so grateful to feel confident walking down the street in a way that makes it authentic to them.?

The aim of the Clinic, at the outset, was to provide primary care and specialized care around hormone replacement therapy, along

with counselling services and services to connect patients to community resources.

The Gender Affirming Care Clinic was propelled with two primary objectives: to create a program that supports people, but also work within the community. That can be a tall order for an organization that covers such a broad geographical area, but with the Clinic primarily based in Aurora and Vaughan, they continue to aim to provide services out of all of their CMHA-YRSS locations.

The program currently operates four full days a month, a limitation that has forced the CMHA-YRSS to often close their expansive waiting list. The recent Provincial boost will allow them to re-open that list, a particularly pressing need because they see an average of 11 referrals a month.

And it's not just about working with individuals. As the program has gained traction, they're now working with families, particularly if the person interested in receiving care is younger, and working to answer their questions and provide support.

'We have had grateful families just say, 'We had nowhere to go, nobody to help us understand and connect us with other people.' Those things are really important on this journey as well,' says Shields. 'Identity is protected under the Human Rights Code and I feel very blessed to be in Canada where we have the freedom to express and live as who we want to be as long as it doesn't hurt other people'. For me, living in an inclusive society where we all belong is really important. We need to support people in their mental health and mental health is health. If somebody is contemplating or has suicidal ideation, we need to be there because nobody should die ? and nobody should be suffering because they don't feel like their identity matches the inside and the outside, whatever that looks like. In a compassionate society, we want to make room for that; having the supports that people need to live their best life is really what we all want, regardless of our situation.'

The overall goal of the CMHA is to help someone become well, she adds, and in this case 'becoming well is about [helping] individuals who choose to be on hormone replacement therapy to begin and maintain that journey.'

With further resources for their CBT Program, the CMHA-YRSS will now be able to offer 'more robust' clinical services, expand hours and develop more group programming, allowing them to create an environment that fosters the development of that all-important 'network of support.'

'I think for people who are questioning, know that it is okay to be questioning and if you have questions, come and connect with us,' says Shields. 'We have a lot of people who just need to explore what it means and find out who they are because CMHA is about meeting people where they are at and helping them live their best lives. That doesn't mean it is one way or the other, and there are stories of people who explore things and make choices about what's right and what's wrong. That doesn't mean that sometimes we go down a path and then realize that we need to go down a slightly different path. Know that you don't have to come with an answer, but we're here for people who are questioning, want to get in touch, and feel they need support. Whatever it is, the CMHA is here to support people in the community live their best lives.

'We are so grateful to the donors. We would love this to be a fully-funded program. We continue to advocate for ongoing funding from Ontario Health. Because this is about healthcare and this is about specialized healthcare within the continuum, it is essential and? we're going to continue to advocate for that so we don't have to worry every year whether or not this program is going to be there for people. Always our goal remains to be there when people need us and to continue to build up the capacity across York Region.

'In this case, it takes a village and we're so grateful for this, but that is just a drop in the bucket of the need. We can open our wait list [but there] is so much more that we can do with people's support.'

For more information, visit cmha-yr.on.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter