

Southlake launches \$7.5 million Capital Campaign to address mental health needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many of us feeling stress, fear, depression and loneliness. Each of us address those issues in our own ways, but it is 'monumentally worse' for people who have existing underlying mental health issues, according to Ansar Ahmed, Vice Chair of Southlake Regional Health Centre's Board of Directors.

Mr. Ahmed knows the hidden realities of mental health issues first-hand. His son experienced mental health issues and was assessed in an emergency department setting. It was a busy place, and not necessarily an environment that fostered time to heal; but Southlake's recently-opened mental health assessment unit is a very important step in the right direction.

'Having lived through the struggles our son had with mental illness, I know all too well that many individuals are at risk of falling through the cracks, sometimes with tragic consequences,' says Mr. Ahmed. 'Those struggling with mental illness often suffer in silence with a sense of isolation. This new space and expansions are welcome additions to Southlake's Mental Health Program where patients can feel supported and cared for in a specialized setting. The need for expanded facilities for mental health patients is urgent.'

The Emergent Mental Health Assessment Unit is one of the centrepieces in Southlake's \$7.5 million capital campaign for mental health. Here, six private assessment rooms with beds, windows, and TVs are available for patients waiting to see a psychiatrist and to begin treatment immediately until inpatient beds are available. Previously, a mental health patient could spend up to five days in a windowless emergency area waiting for admission.

A new 12-bed adult inpatient unit is also a key component of the campaign, which is slated to open in the summer of 2022, thus boosting Southlake's total inpatient mental health capacity to 36 beds from the current 24.

'I think it has always been recognized that generally, across the board, mental health is not serviced at the same level of urgency as, say, cardiac healthcare, diabetes and cancer,' says Mr. Ahmed. 'I think one thing Southlake has determined over the course of time is that space is a very important aspect of the therapeutic treatment for those with mental health, particularly those who are suffering from acute mental health issues or episodes. I think it is one of those situations where the emergency room is absolutely the right place for the treatment of acute illnesses across a wide array [but] it is not the best place to deal with those suffering from mental health issues.'

'We felt there was an urgency to get [the Emergent Mental Health Assessment Unit] done and, frankly, we couldn't wait for all the funding to be in place and [we need] to finance that upfront costs that has already been incurred. The other part of the campaign is to build out the actual in-patient treatment unit. It is a significant expansion in the capacity of Southlake to provide that level of care that those suffering with mental health really need.'

From Mr. Ahmed's perspective, the global health pandemic has 'shone a light' on mental health as a broader issue but for those living with such mental health issues as bipolar disorder, the impacts of anxiety, fear, depression and loneliness can be felt 'monumentally worse'.

'The stress of living through this pandemic' has intensified the magnitude of the impacts and it has highlighted to the hospital the need and the urgency for moving forward with this campaign and moving forward to build out the 12-bed expansion of the in-patient unit.

'Opening the [Assessment Area] was a very important milestone. For those suffering from mental health, the lack of privacy, the chaos that just surrounds the whole environment of the emergency room is just not the right place for those suffering from acute mental health episodes. This new emergent mental health assessment unit is 'the right solution at the right time [for] those suffering from acute mental health episodes to bring them to a dedicated space where they can get the therapeutic health they need and deserve.'

?I think we as human beings, we perceive somebody's illness by what we see and what we can interpret. If we see somebody physically ailing, if they are limping, or if they are having rapid arm movements or erratic arm movements, we make certain assumptions about what their underlying conditions might be. I think one of the unfortunate mistakes that happens is in assuming that somebody that outwardly appears to be quite together may in fact be suffering from some real mental health challenges. I think it is so important that we have spaces like this in our community where those suffering from those underlying and invisible illnesses can get assessed and get the help and treatment plans they need in order to get better.?

For more on Southlake's Campaign for Mental Health, including how you can get involved, visit southlake.ca/foundation.

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