

CMHA-YRSS CEO Shields named one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women



For more than 11 years, Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, has worked tirelessly throughout our communities to underscore the importance of mental health and bring resources where they are needed most.

The role has given her a powerful role as an advocate and now she has been recognized by Women's Executive Network (WXN) as one of the Top 100 of Canada's Most Powerful Women.

The list of Canada's Most Powerful Women honours those who have made a ?transformational difference in their fields and actively shape a more inclusive future, especially in underrepresented areas.?

?It takes a powerful woman to lead like a legend in her field, organization or community, and it takes a powerful woman to empower those around her to do the same,? said WXN CEO Sherri Stevens. ?This year's winners embody that power, giving us hope when we need it most, setting new bars and also changing the status quo. They are legends celebrated not just for the things that they do, but also how they touch the lives of others.?

Rebecca Shields has touched the lives of quite literally countless individuals in York Region and South Simcoe, whether they are clients of the CMHA, their families, or the population as a whole. This recognition by WXN is ?really humbling,? she says, as she is ?blessed to do good work with good people and have a really good time doing it.?

?I have been very privileged to be able to work in the social sector, particularly in mental health and a cause I care deeply about,? she says. ?My hope is [this recognition] amplifies the importance of this work and why we need to have people in leadership in this work. I hope it catalyzes even more work because, from my perspective, we have a lot to do.

?I am grateful for the impact I have had and the people who have been with me on my journey ? and there are so many ? and it tells me it is wonderful what we have done, but I see the need for so much more. I so deeply care about our community and I have always been driven across my career to help people be the best they can be and build stronger, more inclusive communities. Everybody that I touch in this area has embraced change, they have embraced wanting to build healthy communities.

?Mental health touches everybody and we saw that in the pandemic ? we reached out, we really pivoted, and really broadened who we helped in the pandemic, and continue to help individuals and families. Unfortunately, the demand has gone up and I hope this spurs more people to get involved and more investment to be made.?

Over her nearly 12 years with the CMHA-YRSS, Shields says she sees her job has having three very different phases: pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, and this new normal.

One of her missions at the helm has been to reach people quicker, and this has included the development of their mobile mental health unit, the MOBYSS bus, being launched to reach youth where they happen to be. More than 70 per cent of mental illness starts in youth and it is very important to have early intervention, she says.

She has also worked to expand their Newcomer Wellbeing Program which works hand-in-hand with local settlement agencies, reaching people where they are at and reaching them quickly to high quality care.

We have really been innovative in saying, We just have to get there and we'll get there through partnership, says Shields. All people have health journeys and when someone is experiencing a mental health issue, or they are facing a different type of illness, whether it be cancer or chronic disease it is all inter-related. I am thinking a lot about how we integrate care. How do we support the whole person and the whole family so it is not a silo over here, a silo over there and how do we work with our Ontario Health Team partners? Maybe you should have access to that Ontario Structured Psychotherapy program because you can use some tools to help manage your mental health along the way.

People who have mental illness actually die 15 to 20 years younger than people who don't have a diagnosis of a severe mental illness, but for the same reasons they don't have the same access to healthcare because they're seen mental illness-first and not for their diabetes, their chronic health conditions. How do we ensure that people are getting treated for all of their mental health with some sort of equity considerations? We have to continue thinking about equity. How do we reach people because everyone should have access to high quality mental health and addiction or substance use support.

The question is how do we partner? How do we expand access in ways that are connected rather than siloed? How do we use technology and data to make it easier for people? My team has been working in the background these last couple of years to establish standards, data, analytics, so we can do that well. There has been a whole ton of work that happens behind the scenes to kind of rebuild our structures and our foundations so we can handle the growth I think we might need to have in the future.

It will be a challenging road ahead, one that will entail significant resources, but Shields says being recognized as one of the 100 Most Powerful Women I Canada has been like an injection of fuel into my tank.

The amount of people who reached out to me to say, Oh, my gosh! Congratulations! What do you want to do?. I think, for us, the things I am really excited about is were working on expanding access to people who really have been marginalized. Our gender-affirming and our 2SLGBTQ+ services, we have been able to get some investment to expand access. That is really important because, unfortunately, many people who identify and are part of that community have poorer health outcomes, so we want to ensure they get the support that they need and connected to the care that they need. That is really exciting. We continue to push forward and expand, especially around making our services more accessible and available to people in different languages and different cultural communities, so we're doing a lot of partnerships with our Indigenous communities to expand access there, which is great. We're working with hospitals on better integrating care so people aren't in that cycle.

Also top of mind for everybody is affordability in the Region. Our free access to therapy is really important for people to know about, but we continue to work really hard on expanding access to our housing and homelessness services. I think when I started we had less than 50 supportive housing units, we now have over 420. Because when you don't have a safe and affordable place to live, I don't know how anybody is going to be managing their mental health. It's just not going to happen. We continue to put safe access to affordable housing and particularly addressing our most vulnerable, people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness at the forefront of our strategy to really help people in our community move forward from illness to wellness.

For more on the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, including services within the community, visit cmha-yr.on.ca or call toll free at 1-866-345-0183.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter