Mental Health Hub moves one step closer to reality for York Region

Jim Eliopoulos saw the fire diminish in the eyes of his son, Jake.

Adopted from Ukraine as a 22-month-old in 1993, Eliopoulos says he and Jake ?were soulmates in baseball,? with his son passionately pursuing the sport into his post-secondary career.

Then, what he describes as a ?black cloud? descended over his son's head.

He was less communicative, more ?minimalist? in describing how things were going in his life, and, after four unsuccessful attempts to take his own life, the family lost Jake in 2013, just weeks before his 22nd birthday.

?There has been tremendous positive change in chipping away at this mental health stigma that was overwhelmingly present at the time Jake was suffering,? says Eliopoulos, adding that what was present he now understands to be deep depression.

Further positive steps forward now lie ahead as the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, the Province of Ontario, and the Region of York move forward on the construction and development of a new mental health hub, based in Newmarket, that will serve residents of York and beyond.

Eliopoulos was among the advocates who filled the Great Hall at the Regional offices on July 3 as Minister of Health Sylvia Jones announced further provincial supports in making this hub a reality.

?As the first model of its kind in the Region, the York Regional Mental Health Community Care Hub will expand mental health access to mental health care and support for both youth and adults,? said Minister Jones, recognizing more than 20 stakeholder organizations assembled for the announcement. ?Once opened, the hub will provide a range of integrated care and support for services of those 12 years of age or older, delivered in partnership with local hospitals, community mental health and social service providers, primary care and first responders.

?The range of comprehensive services will connect those in need with mental health to the care they need when and where they need it, instead of emergency departments. This hub will also increase access to crisis and stabilization supports and culturally-appropriate support services to connect more people with community-based mental health and addictions resources.

?York Regional Mental Health Community Care Hub is a great example of how government is working hand in hand in the community with local healthcare partners, municipalities, including many who are represented here today ? to make it easier for

people to connect to world class mental health and addiction supports, that is responsive to their needs, close to home, now and for years to come.?

Jones said the tender for building the hub is due to go out this summer, news which was greeted warmly by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, who has been a leading advocate for making the dream of a hub a reality.

It is estimated, said the MPP, that 30 per cent of Ontarians will experience a mental health issues and recent data from Statistics Canada suggests that 63 per cent of adults living in Canada have reported exposure ?to a potentially traumatic event at some point in their lives.?

?It is estimated that more than two million people per year go to their doctors for mental health and addiction-related reasons and nearly one in ten Canadians who visit the ER for health, with mental health and/or addictions, have four-plus visits a year right here in York Region,? said Gallagher Murphy. ?By 2029-30, emergency department visits for mental health and substance use are projected to grow by 63 per cent ? significantly outpacing the 30 per cent increase projected for all other emergency department visits. These numbers are staggering.

?Here in Newmarket-Aurora and across York Region, we know we have our challenges and we know that we need to ensure that our residents have access to our health system that is easy to understand and transparent so that people will know what services are available and how and where to access them.?

A ?Centre of Excellence? like this would focus on targeting ?specific gaps? in mental health services locally, offering high quality care.?

?The fact of the matter is that mental health is health and I am proud to be part of a caucus that not only recognizes this, but is doing something to ensure Ontarians get the help they need and where they need it.?

MPP Gallagher Murphy's advocacy for this project began when she was Constituency Assistant to former Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott when she served as Ministry of Health in from 2018 to 2022.

Integral to this advocacy has been Rebecca Shields, President & CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe, an organization which will take the lead in operating the hub.

Shields said a group of individuals came together ?about eight years ago? to look at ways to address a ?growing mental health crisis? in the community and its impact on youth, adults, families, emergency departments, police, paramedic services, shelters, and other community organizations and service providers.

The need for improved services was apparent then, and became ever more so during the pandemic, she added.

?Together over the last eight years, we established the case for support for a new solution that will bring compassionate, caring, and specialized services when people need it most,? said Shields at last week's announcement, noting that many of these individuals were assembled in the Great Hall, and she hailed them for ?never giving up on bringing forward their case for change.?

?Change is necessary. The York Region Mental Health Community Care Hub is that siren's call for change,? Shields continued. ?Together we are solving and building services and support and navigation that answers the question: what needs to change so somebody's first crisis will be their last? When a 13-year-old is struggling with overwhelming anxiety, what should she, her family, doctor or school know about our hub before bringing her so she knows what to expect upon her arrival? How do we welcome her and her family in a culturally safe and supportive manner, and provide them with the therapeutic environment where recovery begins at the door? How do we connect her with the right level of care and not just to another wait list and empower her in her recovery? Most importantly, how do we as provider embed evaluation in every step so we are an example of a learning health system that focuses on quality in outcomes? This is a bold and ambitious vision, and one we are all committed to because it is necessary for

people, for community, to stop the cycles that exacerbate illness, crisis and prolonged recovery.?

The hub will be an interdisciplinary, connected, community-based model of care that Shields hopes will serve as a ?template to spread across Ontario.?

?Together, alongside people with lived and living experience, family members and our supporters, we're already collectively rolling up our sleeves and committing to collaborate to make this dream a reality,? she said, adding that it's important to look at the hub through a lens of understanding crisis. ?I am not a clinician, but after 17 years in community mental health, I picked up a few insights along the way. I have never met somebody who wasn't trying to cope, doing the best they could, when one moment they realized they needed help and vulnerably sought care. The service must start with helping someone come to the front door, welcome them and assessing what they need, supporting them to stabilize and ensure they have the right connections and information to take the next best step in returning to health and wellbeing.?

Once complete, the hub will be client- and family-centred, with specialized care for diverse cultures and the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and for people aged 12 and up. Services will include child and youth mental health, Indigenous-led healing rooms, assessment and stabilization services, substance withdrawal, and perhaps even a bed for the night.

?Together,? said Shields, ?we can truly solve and support better crisis care for our community.?

By Brock Weir