

Addiction Services marks 40 years of impact in Central Ontario

By Brock Weir

Over the last 40 years, recognizing and treating addictions has come a long way and at the forefront of tackling these challenges in the community has been Addiction Services Central Ontario.

Previously Addiction Services of York Region, the organization, which serves York Region, South Simcoe, and North York, celebrated the start of its special anniversary year last Monday, May 8, with a special reception held at the historic Aurora Armoury.

The anniversary is a time to not only celebrate the strides that have been made, but how they have grown and developed to serve a community that has done the same.

“As we looked at things, 40 years ago is quite a while for an organization to be around and to be providing services and programs,” says Addiction Services Central Ontario Executive Director Penny Marrett. “I think COVID really told us about how important the work that we were doing was to individuals. Particularly if you think about the first 12 to 18 months that social isolation that many people felt, the challenges because you were basically told to shelter at home as much as possible unless you were an essential worker and we had more calls and we knew that people really needed help and needed support.

“It really brought home, I think, that the services that we provided are critical to the communities that we serve. 40 years for us is really a terrific milestone to demonstrate that we were important when we first started and we are just as important now.”

Since its inception, the goal of Addiction Services has been to support individuals with addictions, but 40 years ago there was a concerted focus on substance use and what Marrett describes as “problem gambling.” Those two areas are still under their umbrella but the areas they tackle have become increasingly complex and numerous.

“Our clients have always been complex, but I think there is an increasing number of individuals,” she says. “I think, actually, that some people who maybe before the pandemic may not have reached out for a variety of personal reasons started to reach out. There is a little bit more, I think, who realized they needed the support to be able to continue their own journey.

“We continued all our services throughout the pandemic, but we also saw that there were so many different issues that people were facing. People who perhaps had a job and lost their job during COVID; at the height of the pandemic, people who perhaps had more precarious jobs, those jobs became even more precarious if that is even possible; and we also had individuals who, because we obviously started to offer virtual services, wouldn't have been able to come to one of our satellite clinics, or to our main office for clinics, who were calling because they could do it for free. We hadn't done virtual in the way that we did during the pandemic and that will continue.”

An aspect of Addictions Services Marrett says she's particularly proud of is the fact their services are “wrap-around.” An individual may come to them to reduce or stop using substances and, in turn, they're able to provide community withdrawal management services so people can still be at home in a safe place while they work with a counsellor. Individual counselling is available, but so is group counselling and after care. It's a “full piece to enable someone to really be able to take the time they need to look at the issues” and set goals and they work in conjunction with each individual's list of objectives.

When she looks ahead to the future, Marrett says they will continue to respond to the needs of the community and that recognizes “it's not always about people coming to us, it's about us going to people.”

“We might not be ‘just’ our four walls, whether it is a satellite office or clinic, but we will be in the community. We received money for and have purchased a van for a mobile addictions clinic and we may have more of those. Many of our clients need primary care, they need that addiction support, but primary care, and there's not a lot of primary care available to Ontarians these days. We have a

lot of people who are retiring who are primary care providers and we might be able to partner and provide some of that for our clients. During COVID we had a number of clients for whom food security was a huge issue for them so we partnered with food banks and with other organizations for the delivery of the food hampers we purchased. We had received funding to be able to do that. One of the things that people don't realize is substance use and substance health, it's from all socio-economic levels. It's not only one specific group of people, it's everybody.

?The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addictions recently came out with updated low-risk guidelines so we're looking at that to see how do we incorporate that research into some of the psychoeducation pieces. We offer court support in two courts ? Newmarket and Bradford, primarily, but we know there are other courts in the areas we work in. Are we going to be able to expand that program? Are we going to be able to continue to support youth and families? It's a really important group.

?I think much of what we'll be doing over the next 10, 20, 30 years is really expanding and strengthening the work we're doing today and making sure that we're also continuing to respond to the needs of the community. That may mean we pivot instead of getting the community to pivot. We're ready to pivot to best respond to the community. We're thrilled we have been able to serve the communities and we look forward to being able to continue that and responding to the needs of the community at the same time.?