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CMHA sees unprecedented rise in Canadians and healthcare workers in need

By Rob Paul

New research shows that chronic stress resulting from the pandemic is taking a toll on Canadians.

According to a study from the Canadian Mental Health Association, 64 per cent of Canadians are worried about new variants and 57 per cent are worried about COVID-19 circulating in the population for years to come.

Having dealt with the pandemic for the last two years, it's triggered stressors, such as grief and trauma in Canadians and it's likely to lead to significant long-term mental health effects on both the population and the frontline mental health providers caring for them.

?We're seeing the signs of chronic stress on the population,? says Margaret Eaton, National CEO of CMHA. ?Unfortunately, community mental health organizations have drawn on shallow reserves to meet people's mental health needs during COVID, and now they're running on empty. It's time to check the engine light on our mental health system.?

The chronic stress of dealing with the pandemic is taking its toll, making basic decisions harder, sapping our energy and leaving people plain tired or burnt out. Nearly half (46 per cent) of Canadians are stressed or worried about coping with uncertainty.

?We're seeing big differences?or inequities?in how different groups of people are affected by the pandemic. This is dividing our society into haves and have-nots when it comes to mental health and illness,? says lead researcher Emily Jenkins, a professor of nursing at UBC who studies mental health and substance use. ?The pandemic has made it impossible to ignore the long-standing service gaps and systemic barriers in our systems.?

Almost one in five (17 per cent) Canadians felt they needed help with their mental health during the pandemic but didn't receive it because: they didn't know how or where to get it (36 per cent), couldn't afford to pay (36 per cent), couldn't get access (29 per cent) or because insurance didn't cover it (19 per cent).

There's been a large increase in Canadians who need mental health help, but due to long wait lists or high costs, rely on free mental health and addictions services and supports provided by the not-for-profit sector. This has resulted in organizations being pushed to their limits which has ultimately put more pressure on mental health workers.

?The community mental health and addictions sector cannot meet these growing needs with the current funding model,? says Eaton. ?Between chronic underfunding, patchwork services and people not knowing where to go, Canadians are not getting the help they need when they need it.?

CMHA's Peel Dufferin branch has seen a steady rise throughout the pandemic in its volume of calls for both its core services and its crisis services.

?There was a 35 per cent increase in calls when you compare the year before the pandemic to the first year of the pandemic,? said David Smith, CEO of CMHA Peel Dufferin.

In both years of the pandemic, CMHA Peel Dufferin has seen a minimum of nearly 5,500 crisis calls per month with it peaking at over 6,500 calls per month in the summer of 2020, October 2021, and January 2022.

Seeing such a drastic increase in calls has made it increasingly difficult on the mental health workers who have to deal with a larger load without an equal increase in resources.

?We haven't increased resources, and there's also a problem getting health workers right now,? said Smith. ?In the meantime, we've

had to reprioritize what we work on, and we've reprioritized answering every call so we can at least get somebody some kind of help. Some of our long-term deeper services we've had to do less of as a result in order to meet the demand.?

As the stigma around mental health has decreased, there's been a natural increase in people reaching out to mental health organizations for services and then when the pandemic hit, organizations like CMHA Peel Dufferin saw an unprecedented number of calls.

?The trend has been longer than the last two years,? said Smith. ?The focus on the reduction of stigma has led to more and more people talking about mental health and we've seen an increase in people reaching out for support over a much longer period of time. We went from 45,000 calls per year to our crisis line to 60,000 calls?a huge jump just from the pandemic. When we took the crisis line in house seven years ago, we were getting about 24,000 calls per year. Part of that is because we have increased resources?we're in with the police and 9-1-1 to respond live to mental health calls?so our crisis services have grown, which is part of the greater demand. But there's also a steady increased demand in mental health services generally and then we saw the pandemic and the curve changed direction.?

The balance of not having enough mental health workers and dealing with lacking resources while the uptick in residents reaching out for help has taken a toll on the workers in the mental health sector.

?It's been extremely difficult,? said Smith. ?It's hard on staff and it's hard to say no to people who do need help because you think there's someone else who needs more help?those are the choices we've been having to make. It's been a huge issue (the mental health of health workers) across all of healthcare and certainly within our organization. We've done a lot of work in bringing in people to help deal with compassion fatigue; you're hearing a lot about other people's issues and challenges and that of course weighs on your own. Our staff, like everyone else, is also challenged by the state of the world during the pandemic. So, our staff is dealing with both issues of the pandemic impacting their home lives while having this increased weight of the work. We've been doing things to try and support the mental health of our staff during the pandemic, but you still see less people satisfied with their workplace environments.?

Having the supports for mental health workers to help them deal with the fatigue and burnout that comes with them being the support for the general population has been tough given the circumstances but also something CMHA has tried to prioritize.

?It's critical to have, I think we'd have a lot more staff off sick or dealing with more challenging mental health issues if it wasn't for the support of our supervision, our specialized mental health services that they can access through our benefits program, and the internal work we're doing around compassion fatigue,? Smith said.

It can be easy to forget that mental health care workers are humans who struggle too, says Smith, and as the pandemic has highlighted the need for more support for mental health organizations as services become more widely accepted it in turn has spotlighted how essential it is to have accessible support for mental health professionals as well.

?There was an announcement of $12 million being [invested] provincially in supporting the mental health of healthcare workers,? he said. ?And, CMHA Ontario actually has a significant contract to create and deliver mental health support for people in healthcare.?

With the increased workload for mental health professionals over the last two years, it's doubtful given the recent study that it will slowdown anytime soon. As a result, the shortage in healthcare workers is something that needs to be dealt with to help in the long-term.

?It's harder to recruit good people right now but we're also getting some interest in investment to improve services,? said Smith. ?Like many health organizations, we're doing a lot of work on recruitment, and we're also doing a lot of advocacy right now because the community mental health force has lost ground even to inflation over the last 10 years. There's lots of new programs being funded but the old programs are not receiving annual increases that equal or even come close to the rate of inflation. We underpay compared to the markets and we're trying to advocate to fix that and pay people a good living wage to do very important work.?

CMHA Peel Dufferin is open Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and can be reached at 905-451-2123 for intake, information, and referral. For those in crisis, CMHA Peel Dufferin has a 24/7 hotlines for all ages in Peel (905-278-9036), over 18 in Dufferin (1-888-811-2222), and under 18 in Dufferin (519-941-1530).