

Jones calls for action on mental health wait times

By Bill Rea

Wait times for children and youth seeking mental health counselling and therapy are out of control, according to Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones.

And she's calling on the government to do something about it.

Jones raised the issue recently in Question Period in the legislature, with Health and Long-Term Care Minister Eric Hoskins, pointing out in the last 10 years, there has been a 60 per cent increase in hospitalizations and emergency room visits by children and youth due to mental health disorders.

The minister responded by suggesting that drugs were the answer, Jones said, according to Hansard. Does the Minister truly believe that the solution for this mental health crisis is providing free drugs?

Hoskins initially denied saying that.

Read the Hansard, Jones shot back, and Hoskins replied by suggesting she clarify her recollection.

The Minister added he's very proud of the investments the government has made in mental health. He added the five-year plan for mental health, which he said came out of a select committee of all parties, started with a focus on children's issues.

We were able to expand the services to more than 50,000 additional children who would benefit, he said. We made investments in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Jones expressed appreciation to the reference to the Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, but that was eight years ago, Minister.

She added there are some 12,000 children and youth waiting for mental health services in Ontario, and she said the average wait time for counselling and therapy in Toronto is 208 days. The figure in Barrie is 354 days and 575 days in Ottawa.

Our kids can't wait, Jones declared. Instead of suggesting that drugs are the answer, when will this minister ensure timely access to counselling and therapy service for our children?

Addressing the situation in Barrie, Hoskins said the government announced several months ago a brand new child and youth mental health service in Barrie at the Royal Victoria hospital. This is an in-patient service, but also an outpatient service, which he said is going to benefit tens of thousands of children and youth in the area.

He added that's one example, pointing out \$140 million of additional funds was announced in the recent budget for cognitive behavioural therapy.

This problem cannot be fixed by a pill, Jones said later. Children are waiting for a year and a half for service. The Minister must ensure timely access to counselling and therapy service for our children.