

Jones calls for more action on mental health services

By Bill Rea

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones is calling on the government to improve mental health services for children and youth. Jones raised the issue recently in the legislature during Question Period, citing the previous day's report from Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk, which she said highlighted concerns about the lack of oversight of these services. Jones, according to Hansard, said there were audits in 2003 and 2008, yet she said the Ministry of Children and Youth Services has not yet made changes to make sure children and youth get the mental health services they need in appropriate and cost-effective ways, that are also timely. She asked Minister Michael Coteau if he would finally act on the recommendations made in 2003, 2008 and this year's annual report. In his response, Coteau observed most of the mental health and addiction issues in Ontario begin at childhood or adolescence, agreeing it's important to make sure they have timely access to supports when they need them the most. He also commented the advice from Lysyk was insightful. We know that when it comes to mental health, it's something that's always changing, Coteau said. The pressures in the systems constantly change, but we've taken the Auditor General's advice and we're moving ahead to implement a new funding model for children and youth mental health services. He also said the government intends to enhance oversights in order to hold service providers more accountable and improve quality. After 13 years and three reports, the Auditor General found that the minister is still not monitoring the delivery of services to ensure that children are receiving adequate treatment, Jones responded. It's no wonder there has been a 50 per cent increase in hospitalizations of children and youth suffering with mental health illnesses. She added the lack of action has reached a crisis, with children having nowhere to turn. They need help, and they need it now, she declared. After 13 years, when will the Minister act? In 13 years, there's a lot that's changed in mental health, Coteau countered. If we look at the province of Ontario 20 to 30 years ago and today, we know that the stigma around mental health is drastically changed. People are talking about this issue more. He added the government has invested \$100 million into new funding over the last five years, and are seeing a huge difference. He also said community-based children and youth mental health agencies serve more than 100,000 young people annually.