

Peel Children's Aid Society is calling to Change the Narrative and Start the Conversation this Suicide Prevention Month

By Riley Murphy

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

In Peel, 20,000 emergency department visits each year are related to mental health disorders, and 70% of mental health issues begin in childhood or adolescence, according to Peel Children's Aid Society (CAS).

The World Health Organization's 2024-2026 triennial theme, "Changing the Narrative on Suicide," with the call to action "Start the Conversation," and Peel CAS are joining organizations to raise awareness about suicide, break down stigma, and encourage open conversations about mental health.

Mary Beth Moellenkamp, CEO of Peel CAS, shared that often the youth and children that they serve struggle in silence.

She says that now, in the second year of this campaign, they're encouraging the community and parents to start speaking to youth about suicide to normalize the subject, so if they need help, they're more likely to reach out to a trusted adult or friend.

Moellenkamp shared that after running this campaign last year, they noticed that more conversations were happening in homes, and there were more opportunities for children and families to learn about the different pathways and services available in the community.

"Starting that conversation really helps to create that dialogue, and ultimately for us, hopefully creating safety within the home," said Moellenkamp.

The first piece of advice she shared is to "be curious without judgment."

"It can be often really hard for a parent to hear their child say that they might be contemplating suicide or having these types of thoughts and worry can take over. And that often is a factor in why a child or youth may actually not speak to their parents about that," she says.

She said it's about creating opportunities where they can feel safe having that dialogue, as well as the importance of building a circle or network around a child.

"The more we normalize that these are feelings and conversations that even adults struggle with, the more likely they are to reach forward."

Moellenkamp shared that Peel CAS is working to overcome the multiple barriers that youth may face.

They're working on developing community hubs with multiple service providers, where children and youth can find a sense of belonging.

In addition to bringing mobile services to Caledon, this initiative aims to create safe spaces for children and youth.

Peel CAS is currently ensuring they're visible in multiple areas of Caledon to ensure youth feel comfortable reaching out to them for support, as well as co-locating with three different Brightstart locations.

"I think people know that we're there for vulnerable children, but the majority of the work we do is actually working with families

and communities and helping to create safety and improving well-being for children and youth," says Moellenkamp. "The more they feel comfortable, we think the more we're visible and available, hopefully the safer and the more supportive the community will feel that we are to them."

She shared that the opportunities they have to hold educational awareness campaigns are great for families to have conversations with their youth.

"The more the community does that, the more we have those conversations with families and the more we're going to destigmatize the issue and the more likely that we're going to see less of these challenges happen for the children that we love and care for," she says.

Kiara Stoner, a former youth in care with Peel CAS, is now a project lead with Peel CAS and runs her own braiding and natural hair care business, XAYMACA Curls.

The now 23-year-old first came to Peel CAS when she was 13, as she navigated her personal journey of loss and depression.

"I learned through Peel CAS' support that what I was experiencing was real, valid, and treatable," said Stoner.

Stoner shared that they provided her with many youth programs, as well as different types of counselling.

"That was really a stepping stone for me through these services; they influenced me to where I am today," she says. "While I was going through all those things and all those emotions, the programs they gave me helped me to stay on track and overcome those, and it continuously gave me support as well."

She shared that she was even receiving support up until last year.

"They've been really great at providing me with what I need for my success."

She said it's amazing the level of comfort and support that CAS provides to those who use its services.

"They're really just there to make sure that you're safe and you have a successful path laid out for you in terms of your mental health and just your life as a whole. So, I believe that if you reach out to those support systems, they'll help you more than you think they will."

"It may be scary to reach out, but never be afraid to reach out for help," she says. "Even though you may not have that social support system, CAS can always be a support system for you and you don't need to be ashamed or embarrassed."

Stoner now returns to Peel CAS, leading workshops for youth on mental health, entrepreneurship, and self-care.

"It's honestly really amazing to go and be able to see youth who are still in places that I was and see that and myself in them. It's great to show them that there's more out there and the dreams that they do have, they can chase after and nothing is impossible for them."

Alicia Boothe, Project Lead for the Youth Wellness Hub ? Brampton location, shared that to date, Stoner's workshop has been the most popular program since they opened.

"That was her just wanting to give back and say the impact that she's had of the positive relationships and support that she's received," says Boothe.

Boothe shared that she has been working with Stoner in a supervisor capacity for close to five years now, and she "watched that

transformation from some of the more challenging times that Kiara's had with her own mental health and well-being to where she is today.?

Boothe shared that over the past five years, there has been a 186 per cent increase in counselling requests coming to their agency.

Over the last couple of years, one of the things that Peel CAS has done towards this initiative is submit a request to be the lead agency for one of the newest youth wellness hubs in Ontario, specifically their new hub designated for Brampton.

They are temporarily operating the hub in Mississauga.

As the project lead for this initiative, Boothe sees that a lot of what they'll be doing is centred around mental health and well-being for young people, ?first and foremost.?

They are also currently in the process of adding a nurse practitioner to their team, as she shared that sometimes, if our physical bodies are not taken care of, it can affect our emotional well-being.

Another aspect of the hub that Boothe shares she is proud of is their walk-in basis for counselling as well as scheduling.

She said youth will often come in hoping to speak to someone, and then book future appointments as well.

?It says that they're invested in wanting to keep the conversation going as it relates to receiving the mental health support that they need,? said Boothe.

Through the hub, specifically this month, Boothe says they're running weekly activities aimed at raising awareness around suicide prevention.

She says they're actively working to ?change the narrative on suicide? and ?making sure that the narrative is open and honest and supportive.?

?This transition from being a youth to a young adult can be really challenging, but when you have supportive voices and supportive staff that are in your life it helps to discover that passion and purpose and that zeal for whatever this season is that might keep them focused into future years to come.?

She shared that since the launch of this program, in her position actively working with youth, she has noticed the willingness to sit down and have conversations.

?Youth are willing to have the conversation, they're looking for that support, they want to know that they're seen, they want to know that they're heard, and this resource, this opportunity, this hub is something that allows them to know that they can have that, those needs can be met here,? says Boothe.

Charlene Randall, a Service Director at Peel Children's Aid Society, discussed the Peel CAS Trailblazers program, which Stoner also participated in during her time with CAS.

The Trailblazers program is designed for youth, led by youth.

The program aims to empower children and youth by connecting them to various sports that will help them grow in self-confidence and develop essential life skills.

Randall shared, similar to others, that a big part of what they're doing this month is fighting back that original stigma that comes with these conversations surrounding suicide and mental, even internally with their own staff.

She said they truly work to make sure everyone is equipped with the right tools, knowledge, and skills to have these conversations.

This year, Peel CAS invested resources in training their staff, foster caregivers, and close partners in Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training.

The two-day workshop focuses on preparing people to identify when they're working with someone who has thoughts of suicide or when they know someone who has thoughts of suicide.

Randall urges those in the community to stay informed about local events and learn about the mental health supports available in the area.

In addition to 24-hour, 7-day-a-week crisis lines, Randall emphasizes that families and youth can also reach out to their local Children's Aid Society.

"We do a lot of connecting families to services in the community when possible," she says. "If we don't have the information right at hand, we'll go out and we'll look for it."

Below are listed helplines, the main one for Suicide Prevention is call or text 988.

CMHA Peel-Dufferin Phone: (905) 451-2123

If you are concerned about the safety or well-being of a child or youth under the age of 18, please get in touch with your local Children's Aid Society.

Alternatively, if you are a resident of Peel Region, you can call Peel CAS at 905-363-6131.

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or Text CONNECT to 686868