

Virtual programs help Family Services reach more residents

By **ROB PAUL**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Not every community has access to the support services they need, but residents of Caledon are able to take advantage of Family Services of Peel and the programs they offer when they're struggling or need guidance.

Family Services of Peel provides counselling and programs that deal with trauma intervention, family law, employment, families and school, and adults with development disabilities. These services have provided over 4,000 hours of counselling and over 5,000 hours of supported independent living in Peel thanks to nearly 13,000 hours of volunteer work.

Executive Director Sandra Rupnarain is adamant every community needs programs like the ones they provide to ensure the people in need can receive help in critical situations.

"It's really essential," she said. "We're a generic service in that we're not affiliated with any political statement—we're just here to provide services for the community wherever we're needed, whatever the cultural set is or the language. We're there as a community service to help from anything with employment to women who have experienced abuse to men who use violence in relationships, to seniors—we help families. We keep expanding services too, we have a newer initiative where we have been working with human trafficking survivors for the last five years. It's crucial to have these services because as an agency we're looking at what the needs are in the community to identify the gaps through assessments, focus groups, and what we're hearing from our clients.

"Based on that, we go after funding to create opportunities so that we can have specific services for our community. I think Family Services of Peel really plays a vital role in being innovative and also not just running services, because we're funded to do that, but also creating new strategies, models, and frameworks. We look at social issues like Black Lives Matter and South Asian hate, we work with the LGBTQ community—we definitely want to look at every area where we can work with the community and families."

Some people who need the services that are offered can be discouraged by seeing how long they may have to wait, but Rupnarain says they do the most they can for people with the resources they have.

"We do have a long wait list," she said. "It's a six-month wait list right now, which can be daunting when you think about it, but instead of just letting people sit on a wait list we connect with them and check in with them. We make sure we know how they're doing and help them access resources while they're waiting for services. We have ways we try to mitigate the long wait list—we ran group parenting sessions—unfortunately, it's something we're going to have to deal with unless we get more staff."

The impact of COVID-19 has caused a lot of changes for Family Services of Peel, but a lot of long hours and handwork allowed them to pivot to virtual services and help families in what has been the hardest year of many people's lives.

"Everything has had to be virtual, but the one thing that happened is that we never stopped services," she said. "Our doors were closed on March 20, when everybody went into lockdown, but we never closed our services. Within a month we were previewing different platforms, there was a little bit of a slow start, and we weren't seeing people individually, but our staff was connecting with all of their clients. We were busier than ever in the first couple of months after the pandemic hit just to get our plans organized. The only thing that changed with our services really was that we'd normally have a \$10 charge—or whatever they can pay—for clients for admin costs to access our counselling, so we had revenue loss because we stopped collecting fees from everyone for a couple of months. We lost some dollars from our programs—but it was not a time where we were going to deny people services because of money.

"It's impacted us in that way, but at the same time, governments have really beefed it up with extra dollars to get what we need to

make our places a little more COVID ready with barriers for when clients feel more comfortable. Getting ready to follow the health and safety protocols is a little bit challenging because we need to get all the supplies in and getting everything installed, it's been a process, but we've managed well and rallied together. We will do whatever it takes to make sure our clients and community get served.?

Virtual services have also allowed them to reach people who otherwise would not be able to access what Family Services of Peel offers.

?Before we weren't virtual and we serve all of Peel, transportation from the Caledon area can be difficult,? she said. ?I've noticed since we've gone virtual that our client intake from Caledon has increased. The virtual avenue is reducing the impact of transportation and allowing them more access. That's been a big positive of the virtual services, the hard-to-reach communities who want to come for services but lack access because of transportation. It's really helped out that way.?

One thing she worries about is that although the services are there for people who need them, will they be willing to access them without a clear knowledge of exactly what they are and how they work?

?I've noticed that sometimes services are there, but people often don't have enough information to access the services,? she said. ?When we look at our framework, we could have the best service, but if people don't have access or know about it then it can be challenging. As an organization it's something I've been looking at because we have great services and people are aware of them, but if access is not equitable across the board, then how do we improve that??

Continuing to spread awareness going forward is a big piece of the puzzle for Rupnarain. However, it becomes difficult without the funds to support expanded promotion of family services.

For more about Family Services of Peel and the programs offered, visit fspeel.org.