

LIGHTHOUSE NOW

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Health services expand at South Shore schools

by Keith Corcoran

NEW GERMANY - Junior and senior high students in the South Shore region needing the help of health counsellors will be able to find it in their own schools.

Education and health officials announced October 2 the expansion of in-school services with the addition of four positions, including two clinical therapists, complementing the already existing two addictions counsellors. For the past two decades, the duties of the two existing counsellors were spread over half the schools each. With last week's announcement, the six positions will be tasked with visiting schools on a regular basis. Students are able to drop in or arrange an appointment.

One of those schools benefiting from a health counsellor is New Germany Rural High School, where public-sector officials hosted a press conference in front of students in the school's gym to publicize the news.

The clinical therapists are paid for by the province. The other positions, including the pre-existing ones, are funded by South Shore Health.

It's about increasing access to services that will help students in Lunenburg and Queens counties deal with matters such as substance, mental health and sexual issues, while giving them skills and information to cope, keep them well and not have it develop into a bigger problem, Nova Scotia Education Minister Ramona Jennex said.

"I want to encourage you as students to call on these services whenever you need help," she said during the news conference.

South Shore Health community health services director Todd Leader said later that it's about weighing what's important. "It's really about putting our youth at the top

of our priority list because in terms of long-term improvements in our population's health, that's where we need to be focusing."

South Shore Health vice-president Janet Simm suggested during the news conference that today's youth have plenty to deal with. She outlined some of the numbers.

"The average age for youth first drinking alcohol in Atlantic Canada is 13 years old. Across the province there are many youth struggling with stress, anxiety, depression and mental illnesses," she said. "Research in Nova Scotia has found that eight per cent of Grade 7 students have had sexual intercourse. The proportion of students engaging in sexual activity increased to 21 per cent in Grade 9, over 30 per cent in Grade 10, over 50 per cent by Grade 12."

Having a health counsellor at the school is at the very least convenient, noted Dana Young, New Germany Rural High School's student council president.

"Every person in this room has struggles they're facing, struggles that nobody may even know about. We all have to face and deal with difficult things in our life," she told the audience.

"Everyone deals with those things in a different way but one thing that always helps is talking to someone and it's nice knowing someone's there when you need it."

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