

South Shore wait times slashed

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Mental health, addiction services take 4 weeks instead of 8 months

BRIDGEWATER — In a year, South Shore Health has slashed its wait time for mental health and addiction services to four weeks from as much as eight months.

And the director of community health services for the district says the wait time for children and youth is even lower, at between one and seven days.

"It's not about us, it's about the client," Todd Leader said of the changes the department instituted so that people can get help soon and more easily.

Wait times were at an all-time high of five to eight months for children and adults from August to October in 2012, Leader said.

He said staff were doing everything they could to try and cut those times, but the problem was centred in the system that was in place.

So they changed it.

"People who do clinical work, they wear the stress of wait time problems because they see the result of wait times that are longer than clients should or need to endure," Leader said.

He said counsellors, psychologists, social workers and nurses working in the department saw how clients deteriorated by the time they got to see them, and it frustrated them.

"By their nature, they're very empathetic people and they felt this," Leader said.

But it wasn't easy to implement their ideas for change, he said.

"One of the challenges in this type of system is it's like changing the tires on a moving bus. You don't get to stop, redesign and have a launch date. You're redesigning while the phone is ringing off the hook all day," which made this past year challenging, Leader said.

The first change was to implement a single intake system with one phone number for all addiction and mental health services and for clients of all ages.

Before, clients had to find and call different phone numbers based on whether their primary issue was mental health or addictions, and based on their age.

Now, an intake team handles all those calls and the four employees also book the client's appointment while they're on the line.

With the old system, one person answered the phone, passed on the client's information to intake services, which then handed it to a clinician, who would then assign a professional to take the case.

That specialist then called the client to book an appointment.

Leader says the streamlined procedure frees up so much time, counsellors can book another 10 to 20 appointments a month.

And with this one intake team knowing exactly what the demand is for certain types of services, Leader said the department is more responsive to clients' needs.

The department has also extended its hours to take clients as early as 8 a.m. as well as two evenings a week, and staff have cut back how much time they spend in meetings.

But Leader said “the most exciting thing we’ve done” from his perspective are the enhanced mental and sexual health and addiction services offered in every junior and senior high school in the district through staff who work exclusively out of those schools.

The health authority hired two full-time clinical therapists through the province's Mental Health Strategy to augment the work of four community health workers already in schools.

Because some young people are embarrassed or see their concern as sensitive, they may not seek help. Leader said offering confidential advice and support in the school removes any barriers kids may see as hindering their desire to get help.

The systemic changes mean all clients, regardless of their age or issue, receive help when they are motivated to ask for it, and Leader said that makes it more likely that treatment will work.

South Shore Health CEO Dr. Peter Vaughan praised the department's efforts. “In one year we’ve really changed access to those services. This shows you what you can do when you work and act as a system” he told a recent board of directors meeting.

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