



LIGHTHOUSENOW

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Wait times reduced by months for mental health, addictions help

by Stacey Colwell

Waiting times for mental health and addictions services on the South Shore have been cut dramatically over the past year, from five to eight months to about four weeks for adults and just one to seven days for children and youth.

"We've been obsessively committed to this," said director of community health services Todd Leader during a recent interview.

"General access to services has been right at the top of our list as a health authority."

Mr. Leader said the long waits to see counsellors, psychologists, social workers and nurses were taking a toll on patients.

"Health issues tend to exacerbate and get worse when they're unaddressed. If you have an infection and you don't deal with it, what happens? It can cause major problems. ... If someone is experiencing anxiety problems, early depressions or psychosis, the longer it goes unaddressed, the worse it can get for many people, so that causes significant disruption to their life and their well-being."

Among the changes South Shore Health implemented to cut wait times were expanding school-based services, reducing the time staff spent in meetings, extending open hours and booking evening appointments, and creating a new integrated intake system with one phone number to book an appointment for all addiction and mental health services.

Before the changes, clients had to be shuffled through various bureaucratic steps before ever seeing a health professional.

"It is very much a system approach," said CEO Dr. Peter Vaughan during an October 17 meeting.

"It's moving away from a historic sort of provider base, 'this is how I do things,' to a system-based approach."

He said the reaction of the health-care professionals providing the services has been mixed.

"The younger, newer ones are more open and receptive to that. The older, more entrenched styles are not necessarily seeing the value to them, but clearly the data shows the value to the clients."

Mr. Leader cautioned although the health authority has made great strides in reducing wait times, that could change in a heartbeat if demand increases.

"But for now, this is what we've achieved, and we're going to work on improving that even more or responding to demand as it changes. Hopefully we can manage to hold the line."

Mr. Leader said it's important to note that staff implemented the changes, and the results are a result of far more than just a new management initiative.

"You can't achieve this kind of change without having staff being part of leading the change, and many staff truly have done that. They're the stars."

Although a couple school-based staff positions were funded through the provincial mental health strategy, the changes to the wait times were accomplished without any additional cost to the district.

"This has not involved any increase in funding, just shifting the way we use staff and the way staff works."

The wait-time data does not include psychiatry, which anecdotal information suggests is over a month for most patients.

"That's a separate issue, and we're struggling right now with recruitment because we're short there, so we're still challenged around that issue."

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