

LIGHTHOUSE NOW

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Big gains for mental health in South Shore

by Michael Lee



MICHAEL LEE PHOTO

Todd Leader, director of community health for the Nova Scotia Health Authority.

Wait times for mental health services in the South Shore are among the best in the province.

The Department of Health and Wellness website ranks South Shore Regional Hospital second in the province for adult wait times and first for child and adolescent wait times at 56 days for 90 per cent of all patients.

But Todd Leader, director of community health for the Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA), said the actual waits are much shorter, having dropped significantly from several months to a matter of days or weeks.

Leader said wait times for adult clients have fallen from eight months to three to four weeks, and for adolescents in school, the stats have changed from five months to one to five days.

For children outside of school, wait times have decreased from five months to three weeks.

Services for anxiety and depression are the most common across all populations.

Leader said progress was made over two years, once services were redesigned to better support the client.

"So if you build a system that's based on that, then you start to put other things second to that."

Collaborations with other agencies including schools, police, the Second Story Women's Centre and Harbour House have helped in creating "some amazing products and services," said Leader.

School-based services, for example, have made supportive counselling available for those who may not need therapy but require help in dealing with day-to-day stress, test anxiety or a painful break-up.

"If we can provide them with supportive counselling and some skill-building in how to manage those things in life and how to feel better, then it potentially keeps them from progressing to needing therapy," said Leader.

Some administrative obstacles were eliminated as well. Leader said a single phone number is used for all mental health and addictions services, two areas which were integrated five years ago.

For example, rather than referring a client dealing with an addiction and mental health issue to two staff members, one person can handle both profiles.

This frees up time for staff and removes the need for extra appointments.

By revamping the system, Leader said it creates a more efficient system that doesn't bounce the client around from person-to-person.

"All of that can happen behind the scenes," he said. "It doesn't have to happen at the client's inconvenience."

When 10 years ago a new file would take a week or longer to start, Leader said 90 per cent of appointments are booked once a call is made.

Meanwhile, appointments are set to establish what a client wants through conversation, a shift from the excessive and lengthy assessments done in the past.

Last December saw 1,973 visits, of which roughly 900 were children and adolescents. Of those 900 visits, about 300 were conducted in school.

Of the 1,872 visits in November, 687 were for children and adolescents.

It is important to note that the number of visits will be higher than the number of unique individuals seeking appointments.

However, visitation remains high for an area servicing only two counties, Lunenburg and Queens, and as wait times continue to be a priority for Nova Scotians, so too will client-centred services, said Leader.

"They want the system to treat them in a very respectful way and design systems around what's best for them, not around what's best for the system."

But wait times hold clinical repercussions as well. Research shows the longer somebody waits for an appointment, the less likely they are to show up to that appointment and the less likely they are to follow the advice of their health care provider said Leader

It also increases the risk of a client's condition worsening to the point of an overdose or potential suicide.

"Wait times are not just a political issue about pleasing people so we don't have long wait times," said Leader. "They're really about the fact that that's what's best for the people we serve."

This view has become a mantra for Leader, who says staff ensure the client comes before everything else because "that's the commitment we made."

Leader said he hopes the NSHA will incorporate elements of what the South Shore team has implemented, but as the health authority restructures itself, he acknowledged it will take time.

"I'd love to give a ton of credit to the amazing team of people in this program that have been part of the South Shore Health team because they have really adopted this idea that it is our job to make the systems conform to what the clients need, not the other way around," said Leader.

"That's our mandate from government. That's our mandate from the public."

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