

GAPS IN SERVICES

Summary of the Youth Action Committee's 2017 Consultations

In the fall of 2017, the Youth Action Committee (YAC) of Children's Mental Health Ontario and The New Mentality held two youth consultations focused on gaps in child and youth mental health services: one in Thunder Bay in October, and one in Toronto in November.

Between these two consultations, the YAC heard from more than 100 youth from communities across the province. We heard some stories about where the mental health system supported them. But we also heard about the ways in which the system let them down and the barriers they faced. Most importantly, we heard their ideas about how to improve the system, so that it can offer better and more consistent support.

Emerging Issues

Access to Services in Northern, Rural, and Remote Communities

Youth expressed the challenges they experienced accessing mental health services in Northern Ontario, rural communities, and other remote areas throughout the province. Not only are there very long wait times for services in these areas (sometimes months or years!), but in many of these communities, there is an absence of appropriate mental health services at all. In such cases, youth are expected to travel to another community when they need access treatment. The added burden of doing so includes transportation time and costs, having to leave their home and family, and missing school.

Indigenous Youth and Indigenous Communities

In Toronto and Thunder Bay, we heard about the unique challenges faced by Indigenous youth and Indigenous communities. There aren't any culturally appropriate services for Indigenous youth in many parts of the province, and there aren't enough opportunities to work with Elders and First Nations mentors and counsellors. For Indigenous youth living on reserve, there is often very limited access to services within their communities—or even close to their communities. And the various challenges experienced in these communities (including socioeconomic barriers and a lack of other social and health services) make their need for mental health services even greater.

The Needs of Groups Facing Heightened Risk

The YAC heard from many young people who face a range of identity-, language-, culture-, and race-based barriers to receiving mental health treatment. Often, services aren't designed to meet a diverse set of needs, and staff do not necessarily possess the experiences, knowledge, or training to ensure they can provide appropriate care to these youth. For example, there are limited French services in most parts of the province, clinicians in a given agency or community often do not reflect the diversity of youth they are serving, and youth feel that often counsellors and therapists need more training to help ensure their services are LGBTQ+ friendly.

Family and Peer Support and Mental Health Education

A re-occurring theme was how valuable peer and family support was to youth, and how challenging their experiences were when they didn't have that support. Organized peer support groups within agencies can be incredibly valuable. And even just having better understanding of mental health and mental illness can help friends and family be more supportive.

A standardized mental health education program entrenched in the school curriculum will offer students a better appreciation of how they can cope, manage, and understand mental health early on in life. Additionally, through more education for teachers, school staff, and parents—including in the places parents work—we can help adults improve their skills in relating to and supporting young people.

Transitional-Aged Youth

Many youth expressed frustration with being turned away from services because of their age, and being expected to find their own support once they turn 18. At this age, youth acknowledge they aren't children, but also don't feel like adults. For many youth, they don't have any transition supports, and it is easy to get lost between services and organizations. Importantly, it is not only at age 18 that youth experience this problem—the lack of appropriate services and supports are consistently a challenge for youth as they get older and emerge into adulthood.

Funding

Of course, a key barrier to providing youth with the services they need continues to be funding. Youth are simply having a hard time accessing a mental health service and staff at mental health agencies that are already stretched too thin. Many if not all of these problems that contribute to our broken system won't be resolved without more funding.

What's Happening in 2018

Youth in Thunder Bay and Toronto provided tons of ideas for things that can be done to address the challenges highlighted here. And the YAC in 2018 will explore these ideas further, and will decide what key issues to focus on.

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