

The Sarnia-Lambton Community Forum Report

The State of Children and Youth Mental Health Services

This forum was held October 1, 2010 at Lambton College. Well over a hundred participants from community social service agencies, health, education, and law enforcement sectors as well as elected municipal and provincial officials attended the forum.

Purpose: To provide a forum for bringing together interested stakeholders to discuss the state of child and youth mental health services.

Objectives:

- To understand the service-related problems that children and youth with mental health issues in Sarnia-Lambton face.
- To identify the challenges service providers are facing in Sarnia-Lambton.
- To increase public awareness of the state of child and youth mental health issues in Sarnia-Lambton
- To identify possible solutions & strategies to ensure adequate & sustainable funding for local facilities and professional staff that meet the diverse mental health needs of the area's children & youth (from residential to specialized services)

Forum format:

Dr. Tony Hanlon, President, Lambton College and Judith Morris, Vice President Academic, Lambton College acted as lead facilitators for the forum. They overviewed the purpose and objectives of the forum, reviewed the format, and facilitated the summary discussion of the roundtable exercise.

During the first half of the forum presentations were made by representatives from the Ministry of Child and Youth Services, St. Clair Child and Youth Services, Family Counselling Centre-STARRting Point, Children's Mental Health Advocacy Committee of Lambton, Rebound, as well as Justice Deborah Austin, and Suzzane Sexton, a social worker & former youth client of local services.

The second half of the forum consisted of a roundtable exercise where 3 questions were addressed by the participants. The questions were:

- 1) What issues are children and youth with mental health concerns facing in Sarnia Lambton?

- 2) What challenges are service providers facing in regard to meeting children and youth mental health needs in this community?
- 3) What possible solutions and strategies would you recommend to ensure sustainable quality of service for Children and youth in Sarnia- Lambton?

There were 14 roundtables with approximately 8 participants at each table. The roundtable exercise facilitation was done by faculty from the Social Service Worker and Child and Youth Worker programs, as well as some community agency representatives. Senior students from those programs acted as recorders at each roundtable.

The forum concluded with reports from each table and then a summary of the recommendations which was presented by the lead facilitators. Lambton College committed to writing a report for submission to the Minister, Child and Youth Services and distribution to the forum participants. The College also offered to provide a meeting space for a new committee of social service agencies and advocacy representatives that is being formed to look at collaborative ways of addressing the issues and turning the forum recommendations into actions.

Summary of the Issues

- Regardless of who has mental health issues, the entire family is impacted and the entire family needs assistance managing the issues
- Parents of children with mental health issues are struggling to cope with their own issues, and often have diminished capacity to parent
- Individuals who exhibit the most severe mental health issues are given priority for treatment however the individuals with less severe illness are often not treated e.g. schizophrenia versus depression
- It appears that there are higher incidences of children and youth with mental health issues in families who live in poverty
- Referral data does not reflect the magnitude of the problem; lengthy waitlists deter agency staff from referring and/or families self referring.
- Schools do not have the capacity to address mental health issues within the classroom and need assistance in a timely manner
- Education and mental health services do not have adequate psychotherapy assessment resources

- Street drugs and related criminal behavior exacerbate mental health issues
- Mental health appears not to be a government funding priority
- Government funding does not reflect the mental health needs of the community because it is based on population rather than actual needs
- Limited mental health services in rural Lambton County
- Lack of transportation for people living in rural areas is a barrier to accessing services in Sarnia

Summary of Challenges

- Lack of funding causes lack of resources
- Individuals with mental health issues are not receiving service due to limited resources
- Excessive demand on limited resources discourages collaboration among agencies
- Long waiting lists exist for specialized services
- Shortage of psychiatric services within Lambton County
- Compassion fatigue is being experienced by mental health services staff who are challenged by increasing demands and funding shortfalls
- Mental health services staff face an ethical challenge in serving only those most in need
- Prevention and early intervention services have been eroded
- Agencies' "territorial" issues; better collaboration required

Summary of the Recommendations

1) Community Planning and Services

- Form a committee with representation from across the local social services system to develop and implement a comprehensive children and youth mental

health services plan for Lambton County that includes service gap analysis and remedial actions

- Develop & implement a local initiative to encourage more agency collaboration.
- Advocate continuously and assertively at the municipal level and provincial level.
- Provide equal access locally to residential services for both boys and girls.
- Maintain the current local residential space locally, for female children and youth suffering from mental health problems
- Examine the Bridges Out of Poverty and the Circles Programs when looking at possible solutions to children and mental health issues
- Create a dedicated space for children and adolescents suffering from severe mental health problems at Bluewater Health Hospital that is separate from an adult area
- Increase support services for parents of children & youth with mental health issues
- Create a rapid, mobile response service for children/families in crisis

2) Early Intervention & Education

- Provide early screening of children for mental health issues
- Educate both staff & children in schools as to the signs of mental health issues through collaboration among agencies and school boards.
- Develop and implement a plan to use web social marketing tools to reach children, youth and their parents regarding suicide prevention and other mental health programs and services.
- Provide public education on mental health to Lambton County and local First Nations communities.
- Develop and implement Suicide Prevention Education Program for parents, teachers and youth.
- Enhance mental health education into the local police departments and provide support to officers in the field.

- Seek support from local media to offer regular stories on children's and youth mental health issues and services
- Have information booths at major community events
- Continue a Community Mental Health Awareness Day

3) Funding

- Increase funding for programs serving children & youth with mental health issues.
- Provide inflationary increases to children's and youth mental health programs
- Provide more funding for children and youth psychological services
- Provide funding for programs to assist with grief and loss as a result of having a family member in Palliative Care
- Fund a Detox Centre & related addiction prevention and treatment services
- Develop a MCYS funding mechanism that recognizes economy of scale issues; funding cannot focus on population alone as communities in less densely populated areas still have high needs.
- Provide funding for assessment services as well as intervention programs; low referral rates are **not** an indicator of need, rather an indicator of frustration and lack of service.
- Develop a business case through a collaborative effort of local service agencies to demonstrate the need to government for more funding.
- Send a report on the forum proceedings to the appropriate provincial government ministry and local government officials indicating an immediate need to increase funding for programs serving children & youth with mental health issues especially in early prevention.

4) Administrative Requirements

- Streamline administrative requirements; reduce unnecessary and/or redundant “paperwork”.
- Review the regional agency meetings format to improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- Provide funding for up-to-date information technology to facilitate more efficient agency service delivery.

Next Steps

1. Send the report on forum proceedings to Minister, Children and Youth Services, M.P.P.’s Maria Van Bommel and Bob Bailey, Warden Burns, Mayor Bradley and all forum participants.
2. Form a children and youth mental health services planning council or steering committee with a mandate to:
 - i) Create and maintain collaborative planning and delivery of child and youth mental health services.
 - ii) Review, prioritize and act on the forum recommendations
 - iii) Advocate at the municipal and provincial level for multi year funding that ensures effective & sustainable services in Sarnia –Lambton
 - iv) Involve youth in developing solutions
 - v) Organize annual forums on the state of children and youth mental health services
 - vi) Work with school boards and parents to address the youth suicide issue
3. Lambton College will invite interested agencies/advocacy groups and provide space for the inaugural meeting of a children and youth mental health services planning council or steering committee. Leadership must come from the social services sector.