

BEREAVED MOM ADVOCATES FOR MENTAL HEALTH, ADDICTIONS SUPPORT

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Since losing her son to an accidental opioid overdose, Betty-Lou Kristy has dedicated her life to helping fill gaps in the mental health and addictions systems.

As the coronavirus pandemic persists, her focus and determination hasn't wavered. The Georgetown woman is currently part of a provincial COVID-19 table geared to mental health and addictions, where she's sharing her insights as a bereaved mother who's been in recovery for almost two decades from alcohol, multiple drug addictions, trauma and mental health issues.

"I was very happy to be invited to that table because I'm the only person there that comes from the perspective of lived experience," said Kristy, who's also the director of the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support, which works locally to integrate peer support services in the mental health and substance use/addictions system.

The provincial table is cognizant of how the pandemic is going to impact people's mental health in general, she noted — even those who perhaps didn't struggle in this department before.

"The stressors of this (pandemic) alone are going to be phenomenal the longer it goes on, particularly with so many people out of work right now," she said. "We're just going to see a massive escalation in mental health issues."

For those like Kristy who have a history of mental health and addictions, she said there's even more urgency as people continue to be isolated at home.

"While I'm experienced enough to keep myself in



Betty-Lou Kristy photo Georgetown's Betty-Lou Kristy giving an opening speech recently for Minister of Health Christine Elliott.

recovery during this and not relapse, there will be many who aren't because being isolated is one of the worst things for them," she said. "Their mental health could unravel. How many people will run to self-medicating or relapse in their addiction due to the stress of all this?"

Kristy also expressed concern for individuals coping with trauma or grief — a path she's familiar with since losing her son Pete in 2001 to an accidental opioid overdose at the age of 25.

"Losing your job, losing your freedom, losing your security could retrigger a lot of trauma in people and grief/loss responses, and if they're not aware of that, they might wonder what's happening to them," she said.

This isn't Kristy's first time providing input at the provincial level on the topics of mental health and addictions. Most recently, she consulted on the Ontario government's document entitled Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System.

On the ground locally, Kristy and the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support — which recently amal-

gamated with TEACH (Teach, Empower, Advocate for Community Health), housed at Support & Housing-Halton — are working to serve clients from afar during the pandemic with peer support via phone calls, texts and virtual groups.

"We didn't shut down any services. We've turned everything virtual," she explained. "We're dealing directly with the most vulnerable who are struggling with mental health and addictions."

The following are some of the services available for local residents seeking mental health and addictions support during the pandemic and beyond:

- Crisis Outreach and Support Team (COAST): 1-877-825-9011
- Distress Centre Halton: 905-877-1211
- Centre for Innovation in Peer Support (TEACH), noncrisis peer support warm line: 289-644-1480 (staffed Monday to Friday, noon to 5 p.m.)
- One-Link — a single point of access for referrals to 10 addiction and mental health service providers funded by the Mississauga Halton Local Health Integration Network: 1-844-216-7411, www.one-link.ca.

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