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Mental illness has been defined as the orphan of health care.

Yet, it is underfunded and overwhelming for patients and practitioners, York Region's front-line mental health administrators and physicians agree.

According to 2011 census data, York Region had the fastest growing population of any region in Ontario, at 15.7 per cent, which means demand for mental health supports and services in the area will continue to increase.

Within a decade, seniors, who have a higher risk of dementia, will outnumber teenagers.

As more people seek treatment, mental health infrastructure remains relatively static.

Annually, York Support Services Network provides case management to about 1,000 people.

Another 12,000 to 14,000 call the organization's crisis line each year.

Demand for mental health services at our three hospitals grows exponentially.

In 2011, for example, Southlake Regional Health Centre mental health-related visits rose by 19 per cent for children and adolescents and 5 per cent for adults.

The next year, Southlake's mental health team treated 118,400 patients, including more than 4,000 people arriving at the emergency department in need of assistance and 96,800 on an out-patient basis.

The Canadian Mental Health Association York Regional Branch, working with just less than \$9.5 million last year, served 1,752 individuals and more than 15,652 were reached through its health promotion and education programs.

The needs are growing and changing in our communities, CEO Rebecca Shields said.

There is an increasing recognition that there is no health without mental health, she said.

There is significant evidence mental illness is bereft of proper health parentage.

Nationally, mental health care receives a minuscule percentage of federal health dollars.

Of the association's 2012-13 revenues, \$8.5 million was provided by the Central Local Health Integration Network and Ontario Health and Long-Term Care Ministry.

The network, serving York and surrounding regions, allocated \$72 million for outpatient mental health and addictions last year — about 4 per cent of its total health allotment.

Challenges abound, Ms Shields said.

A key impediment lies within



Canadian Mental Health Association York Region CEO Rebecca Shields said needs grow and change with the region's demographic makeup.

OFTEN OVERLOOKED

STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

individuals who have mental disorders.

"A lot of people are suffering, but, because of stigma, they don't seek help," she said.

If they do reach out, there are access issues and waiting lists, sometimes as long as nine to 12 months for a case worker to start a file.

York Region's rural areas are under served, she said, and the burgeoning newcomer population will require increasing mental health supports.

One of the identified challenges experienced in Central LHIN is the gaps that exist in the mental health and addictions system and access to care, CEO Kim Baker said.

Other challenges include the availability of supportive housing, integration between the various sectors and support for primary care practitioners to treat patients struggling with mental illness or substance abuse issues.

"We are working with our 21 mental health and addiction agencies to address these challenges collaboratively, to harness best practices and innovation to improve care and to improve access to care with new funding when we can, she said.

The top three most common mental health issues at Southlake are people suicidal with depression, schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders and anxiety, mental health vice-president Annette Jones said.

In a region with more than 1.2 million people, hospitals are bracing for increased challenges. Resources for children and adolescent mental health care are scarce, said Ms Jones, who is also responsible for maternal child, medicine and surgery as chief nursing executive.

The health facility has only 24 adult mental health inpatient beds

and the eating disorder program has two. She is hopeful the Central LHIN will soon fund an additional 12 beds.

The hospital admits about 1,000 patients each year.

Hospitals in York Region need to develop partnerships and pool resources with other health facilities, associations and organizations.

Markham Stouffville Hospital's 33 adult mental health patient beds are perpetually occupied, chief of psychiatry Dr. Rustom Sethna said.

"We battle every day to ensure we can adequately service the mental health needs of patients," he said. "We do our best with limited resources."

Mental health care professionals universally are frustrated with the bleak fiscal climate and trickle of budgetary dollars, he said.

The Long & Winding Road

A discussion about mental illness in York Region

A 6-part series

PART I: Parents share heart-wrenching story of a son battling mental illness.

TODAY: The invisible disease. First-person accounts of how it all started.

PART III: Our hospitals brace for increased challenges

PART IV: A discussion about when the mentally ill are criminally responsible

PART V: How York Regional Police are dealing with increased challenges

PART VI: Medical experts weigh in on 'the orphan of health care.'