

Adapting for COVID-19: Delivering Mental Health Services to the Doorstep

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PEMBROKE - For the most vulnerable in our community who are living with mental health and addiction issues, the COVID-19 pandemic is further escalating needs around safe housing, social isolation and food security.

Fortunately, Mental Health Services of Renfrew County (MHSRC) — an essential service within the local healthcare system — is here to help. Administered by the Pembroke Regional Hospital, it offers a broad range of publicly available health services supporting wellness and recovery for Renfrew County residents ages 16 years and older, who are living with mental illness and addictions.

According to MHSRC Clinical Manager Liz Michaud, “The COVID-19 outbreak has dramatically reduced face-to-face access to services for so many in our community who were already at risk. To encourage physical distancing, social programs are shut down and transportation services have stopped.”

As a result, the needs of current clients are trending upwards, and increasingly clients who had been coping independently are reaching out for support once again. “While it’s great to reconnect with those we haven’t heard from for a while, it’s a sign that many are relapsing as a result of the pandemic,” said Recreational Therapist Susan Gagnon-Michaud.

For most, daily life has changed dramatically. Some have had to move into different living arrangements so they’re better protected from COVID-19 transmission. With restaurants and coffee shops shut down, the simple task of grabbing a bite to eat has also become a challenge. It’s harder to get out to shop for groceries, and many of the support networks they’ve come to rely on such as local food banks are shut down or overwhelmed.

“Many of our clients are having to rely on others or go without. It’s a real struggle,” said Ms. Michaud. “They’re having to make do with very little.”

Traditional Easter Dinner

In recent years, the tradition of sitting down to a homemade Easter dinner has brought some comfort to clients of the Recovery Outreach Program (ROP). This joint initiative is

coordinated each spring by outreach and case workers of the various MHSRC peer support and mental wellness programs.

Since ensuring access to nutritious home-cooked meals is integral to their community-based outreach work, the MHSRC staff felt it was crucial to keep this tradition alive — especially during the pandemic.

While physical distancing prevented everyone from gathering around the same table, on April 8th, MHSRC staff prepared and delivered warm meals to over 80 clients in their homes. Recipients ranged from young adults to seniors, many living alone, some in supportive independent living.

“Nutritious food is so essential. We had the supplies on hand, so the staff pitched in to prepare and deliver the meals,” said Ms. Michaud. Deliveries were made to clients in Pembroke and surrounding communities.

“And even though we had to leave many of the meals on the doorstep, it gave us a chance to check in from a distance,” added Ms. Gagnon-Michaud.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in mid-March, members of the ROP teams in Pembroke, Renfrew and Arnprior have also been preparing and delivering frozen meals to clients who are without access to any other community services. The expectation is that the need for this service will only increase the longer the pandemic continues.

Nutritious take-out lunches are also provided by The Grind, a vital MHSRC community partner, which has increased capacity to feed the hungry since the start of the pandemic. On April 11th, almost 100 people dropped into The Grind to pick up a home-cooked turkey dinner.

“These people are our homeless and marginalized citizens,” said longtime volunteer Dave Studham. “If we aren’t here to feed them, they would simply go hungry, and their immune systems weaken.”

Education and Recreation Packages

In addition to the various meal programs, the Recovery Outreach Program’s outreach and case workers are connecting with their clients on a daily basis. In order to keep our staff, clients and the community safe, these wellness checks are conducted via phone.

As well, the staff are delivering education and recreation packages directly to the clients’ doorsteps. Each education kit provides current information and resources relevant to

the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to keep everyone well informed and increase awareness of local support networks.

The customized recreation packages include various coping tools such as craft supplies, puzzles, games, journaling materials and mindfulness exercises to help build resilience and reduce anxiety.

“We’re trying hard to do the best by our clients,” said Ms. Michaud. “Wellness is within reach.”

Anyone seeking mental health and addictions support and information is asked to call Mental Health Services of Renfrew County or the Crisis Line, or visit their websites:

- 1-800-991-7711, extension 8006 or local (613) 732-8770, extension 8006
- Crisis Line: 1-866-966-0991
- www.Crisisline.ca
- www.pembrokeregionalhospital.ca

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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