

Innovations in CYMH: HandsTheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca

Background

HandsTheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca supports families with a child or youth who have mental health concerns, autism and developmental disabilities. They offer specialized services for families throughout Northern Ontario and is the lead CYMH agency for the Districts of Muskoka, Nipissing, and Parry Sound.

Developing an After-Hours Crisis Line

After reviewing data from local hospitals and the Northeast LHIN, Hands observed that the majority of evening visits to the Emergency Department (ED) for mental health concerns among children and youth were made by youth. The data further demonstrated that most visits happened before 9 pm, with teens presenting with low urgency scores (based on the hospital's assessment tools). To improve system efficiency, and their relationships with the hospitals, Hands realized that awareness of services for youth and additional crisis services in the community were required to reduce the strain on the EDs.

Hands has long offered a day-time crisis response but did not offer evening crisis response programs. In collaboration with a community partner, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions, Hands worked with Ontario 211 to develop an innovative crisis line. Hands signed a formal contract with Ontario 211, and purchased a unique 1-844 crisis phone number - the [Mental Health Crisis Line](#) for children, youth, families and service providers.

Today, children, youth and families looking to access mental health supports can call the 1-800 number 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They are promptly connected to trained staff, who speak numerous languages, and help the caller access the right community supports.

- If the call is made between 8:30am-4:30pm the caller is linked with a Crisis Worker at their closest CYMH provider, who will provide same- day support.
- If the call is made between 4:30pm-9:00pm, the caller is connected to a Hands Crisis worker who can provide help over the phone, or meet in person (in North Bay or Muskoka).
- If the call is made after 9:00pm or on weekends, clients are asked if they would be okay if they could speak with a Crisis Worker the following day (and if so, an appointment is made). If the caller needs help right away, they are directed to the closest ED.

Since the crisis line was introduced, Hands has hired additional crisis workers (Child and Family Therapists) who have been able to respond to an increase in daytime calls, due to youth promotion, and increased availability until 9pm to provide crisis supports. Hands also collaborated with youth to design and share promotional materials.

Benefits and Lessons Learned

Since the Mental Health Crisis Line was implemented, hospitals are reporting (with LHIN data confirming), that while still receiving the same number of ER visits by children and youth for mental health concerns, the urgency scores have shifted, and they are seeing fewer, non-urgent cases in the ER – especially in the 4:30pm-9:00pm time period. Across the rest of the province, ER visits have increased. Overall, hospitals have been very appreciative of this work as Hands has been able to see youth in the community, connect them to community partners and mitigate risks.

Furthermore, Hospitals, mental health and addiction nurses, school boards and mental health agencies have now created MOU's in Hands' Service Area to further support the pathway to and from crisis in each locality, increasing collaboration and clarity. This multi-sector collaboration has also helped redirect crises from the ED to community, honoring the request of families to not have to go to a hospital for mental health needs.