Youth perspectives on child and youth mental health services in Ontario

May 2016
Context

The Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services’ (MCYS) action plan, Moving on Mental Health, aims to ensure children, youth and families have access to mental health services in their communities, where and when they need them most. As part of this plan, MCYS identified thirty-three geographic service areas across the province. Within each of these service areas, lead agencies are responsible for working with core service providers as well as cross-sectoral partners to develop a Community Mental Health Plan and a Core Services Delivery Plan, both aimed at identifying key priorities and activities to strengthen local mental health service delivery. In doing so, each lead agency is required to engage youth and families in the development of these plans – putting children, youth and families at the centre of meaningful change in Ontario’s mental health system.

For the past two years, the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) has provided consultation support to ensure youth voice is included and reflected in the development of these plans through an entirely youth-led process. Youth advisors from the Centre partnered with local youth with support from lead agencies and Centre staff (and in some cases, core service provider agencies). The goal for this work was to help lead agencies gather important information from youth to help inform lead agency local plans, and to support service areas with developing and cultivating relationships that allow for sustained, meaningful youth engagement over time. Below is an overview of who was consulted, where, how and their reflection on the experience.
What we heard

Through surveys and focus groups, the Centre gathered information on youth perceptions of access to mental health services, youth experience with services and youth engagement activities. Here’s what we heard.

What is it like for youth seeking help?

- **Awareness** of local mental health services varies by region and groups.
- **Preferences** for access points varies across regions and groups.
- Youth primarily find out about mental health services when they need them. This happens through school personnel, friends, family and trusted community members as these supports are easily accessible given where youth find themselves.
- Youth who are already connected to child and youth mental health supports are generally more aware of available services.

What gets in the way of youth getting help?

- **Personal barriers**: Youth described circumstances in which their own thoughts and feelings might prevent them from reaching out for help (e.g. not realizing help is needed, feeling the issue should be handled alone, shyness/embarrassment, fear that no one will understand, etc.).
- **Perceived stigma or judgment from others**: Youth said that in many cases, it seems that others don’t understand the signs and symptoms of mental illness or even mental health in general—this can lead to stigma.
- **Lack of knowledge of available services**: Many youths aren’t aware of which services are available or what to expect of them (e.g. how to access them, how they work, what will happen after receiving service).
- **Lack of fit with service**: Youth found that many services were too crisis-oriented, the wrong length of time or required too much paperwork. Youth feel it’s important to make room for more personalized mental health care, tailored to each individual’s needs (including language and cultural preferences).
- **Lack of fit with service providers**: Youth shared that for them, the ability to develop a relationship with a service provider is an important predictor of success in mental health care. Similarly, youth described interruptions to one’s relationship with a service provider (e.g. being switched to a different counsellor) as particularly challenging.
- **Age limitations**: Youth described challenging scenarios where they were turned away from services for being too old or too young. Similarly, youth felt challenged by services requiring parental consent, as in many cases, youth may avoid telling their parent, and in turn, avoid getting help.
- **Long wait lists** (and financial restrictions preventing youth from seeing a private therapist to avoid waiting): Youth said that when they were able to access help, they often didn’t need it anymore or it was too late.

164 youth said they waited for mental health services:

- Less than a week: 22%
- One week to a month: 31%
- Between one month to 6 months: 21%
- Between six months and a year: 11%
- More than one year: 5%
- More than two years: 10%
Youth said that they feel as though their concerns are invalid or not important when they are put on a waiting list.

- **Hours of operation**: Youth acknowledged that many services are only open during limited, inflexible hours that often conflict with school and/or work.

- **Location of services and lack of transportation** (particularly in rural locations): Depending on location, there may not be any mental health services nearby and many youths don’t have the means to get where they need to go for help. In many cases, service providers have to go to youth or someone needs to help youth get to services.

- **Lack of trust in the system due to negative past experiences**: Youth acknowledged that a single negative experience with a service or service provider can be enough to deter them from returning to services and seeking out additional services in the future. Youth want to feel trusting and hopeful about seeking help – that it will be worth it to reach out – but many have had discouraging experiences in this respect.

### Priorities for improving mental health services

The following is a list of opportunities youth felt would improve how they experience mental health services:

- **Build mental health awareness in the community**: Continue the conversation about mental health with youth and the adults who support them. Youth acknowledged that this could help address ongoing stigma in the community. Many of youth’s negative experiences with family members, friends and adults in different roles stem from a lack of awareness about mental health and how to properly work with youth who have a mental illness.

- **Clearly identify and advertise available mental health service**: Use language that youth can relate to and understand easily. Ensure that individuals who interact frequently with youth are knowledgeable about mental health and local supports available.

- **Invest in the relationship between youth and service providers**: Youth want a say in the service provider they are matched with as well as the choice to request a new service provider (without penalty) if they feel it’s not a good fit.

- **Invest in peer support and group-based programming**: Youth across the province were universally in favour of joining with other youth to establish regular ways of connecting for both giving and receiving support. Youth are eager to build a community of support, pointing to the importance of connecting with people their own age with similar experience.

- **Make room for more personalized mental health care**: Many youths expressed an interest in accessing mental health services that are inclusive of their culture (e.g. First Nations and Métis youth said they would like to have smudges and sweat lodges as part of service provision).

- **Improve service settings and safe youth-friendly spaces**: Youth are eager to have more safe spaces where young people could come together and connect while also accessing support from service providers. Many communities expressed interest in a local youth centre, as well as a place for students to go while at school to receive peer support and also to just relax. They also wanted the creation of an inviting, comfortable and modern space as opposed to clinical and office-like space.
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- **Provide more in-school support**: Position more mental health service providers in schools (and increase their visibility). Find ways to formally integrate conversations about mental health in schools (so all students have basic knowledge to help them deal with their own issues and guide others), and start the conversation with students at a younger age.

- **Expand access to services**: Expand access to services so youth can get help when and where they need it (e.g. satellite locations, extended hours, mobile supports, other modalities of service such as online, phone-based supports and text-based crisis lines). If wait lists are unavoidable, have bridging programs that provide support to youth who are waiting.

### Moving forward

Youth suggested the following ways that lead agencies could get more input:

- Youth expressed interest in **future consultations and surveys**. A number of youth also expressed interest in being engaged on a youth advisory committee that could advise on local mental health services. Youth identified that the most effective ways to reach youth are in school and online (e.g. via social media).

- While youth appreciated being consulted, they **want to take action**. It’s important for youth to see their impact as part of the bigger picture of change – to feel they are a part of making things happen.

- An overwhelming majority of youth expressed an interest in being engaged in **peer support programming** so that young people could support others of a similar age. Youth also spoke positively about their experiences being engaged in groups like the New Mentality and other youth-led groups. Finally, a number of youth expressed interest in being **engaged in efforts to build community mental health awareness**.

- Youth want to be engaged in **mental health system planning**. Youth across the province emphasized that meaningful engagement really depends on the youth engaged and what they want to do. This highlighted the importance of asking individual youth how they want to be engaged, listening to youth’s suggestions and empowering youth to take initiative.

### Youth perception on consultations

We asked youth what they thought about being consulted on local mental health services:

- Youth acknowledged the value of sharing with other youth, experiencing a sense of community and the powerful reminder that they are not alone. (e.g. “I made friends!”, “I felt I could relate to everyone in some way.”)

**Youth appreciated the chance to speak and be heard.**

“I liked getting to share my prior experiences and how they may have been improved.”
Youth described the consultation environment as relaxed, friendly, laid-back, open, honest, accepting, non-judgmental, understanding, respectful and comfortable. (e.g. “Being able to talk about my thoughts, feelings and have people understand.” “I liked that I was able to voice my opinion without being judged.”)

Youth engagement support: How we can help

While the implementation of *Moving on Mental Health* continues across the province, opportunities for meaningful youth engagement are just beginning. The Centre is committed to working with lead agencies and service areas in enhancing youth engagement processes using an implementation science approach to ensure meaningful youth engagement is adopted and sustained for the long-term.

The following is a list of opportunities for engaging youth as well as some key resources.

- Dare to Dream program
- Youth engagement toolkit
- Consultation support
- Focus group interviews mini-kit

For more information on youth engagement or any of the Centre’s programs, please contact us at [centre@cheo.on.ca](mailto:centre@cheo.on.ca) or by phone at 613-737-2297.

About the Centre: *The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) is a provincial organization that works with child and youth mental health agencies to strengthen services and build an effective and accessible system of care.*