

Atlantic Wellness Community Centre faces uncertain future

Government says it is willing to meet with organization

ERIC LEWIS
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

The Atlantic Wellness Community Centre's future may not be as bleak as originally thought.

The Riverview-based organization that provides free mental health counselling and therapy to youth in Metro Moncton is facing an uncertain future because it's been unable to secure sustainable funding since opening three years ago.

AWCC cut its hours almost in half at the beginning of 2015, and executive director Lesley Smyth said she's not sure how long they will be able to stay afloat.

However, the provincial Department of Health told the Times & Transcript on Wednesday that it is willing to meet with the organization.

"Government wants to ensure mental health services are accessible to all New Brunswickers," spokesperson Sarah Bustard said in an email. "The Department of Health is open to meeting with the Atlantic Wellness Community Centre."

This was welcome news to Smyth, who said AWCC will entertain any opportunity to meet with government officials.

"We're definitely willing to meet and hopefully generate at least some funding," she said Wednesday.

Clients of various government-run services, from hospitals and mental health clinics to schools, are routinely referred to AWCC, but the organization has never received government funding. They rely solely on whatever donations and grants they can scrape up.

"Guidance counsellors refer to us very frequently; the public mental health and addictions refers some of their clients to us when their wait list is so long and it's taking a while to get in there. — The Moncton Hospital psychiatrists



Danielle Whalen and Lesley Smyth of the Atlantic Wellness Community Centre, in Riverview.

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and doctors are referring to our centre," Smyth said. "So we're definitely being used and accessed by other government agencies ... but we're not seeing any of the funding coming through at all."

Smyth said she met with David Alward when he was premier and presented to various ministers to request financial assistance, but it didn't yield any results.

AWCC opened on Coverdale Road in 2012 with the goal of providing free professional counselling to youth ages 12 to 21 who struggle with mental illness and

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Smyth and Danielle Wheaton, both certified counsellors, have seen more than 500 clients — plus many clients' family members — since opening. Many of those clients have returned to the centre over the years for additional

one-on-one counselling.

Kathy LeBlanc, mentor for guidance counsellors for the Anglophone East School District, said there is a tremendous need for the services AWCC provide.

"We are huge supporters of the Atlantic Wellness Community Centre," she said. "Most of the students that they see would come from our schools."

LeBlanc said school guidance counsellors do all that they can for youth facing issues like depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, but there are few resources available outside of school hours. Public mental health clinics have lengthy wait times, she said, and private mental health services can come at a cost of \$80 to \$150 an hour.

"These two women (at AWCC) have

done an extraordinary job of seeing students quickly and dealing with some really tough issues," she said, adding that feedback from students and their families has been positive.

Smyth said it's crucial that youth issues be dealt with quickly.

"When you're a youth or an adolescent, you act in the moment, and it's all about the present. The wait time can't be that long for a youth; it needs to be a bit more immediate."

Christa Baldwin, executive director of the Canadian Mental Health Association in New Brunswick, said mental health support agencies like AWCC often struggle financially.

"It is very unfortunate that the Atlantic Wellness Community Centre in Moncton is the most recent mental

health support agency to experience this growing concern and now has less staffing to meet the growing needs for mental wellness," she said.

While there is a positive shift happening within societal views on mental illness, "we are not where we should be."

"As a society, we need to see mental illness the same as any other illness, for example like cancer," she said. "As our communities begin to understand and understand mental illness more, there is also an obligation to make sure more support services are in place when people need them."

AWCC's operating budget is about \$110,000 a year with two full-time salaries, plus rent and other operational costs.

In an effort to trim costs, Wheaton has dropped her hours at AWCC to one day per week, while Smyth juggles therapy hours and her duties as executive director. AWCC has also stopped taking new referrals, placing them on a wait list instead.

"I feel like there is going to be quite a ripple effect here, in that the organizations that refer to us are going to have to go elsewhere for that immediate accessibility," Smyth said.

She is considering a future where AWCC may be forced to close its doors, but said she is trying to remain optimistic.

In November, the New Brunswick Health Council released its annual State of the Child report, which recommended that government and childcare agencies should focus on battling obesity in young people; reducing smoking; reducing the high rate of injuries and improving mental health services. The report said that New Brunswick far outpaces the rest of the country in hospitalizing kids with mental diseases and disorders.

A fundraiser is being held at Riverview High School Thursday from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. Organized by the Grade 11 yoga class, the annual Raising the Royal Roof fundraiser will raise money for AWCC and Youth Impact Jeuneuses. Admission is \$5 and some activities will cost \$1.