

New program for mentally ill teens will help them with transition to adulthood

BY PAULINE TAM, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 26, 2011

OTTAWA — A new test program is being launched to better connect mentally ill young people, who are woefully underserved, with the right health and social services as they enter adulthood.

The program targets young people between the ages of 16 to 24, who are at high risk of abandoning psychiatric care because mental-health services are so poorly connected that many simply fall through the cracks as they make the transition to adulthood.

A Yale University study has estimated that more than half of all teens and young adults with mental-health problems abandon treatment as they come of age, even though they may still need it.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood, or high school to university, can be tricky for any teenager, but for the one in five young people with diagnoses of mental disorders the passage can be particularly fraught. Keeping a psychiatric disorder under control at a time when young adults are exploring their sexuality, learning to handle drugs and alcohol, and negotiating their new-found independence can be distressing.

In focus groups, teens have told eastern Ontario's providers of mental-health services there appeared to be no place for them in the health system once they turned 16.

"They talked about an apparent absence of any plan for them on their 16th birthday. They felt like when they turned 16, they were put in a wheelchair and brought to The Ottawa Hospital," said Karen Tataryn, regional director of children and youth mental health services. "Without doubt, the youth felt very clearly that accessing adult services was a significant challenge for them."

Likewise, the parents of these young people complained about being left on their own to sort through complicated bureaucracies, multiple waiting lists and conflicting advice.

Meanwhile, the providers of mental-health services, overwhelmed by chronic underfunding and soaring demand, often resorted to calling in favours from their colleagues to place patients in the right treatment programs because of the haphazard way services were organized.

"I think we had a sense that it really wasn't good, but I don't think we had a sense of how bad it was," Tataryn told a meeting Wednesday of the Champlain Local Health Integration Network, eastern Ontario's health authority.

The new program is meant to be a first step toward correcting these flaws. Under it, up to 115 young people would be referred over the next 18 months to a "transition coordinator," who would work one-on-one with each patient to design a treatment plan that would cater to their needs as they moved through the crucial youth-to-adult phase. Since it began two months ago, 32 patients have already been enrolled.

