

Mental health crisis support needed: report

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George Kurzawa hopes the findings of a new report will bolster his case for getting more mental health funding for Niagara. Kurzawa, executive director of the local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association, said Thursday an all-party committee report from Queen's Park calling for a radical overhaul of Ontario's mental health system might help bring badly needed crisis services to the region.

"We are going to be addressing the MPPs directly now," Kurzawa said. "That isn't something we have started yet. We have to talk with our partners still, but this is what we are going to do."

The report, issued last week, effectively said the mental health system in Ontario is broken. Authored by a committee of Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and NDP members, it calls for better funding and a new provincial oversight body to ensure adequate mental health services can be accessed across the province.

Among the concerns raised in the report, and shared by Kurzawa, is the impact that unrecognized or untreated mental health issues have on the health and justice systems.

Kurzawa said hospital emergency room wait times can get set back because of mental health cases, and that there are far too many people in jails with mental illnesses that are not being properly treated. "The number (at the Niagara Detention Centre) is something like 30%," Kurzawa said.

He said three years ago, the Canadian Mental Health Association, along with Niagara Regional Police, the Niagara Health System and others, submitted a proposal to the Local Health Integration Network -- the body that funds health care in the region -- to create a crisis intervention program to help those with mental illnesses. The aim, he said, was to get them the right help when things go badly. A similar program exists in Hamilton, called the Crisis Outreach and Support Team.

"The LHIN recognized the merits of the program, but in the end said they didn't have the cash," Kurzawa said.

He said agencies in Niagara are doing what they can. The NRP, he said, has dedicated some resources to deal specifically with people who have a mental illness, as has the NHS. But the lack of funding means a comprehensive effort is extraordinarily difficult.

"The NRP and the Niagara Health System and our other partners are doing great work, but there is a serious funding issue," he said.

With the LHIN unable to fund the program, Kurzawa said it's time to approach the government directly. The tri-party report gives the case for better crisis services ammunition it did not have before, he said.