



Opinion

Integrated Youth Services: a pan-Canadian movement critical to addressing youth mental health

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Ian Boeckh

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health of many Canadians and all signs point to a coming surge in the number of people needing support. But even prior to COVID-19, society had many concerns about mental health care, especially for youth.

This is a critical age group, when early intervention can make a profound difference. We know that 75 per cent of mental illnesses begin before age 25, and that more than a million children, youth, and young adults will need mental health support every year. However, only around 20 per cent receive adequate care. In many cases,



We know that 75 per cent of mental illnesses begin before age 25, and that more than a million children, youth, and young adults will need mental health support every year. However, only around 20 per cent receive adequate care, writes Ian Boeckh. *Pexels photograph by Samson Katt*

youth and families do not know where to find help. They face a fragmented system with large service gaps and long wait times.

Given these challenges and the large numbers of youth that need help, how can we ensure that young people get the support they need? The answer is to deliver a holistic suite of easily accessible and evidence-informed services to youth close to where they live.

We are making progress. The emergence of Integrated Youth Services (IYS) across Canada is changing how, when, and where young people receive mental health care. But there is much more to be done to drive this shift forward.

IYS approaches are designed with close involvement of youth and family carers so that services meet the needs of young people aged 12-25 with a focus on equitable access. They take a holistic view and offer a variety of services including mental health, addictions, primary care, social services, peer support, wellness programs, and virtual care. The services are designed to flex with the intensity and type of service needed so that

youth can receive the right service, at the right time.

IYS features a one-stop-shop model, known as youth hubs. These hubs offer youth-friendly services, accessed at a single location and free of charge. Data collection and research are also an important component.

To nurture and drive these projects forward, the Graham Boeckh Foundation (GBF) has co-developed IYS initiatives with multiple governments. In addition, GBF and Bell Let's Talk formed a partnership in 2020 with \$10-million invested to develop IYS across Canada.

The first pan-Canadian IYS project was ACCESS Open Minds, comprised of 16 sites across Canada, including seven in Indigenous communities. The project is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and GBF.

Several provinces also created large-scale IYS initiatives in partnership with GBF. These projects include Foundry in British Columbia, Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario and Aire ouverte in Québec, with each initiative active in multiple communities. Manitoba is also supporting a new IYS initiative.

All told, IYS is being developed in more than 55 communities, with another 65 communities expected to follow over the next two to three years. Moreover, the flexibility of IYS models allows implementation in urban, rural, and Indigenous contexts.

The speed with which IYS is developing is a hopeful sign. But for IYS to achieve its full potential, three important policy priorities need to be addressed.

First, youth everywhere in Canada deserve access to high-quality, integrated mental health services and this should be even more widely recognized. All provinces and territories should be supporting these services.

Second, IYS is an ideal platform for delivery of psychological services for youth. This includes services for the full spectrum of early-intervention needs—including mild, moderate, and severe illness.

Third, more work with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis is needed to support the development of culturally appropriate, holistic, and integrated systems of care for Indigenous youth.

The Government of Canada can play an important role in addressing these priorities by collaborating more with provinces and territories, philanthropy, and Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the federal government's role in research, innovation, and knowledge sharing is crucial to improving IYS.

Along with governments, many other organizations share the goal of helping our youth thrive, regardless of their circumstances. By combining and expanding our knowledge and resources and supporting integrated approaches, we will be far more able to address the serious mental health challenges that our youth face every day.

Ian Boeckh is the president of the Graham Boeckh Foundation, a private family foundation that works across Canada to transform youth mental health services.

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