

People with mental health issues need more resources

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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Part 1 of this three-part series, which appeared in the Dec. 18 issue of CJN, examined the stigma associated with people who suffer from mental illness and the lack of attention given to this problem in the Toronto Jewish community.

TORONTO — There aren't enough homes or services available for the mentally ill in the Jewish community, compared to the number of people who need help, said "John," who has a brother with schizophrenia.

Richard Cummings

"I don't think anyone even has an idea of the number of mentally ill in the community because it is just not a priority," he said.

Rochelle Goldman-Brown is the executive director of Chai Tikvah Foundation, a Jewish support service that provides housing for psychiatrically disabled adults, as well as support services for people living on their own.

"We've been around for 25 years. We have a group home, a triplex, and we run a social recreational program once a week out of the National Council of Jewish Women," Goldman-Brown said.

"But we're basically a band-aid for the need of the community."

She explained that the group home located in Thornhill, Ont., has eight residents who receive 24-hour support.

Last year, the foundation purchased a triplex, which has space to house eight more residents who receive support from a staff of about 15 social workers who make frequent visits to the home.

Chai Tikvah, which works to have its residents eventually move into more independent living, has also been allotted 15 apartments in a new complex being built at the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, which will provide housing for 18 adults who require less supervision.

The weekly social recreation program for residents and others in the community is called Club Simcha. Funded by UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, the program attracts 20 to 25 people each week.

But John, whose Holocaust survivor parents have been taking care of his schizophrenic adult brother for his entire life, spoke to The CJN on the condition of anonymity about the lack of services for the Jewish community.

"If we look at the numbers of the people who are mentally ill – and that is a broad term that can include people who are depressed – the numbers are just totally out of whack. There aren't only 12 mentally ill people in the Toronto Jewish community that need services," he said, referring to the small number of people Chai Tikvah is able to support.

"So, either they are living on the streets or are abandoned, living in shelters; or parents like mine are suffering and dealing with the consequences," John said, adding that his family is considering Toronto's Baycrest Centre to provide his brother with long-term care, but the waiting list is years long.

As a result of the lack of space in Jewish housing, Goldman-Brown said that many Jews are living in non-Jewish group homes.

“We get a lot of calls from those people saying, ‘They have crosses here,’ or ‘They don’t have kosher food,’ and it’s a struggle,” she said.

“With the number of calls we get and the number we are able to actually address, it’s really quite sad.”

Goldman-Brown added that Chai Tikvah does not promote its services because there are only so many beds and it’s not able to fully address the needs of the community.

“Number 1, they have to fit our criteria to get in, and number 2, the waiting list is usually a few years,” she said.

“Rachel,” who has a son who suffers from schizophrenia who currently lives at Chai Tikvah, said she learned about the home by chance — before she even knew her son would need it — when a friend came to visit her when she was sitting shivah for her late husband. The friend suggested that she donate all her excess food from the shivah to Chai Tikvah.

After her son spent months in and out of hospitals and she was faced with the option of sending her son to live in non-Jewish group homes in small Ontario towns such as Woodstock and Lindsay, she suddenly remembered hearing about Chai Tikvah.

She managed to get her son into the home after one of the residents moved out to live more independently.

“But what about all the others who are waiting to get into a home?” she asked.

“Heavens knows I’ve talked to so many people, and as soon as I start talking about it, they start telling me about a family member.”

Rachel said it was important for her son to live at Chai Tikvah because “he had a strong Jewish upbringing, and I wanted him close to the family. He has no one else. He’s single, he never married. He’s got his aunts and uncles here, his brother, his mother. What was he going to do in Woodstock or Lindsay?”

Although Rachel is encouraged by the allotment of 15 apartments in the Lebovic centre, she said Chai Tikvah is being asked to raise \$250,000 for administrative fees, which she thinks will be difficult.

Despite the fact that there aren’t many group home options for mentally ill Jews, there are programs available for those who suffer from mental illness, and their caregivers.

Devora Schwartz-Waxman, the Family Caregiver Connections co-ordinator at the Circle of Care, a non-profit provider of in-home health and support services, spoke to The CJNI about a new initiative to help people who are caring for aging or ailing family members.

Seven agencies, Circle of Care, Baycrest, Bernard Betel Centre for Creative Living, Chai Tikvah Foundation, Jewish Family & Child, Jewish Immigrant Aid Services Toronto and Reena, have joined forces to create the Family Caregiver Connections Project.

Schwartz-Waxman said one aspect of the project is to help elderly parents who care for adult children to prepare for a time when they are no longer able to do so.

“We work with caregivers who have children who have mental health issues and help them prepare for [the problems that come with] aging. The other end is people who are caring for seniors who have mental health issues,” she said.

“There is a lot of planning if the parents have kept their kids at home all along, and now the mother who has looked after the child all along has dementia and the child is in their 60s and is starting to have age-related health issues – it becomes a very complicated situation.”

She said the project provides assistance to aging caregivers by encouraging them to take time out for themselves without feeling guilty, and helping them with financial planning.

Jack Kugelmass, a social worker who has experience in the Jewish community, said that UJA Federation also has a task force on inclusion, which operates out of the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre.

“Federation has an inclusion initiative in an effort to include diverse groups who otherwise are disenfranchised and may not feel included. I’m talking about people with developmental needs and physical handicaps,” Kugelmass said.

Jewish Family and Child (JF&C) executive director Richard Cummings and JF&C supervisor and social worker Fay Geitzhals spoke about programs their organization provides to people who suffer from any number of challenges.

The Toronto Jewish Healing Project, which operates in JF&C’s chaplaincy service, tries to help people cope with illness and despair and to further a sense of well-being, comfort and guidance through the support of the Jewish community.

But Cummings said that while the project isn’t exclusive to helping those coping with mental illness, there are other services, such as individual counselling for the mentally ill.

“We have programs ranging from individual counselling to a wonderful service we provide called the Bagel Club, which is a once weekly social opportunity for a wide range of adults ranging from 20 to 70 who come in and break bread together,” Cummings said. “It really is a life line for people who are terribly socially isolated, marginalized and stigmatized.”

Geitzhals said that the 20 to 25 people who come to the Bagel Club each week are not so different from others.

“They just have another issue to deal with in life. It would make a big difference if people were to know what it’s like,” she said.

“At the end of the day, if we’re a community that can be more inclusive, if we’re a community that can be more compassionate, you make more room for people and they fit in better,” Cummings said.

“We wish we could do more,” Geitzhals said.

Part 3 of this series will examine the ways in which the Jewish community can work to improve the resources available for the mentally ill and their families.

For information, call Schwartz-Waxman at 416-635-2900, ext. 413; Goldman-Brown at 905-886-6520; or Cummings at 416-638-7800.