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Health

Tune in to Changing Minds

Education program aims to enlighten front-line workers of mental health

DEANA STOKES SULLIVAN

The Newfoundland and Labrador division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is launching a mental-illness education program today in partnership with the College of the North Atlantic.

Geoff Chaulk, executive director of the CMHA, credits his predecessor, Moyra Buchan, for the initial concept.

Changing Minds, an eight-module digital video disc (DVD) program, is aimed at addressing the educational needs of front-line service providers as recommended by Judge Donald Luther in his report into the deaths of Norman Reid of Little Catalina and Darryl Power of Corner Brook. Both men, who were diagnosed with mental illnesses, were fatally shot in 2000 in separate confrontations with police officers outside their homes. Reid was shot by an RCMP officer while Power was shot by a member of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC).

"I think, given our association's standing at the Luther inquiry into the deaths of Mr. Reid and Mr. Power, it became apparent that understanding of mental illness in terms of people on the front lines was certainly lacking and, in a number of cases, from what I read by people's own admission, they really didn't have any education and training," Chaulk said.

As well, he said, the inquiry revealed that many people in the community don't know what a mental-illness diagnosis, such as schizophrenia, means.

Funding provided

The CMHA received funding from the federal Department of Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the provincial Department of Health and Community Services, Glaxosmithkline and Rotary St. John's Northwest to complete its educational program.

Chaulk said filmmaker Francine Fleming was hired to develop the ideas Buchan had put on paper and now, about two years later, an eight-module DVD has been produced, starting with an introductory module on understanding mental health and mental illness.

"The program kind of walks you through each of the major illnesses, which would be, in and of itself, a stand-alone module," Chaulk said.

It covers illnesses including psychosis, mania, depression, complex needs and anxiety.

The program also features mental-health consumers and family members telling personal stories about the onset of mental illness and their own experience as well as practical communication exercises that people on the front lines can use.

Chaulk said this should prove useful for police, ambulance attendants and paramedics, emergency room nurses and teachers.

He said participants, for example, try to carry out an exercise while simulated auditory hallucinations are being played, to give them a sense of what it must be like to try to connect with someone who is quite ill and experiencing auditory hallucinations.

The program was pre-tested and the latest group of RNC recruits completed the program as part of their training, Chaulk said.

"We thought that was excellent, and we've had at the steering committee level, sort of a cross-section of people and organizations, including the RCMP and RNC, ambulance attendants, emergency room nurses, in-home support

workers - again, people as first-line responders," Chaulk said.

The College of the North Atlantic will provide opportunities for people to take the program and become mental-health trainers.

Chaulk said some of the details are being worked out and the cost will likely vary depending on travel or accommodation expenses, but it's expected to cost in the range of \$200 to \$300 per person.

"We're hoping after the launch, within six to eight weeks, we'll have our first group of trainee trainers and then probably as of the new school year, shall we say, September, we'll be able to launch something that's more encompassing of the province," Chaulk said.

dss@thetelegram.com

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