

Canada's anti-stigma mental health program heads to the Bronx

A low-cost program that's helping to reduce stigma around mental health among Canadian youth will launch as a pilot at a Bronx high school this fall.

The program, known as Headstrong, involves training students as mental health champions so they can help develop anti-stigma programming at their schools. It also promotes partnerships between schools and organizations so students can hear from people who have experienced mental illness and are managing their symptoms.

The evidence-based program, a project of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, captured the attention of Steve Coe, chief executive of Community Access, a Manhattan nonprofit providing supportive housing and social services to New Yorkers with mental health issues.

"There are youth initiatives within ThriveNYC," the city's \$850 million mental health program, said Coe. "But none of those initiatives engaged the kids, and that's what I think is really important."

A version of the Canadian program is now coming to fruition on a micro scale thanks to Nixie Strazza, a 16-year-old who interned at Community Access this summer. The rising sophomore got her school, the High School of American Studies at Lehman College, to agree to be the testing ground.

"At my school we're tolerant, but there's always going to be somebody who says, 'Oh, that person's crazy' or 'They're on meds,'" said Strazza. "So those are things we keep to ourselves, and that can build up more anxiety about it."

Strazza is initially starting the program at her school as a club, which will require hardly any funding. But Coe is looking for support for the program from the city and foundations at a symposium on youth mental health being held at Community Access today. The ultimate goal, he said, is to use anti-stigma efforts to get people to seek help for mental health conditions early in life.

"A lot of the work we do is around job training, employment, getting people to go back to school," Coe said. "All of these problems are linked back to catching people early and really supporting them."

In Canada the Headstrong program centers around summits that offer training and workshops to students, teachers, representatives of local organizations and people who have experienced mental health issues.

The program was launched with a weeklong national summit in the 2014–2015 school year and has been followed by regional summits coordinated by students and organizations with help from Canada's Mental Health Commission.

The commission has been evaluating results with surveys distributed before and after each summit. They include questions related to acceptance and stigma around mental illness. Before attending a regional summit, on average 49% of students surveyed gave answers that showed they didn't stigmatize mental health, according to a 2015 report from the commission. After the summit that share rose to 62.2%.

Although funding from the commission has shrunk because of budget cuts—from \$750,000 in its first year to \$160,000 in 2017—the program has grown throughout the country through new funding streams, said Micheal Pietrus, director of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

"Once government agencies and foundations and stakeholder groups begin to see the impact, it's easier for those organizations to get donations and support, and fund it on their own," said Pietrus. —C.L.