

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Ontario Children and Youth at Risk of Not Getting Timely Access to Community Mental Health Services: Auditor General

(Toronto) Children and youth in Ontario, especially those with severe mental health issues, are at risk of not being able to access the mental health services they need in the community when they need them.

“As one in five children and youth in Ontario will experience mental health challenges in their lifetimes, the Province needs to ensure young people and their families have timely access to the services and supports that government-funded agencies provide to help them through difficult times,” says Auditor General Shelley Spence.

Some of the key findings in our report include:

- The average wait time for intensive treatment for children and youth who experience impaired functioning because of their mental health problems was 105 days in 2023/24, up from 94 days the year before;
- 13 of 33 service areas in Ontario lack live-in intensive treatment services.
- Only three agencies, located in the Greater Toronto Area and eastern Ontario, offer access to a secure treatment program for children and youth at risk of self-harm or harm to others. This leads to inequitable access to this program for families across the province, including the west and particularly in the north.
- Children and youth with concurrent mental health and addictions disorders cannot readily access the needed services; about 70% of agencies that responded to our survey reported that services are not sufficient to meet the needs of this group of children and youth.
- Young people face challenges when aging out as they transition into the adult mental health system; 66% of the agencies that responded to our survey did not think sufficient mental health services exist for transition-aged youth in their service areas.
- The Ministry of Health lacks a health human resources strategy for the child and youth mental health sector to address staffing shortages, which the Ministry acknowledged will lead to increases in hospitalizations and emergency room visits, and longer wait times.

During our audit, we also found that using one unique identifier, such as an Ontario health card number, would reduce the need for children and youth to share their information with multiple health service providers. It would also link services for youth moving from one community-based program to another or to adult mental health services and hospital settings.

While the Ministry of Health has made updates to the annual funding of child and youth mental health agencies, annual base funding was determined decades ago; it does not fully reflect the changing needs of children and youth. Our audit recommends the Ministry adopt a needs-based approach to allocate resources to better support child and youth mental health in communities across Ontario.

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