

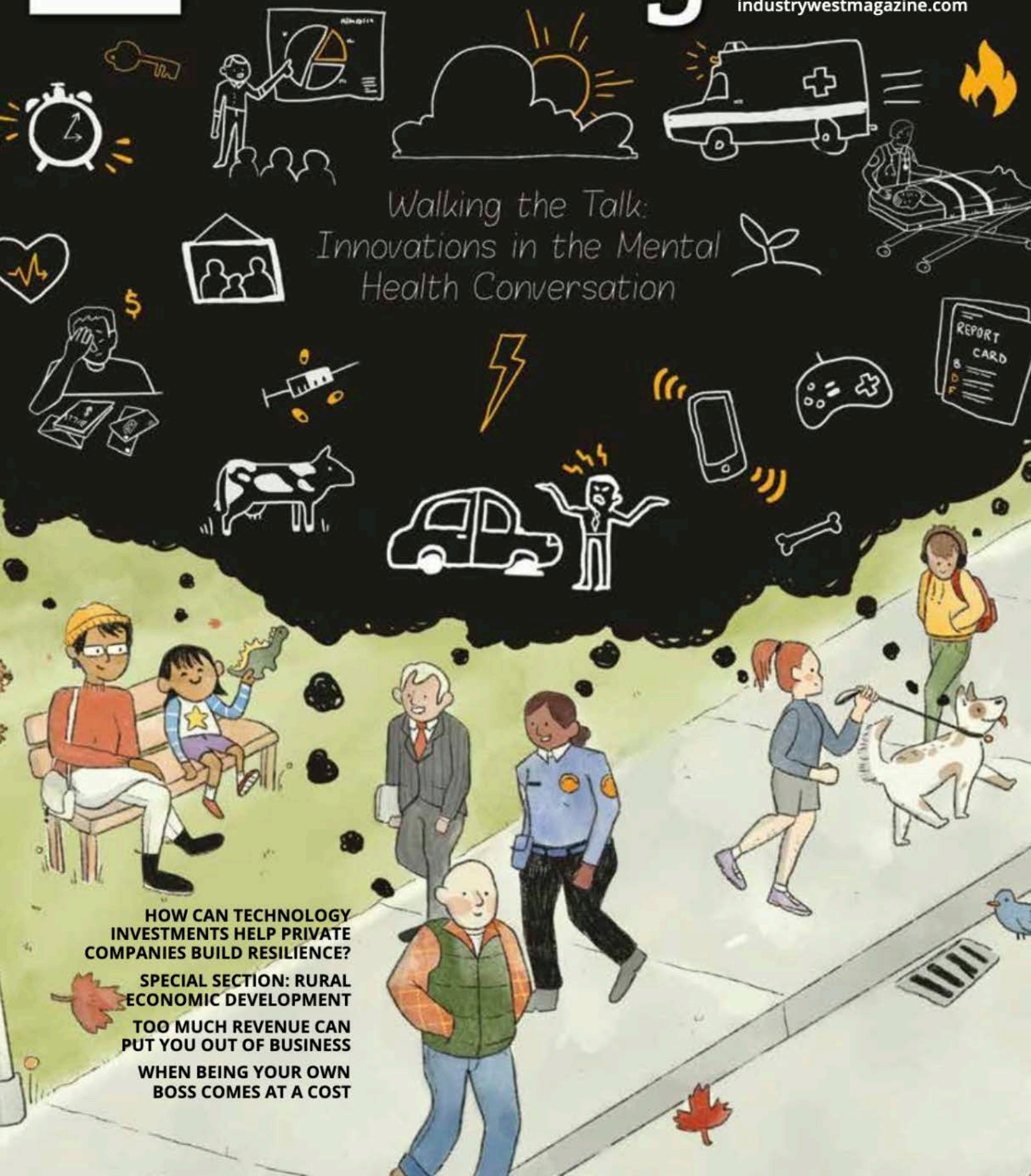


SASKATCHEWAN

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Walking the Talk:
Innovations in the Mental
Health Conversation

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WALKING THE TALK:

INNOVATIVE STEPS FORWARD IN THE MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION

BY CHARLENE HILKEWICH



FROM L TO R: MODERATOR CHARLENE HILKEWICH, ADELLE STEWART (DO MORE AG), SCOTT BORYS (HUGR | TERRITORIAL), ELAINA GUILMETTE (SUN WEST DISTANCE LEARNING CENTRE), JIM DEMERAY (UNDERSTANDUS), LEON FERGUSON (BRIDGES HEALTH), JOEL PEDERSEN (FITNESS 2J2), PHYLLIS O'CONNOR (CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION-CMHA, SASKATCHEWAN DIVISION).

On October 1, 2019, Industry West brought together seven Saskatchewan mental health partners to talk about their innovative work, the growing responsibility schools and workplaces face in educating students and workers while providing healthy environments, the challenges of integrating mental health with other areas of wellness, and the progress and gaps within the field. Writer Charlene Hilkewich moderated the roundtable discussion held at Regina's Local Market.

Meet Scott Borys (Hugr | Territorial), Jim Demeray (UnderstandUs), Leon Ferguson (Bridges Health), Elaina Guilmette (Sun West Distance Learning Centre), Phyllis O'Connor (Canadian Mental Health Association-CMHA, Saskatchewan Division), Joel Pedersen (Fitness 2J2), and Adelle Stewart (Do More Ag). For the full roundtable video, visit our YouTube channel, @iwmediagroup.

Talking it Out

There's been a massive shift in the last decade towards talking about mental health. National programs like Bell Let's Talk, and Sick Not Weak have built public awareness and opened the door

for people to share their personal stories, and in doing so, begin to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and mental health.

We asked Phyllis O'Connor, executive director of CMHA's SK Division, what she has seen as a result of those efforts. "I've been with CMHC for 20 years now and I can honestly say within the last five years, I've seen a real sea-change in attitudes," says O'Connor. "We have to give kudos to groups like Bell Let's Talk and all the celebrities who have come out and shared their stories because now it really seems to have made it okay for people to be vulnerable and say, you know, I'm not okay. And that's a really important piece to people getting services."

"Now we are also a little bit of a victim of our own success in that work because now they're coming out and they are identifying a need for services. However, especially in Saskatchewan, the services are not necessarily always there," O'Connor continues. "So, we've come a long way, but we have a long way to go yet to make sure that everybody has access to adequate timely services for their mental health."

Jim Demeray, founder of UnderstandUs, agrees. "Traditionally even when I first was dealing with my own anxiety and I kind of felt the stigma firsthand, I kind of looked at mental health with a lot of fear and a lot of shame." Realizing the imagery around mental illness was very dark and not particularly optimistic helped Demeray in his formation of UnderstandUs. He wanted to enlighten the conversation by showing some positivity and success.

"That's one way of shifting the stigma," says Demeray. "I think that's something we've done well and that has allowed people to feel like, hey, if I am starting to have these feelings, there are a lot of people that have dealt with it and have found success and effective treatment."

Building Strength Through Education

As awareness builds, more focus has gone to education and proactive understanding of what mental health looks like, how to care for ourselves in healthy ways, how to recognize when we aren't doing well, and how to ask for help when that happens.

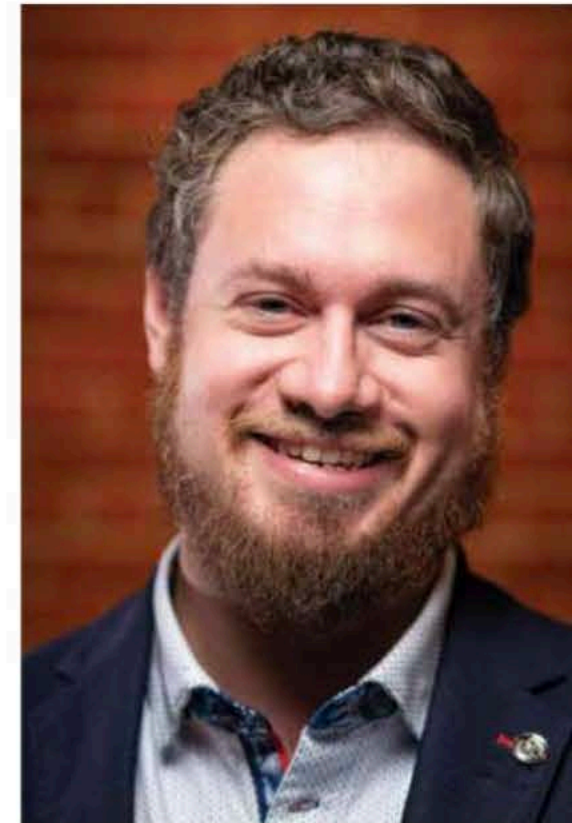
"We do a good job in elementary and up to middle years addressing those concepts. But when we get into that secondary level, that transition to adulthood, there's a lot going on and we need to provide our students with those skills," says Elaina Guilmette, with Sun West Distance Learning Centre.

When Guilmette became an online teacher three years ago, she realized that her students were asking a lot of questions that weren't being addressed in schools. "Once you get into high school, you get to choose your electives. And it's funny that not one of our electives really deals with mental health or mental wellness or the proactive strategies." She notes that the Centre has a high demographic of students that attend the school because they struggle with various mental health issues and concerns, and the brick and mortar school just doesn't fit their needs. Over time, Guilmette began to see some of the very real work students were doing to enable themselves to succeed in their studies.

"What if they could get a credit for the efforts that they were putting in? A group of us got together and we started to talk about it. We decided to write a curriculum, and then we got it approved by the Ministry of Education. Then we worked almost a year developing this course with youth that have struggled with mental illness." Now kids can sign up for Guilmette's course and get a grade 12 elective to better understand themselves, the preventative and the proactive strategies to incorporate in their lives, and how to live better lives.

And the education doesn't end there. In recent years, there has been a increase in awareness around mental health in the workplace. Employers have a growing responsibility to build psychologically healthy work environments and they are being asked to wade into some potentially charged waters. Employees are being asked to understand and support co-workers. Navigating these discussions can be tricky for both employers and employees, but there are many training opportunities—workshops and seminars—and even applications that help define expectations and ease fears.

When Scott Borys, COO and partner at Saskatoon's Territorial went through a depressive episode several years ago, he found one of the major challenges he had was that he needed to train his friends and family how to support him. It wasn't that people didn't want to help—more that they were afraid to do the wrong thing or that they simply were unequipped to help effectively. Trying to help them help him was especially difficult given what he was going through at the time.



SCOTT BORYS (HUGR | TERRITORIAL)



LEON FERGUSON (BRIDGES HEALTH)



JIM DEMERAY (UNDERSTANDUS)



ELAINA GUILMETTE (SUN WEST DISTANCE LEARNING CENTRE)

"I wanted to take that experience and try to make it easier for people to create support networks or train their support network on how to be supportive. So, when I returned to Territorial, we started working on this product called Hugn, at first in our spare time," Borys says. "There's really two versions—Hugn personal that focuses more on helping people create support networks for their friends and family, and then Hugn professional which we see as helping create a better employee experience in the workplace."

The professional version uses anonymous tracked data about how people are doing in their days so that that employers or HR can see how their employees or teams are doing. "They can see aggregate data about how their team is doing," Borys adds. "And we're doing this to help employers understand how they are doing in creating a psychologically safe workplace."

Leon Ferguson, Vice President of Bridges Health, agrees. "I think that a lot of people don't realize that we spend about 90,000 hours of our lifetime in the workplace. So, the significance of what we do with inside of that is important. It's huge."

Employers are starting to understand the impact of presenteeism. For many years, there was a lot of talk about absenteeism. But now the conversation has moved to when you're at work, but you're not—you're struggling through something, whether it's a problem or an illness or something going on with the family. Ferguson says what we're seeing as a consequence of that is about 7.5 times more of an impact on a company than the absenteeism portion.

"So, lots of conversations that I'm in now are about how do we create a holistic strategy that fits into both not only the mental health capacity, but overall wellness," says Ferguson. "How do we help our leaders have those difficult conversations that need to be had at times? How do you support your teammates as a leader? How do you support your team? And as a co-worker, how do you support your teams?"

Ferguson says that there are great resources for leaders in the workplace—be it the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Mental Health First Aid certification course or their National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace which provides guidelines and tools for employers. There are also a wide variety of workshops available for employers and employees through organizations like CMHA, UnderstandUs and Bridges Health.

Careers with an Added Cost

We asked Joel Pedersen, founder and CEO, Fitness J2J, about careers that involve intense levels of stress and sometimes, trauma. At 17 years old, Pedersen joined the military—one of the only professions with unlimited liability. Similar to policing, a job Pedersen has also held, in that people can be sent into potentially life-threatening situations, there are many external influences at play. Those, along with the internal influences of the day-to-day grind, can lead to Occupational Stress Injuries (OSIs) or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

On joining these professions at a younger age, Pedersen says, "I think you often think you're fire-resistant and you can pretty much do anything you want. After a while—and I'll use the analogy of the onion as it starts to peel off—as you have more and more experiences, it starts to affect you in different ways. And so, I think one of the real positive things that have happened in the last 15 or 20 years, especially in the military, is people coming out and saying, I have problems."

This has led to the development of programs like the Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR), which exists to build awareness of mental illness and operational stress injuries (OSIs) and The Working Mind First Responders (TWMFR) program, created to reduce stigma



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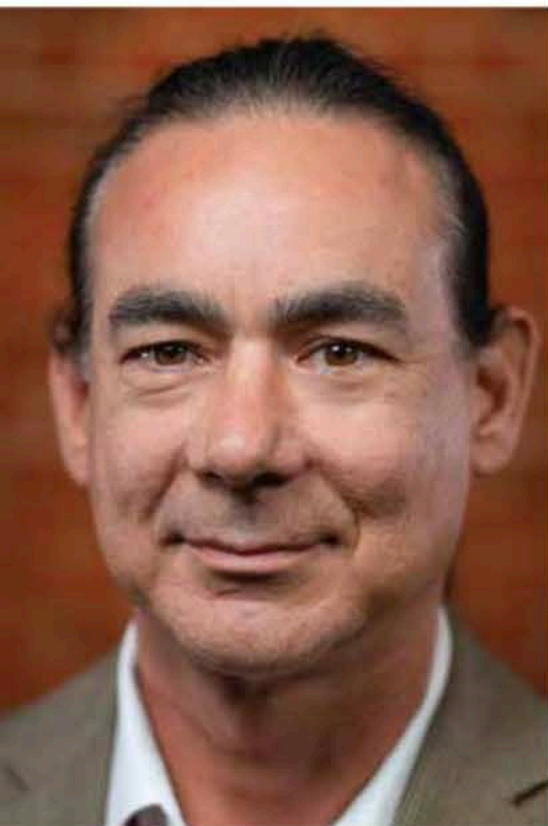
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JOEL PEDERSEN (FITNESS 2J2)



PHYLLIS O'CONNOR (CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION-CMHA, SASKATCHEWAN DIVISION)

and increase resiliency in first responders. These programs are significant because they talk about a holistic way of living—physical, mental, spiritual and emotional wellness as interconnected. These are vital components to the work Pedersen's company does, especially within the community and developing opportunities for youth where there are no opportunities.

O'Connor, agrees. "I think some of the stigma's coming off, however we still do encounter with those target groups, a concern that if they show weakness, they could lose their job, they could be stuck behind a desk and no longer be active. So, when we designed our OSI-CAN program, we designed it so that they would never have to have a formal diagnosis. They just have to know that they need some help. It's completely confidential and it's all based on peer support. As needs are identified in the group, we will help link them up with the services they need."

OSI-CAN is dedicated to helping serving members and Veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, Allied Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and community First Responders, which include Municipal Police Services, Emergency Medical Services, Fire Protection Services, Emergency Communications Specialist (911 operators), all public safety personnel, hospital trauma personnel and corrections officers. It is a joint project of the Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) and the Royal Canadian Legion (Saskatchewan Command).

Unique to Saskatchewan

"It's hard sometimes to understand how Saskatchewan is unique as we are," says Adelle Stewart, executive director of Do More Ag. "You can't not drive past agriculture. Even in Regina, even in Saskatoon—our city centres are still incredibly small. Ag really is the heart of the prairie and we're still facing some really unique challenges with that. It can be hard to imagine if you're close to a city centre that there are still areas that don't have high speed internet." Stewart explains that although there are great online resources that should help farmers and producers access mental health care remotely, such restrictions make it impossible to access.

She points to the launch of walk-in mental health clinics as a great addition in the area of mental health, trauma and crises. One of the things Do More Ag is proud to be bringing to Canadians is the community fund, in partnership with Farm Credit Canada. The fund brings mental health training to rural areas across Canada, including Saskatchewan, to help create networks of people on the ground. "Farmers and families and neighbours who are now comfortable with and trained to start conversations with each other. They also know how to support themselves, how to identify when they've reached their own boundaries in terms of supporting someone else, and what to do when that happens."

Isolation isn't only a factor for ag producers. Within the indigenous communities, there's a lot of variation between capacity. "There are some communities that are so isolated and it's a plane ride that's as long as it would take to get to Toronto," Pedersen says. "With some of those limitations are also strengths as well. Some of the communities are still very strong culturally and some are not. As far as programming within the communities that are quite isolated, it's about providing opportunities for community, for youth in particular in my experience."


Pedersen has been to over 30 communities in the province—First Nations, Métis and urban centres—and has worked with over 30,000 youth and adults over the last eight years. He has found that inaccessibility to programming exists even within the urban areas who have a large Indigenous population. "It's about creating safe spaces and

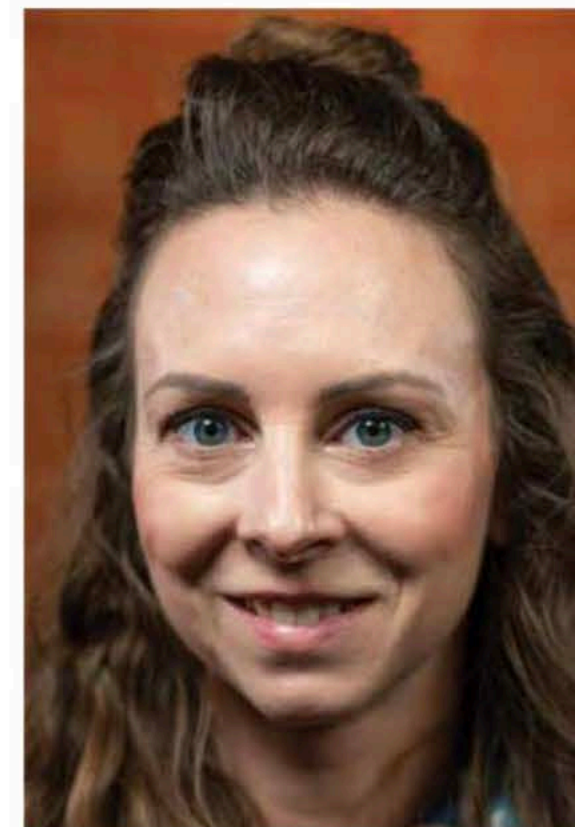
programs people can be a part of," says Pedersen. "And we were able to build capacity by not only doing that initial engagement into community, but capacity by having some sustainability, by empowering the community to become mentors and leaders within the community so that the programming can continue on."

The work is inclusive. It is open to everyone, especially in the urban centres. And Pedersen notes—especially in larger centres like Saskatoon and Regina in the socioeconomically disadvantaged areas like the inner cities—it's not just Indigenous people, it's immigrants and new Canadians.

Where We Go From Here

For the CMHA, the answer is simple. "CMHA nationally is going to start advocating for mental health as a human right," says O'Connor. The CMHA also wants to hear from and work with people that are on a mental health journey. "I think it's critical that whenever we're planning or advocating for programs and services that we take into account the people with lived experience. They should be involved in every aspect of our planning, every aspect of our advocacy work. Because after all, who are the experts on what they're going through? It's them. And that is a point that often gets overlooked," she says. Guilmette agrees. "There is just something so valuable about that lived experience and sharing that lived experience that can really shift your mind. And that's what happened to me—it took learning, you know, to kind of go into a real conversation versus a clinical one," says Guilmette.

For Ferguson, it's also about collaboration and understanding. "With leadership in relation to empathy, we're seeing people starting to listen with the intent to understand and not respond. For so long we were just trying to fix problems and now we're starting to say, hey, let's work on this together," says Ferguson. 



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