

COMMUNITY

Symposium focuses on women and addiction



Dr. Sarah Gander presents on her Parent-Child Assistance Program at the Women and Addiction Symposium in Saint John on Saturday.

Photo: Marlo Glass/Telegraph-Journal

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Marlo Glass | Telegraph-Journal

A symposium on women and addictions held in Saint John this weekend aims to shine a light on the barriers women face when accessing treatment for their addictions.

Peter Vamos, executive director of Portage, a non-profit organization that helps people with substance abuse

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gender-based inequality in the medical field, including mental health and addictions resources for women.

That includes “a systematic bias and stigma” surrounding women with addictions, especially mothers, Vamos said, which can discourage women from seeking treatment.

“The decision-makers need to be aware, and kept aware, of these challenges, so that they can take the appropriate measures,” Vamos said.

The symposium featured panels on addictions and the legal system, gender-based addiction treatment and support for women, as well as Indigenous perspectives and social pediatrics. The event ran from Thursday until Saturday and was attended by Minister of Social

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OF ADDICTION TREATMENT.

A Saint John-based social pediatrics program is working to support mothers who live with addiction, poverty, a lack of affordable housing and transportation, along with other barriers.

The Parent-Child Assistance Program, led by Dr. Sarah Gander, assists women who experience addiction during pregnancy, and currently supports 55 women.

Many of the mothers grew up in poverty, raised by parents who also experienced addiction and mental health issues, Gander said. This program aims to break the cycle of poverty by supporting new mothers and their babies not just with medical care, but with social needs, too, like helping them get IDs or accompanying them to court

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communities,” Gander said, with a goal of nurturing healthy children in order for them to meet their full potential.

Barriers to care, Gander said, include negative stigma, a lack of trust in the medical system, poverty-associated barriers like transportation and housing, and communication

issues. Gander noted a large portion of women she works with don’t have consistent access to cell phones.

Outcomes of the three-year program include fewer interactions with the court system, Gander said.

Vamos noted some women delay or avoid addiction treatment out of fear of losing custody of their children, and “that fear is not unfounded,” he says.

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the legal system, particularly in family court or criminal court, but there isn't a specialized court in New Brunswick to deal with addictions-based issues.

People with addictions aren't criminals, she said, and that's being recognized by the justice system, as high up as the Supreme Court of Canada.

Instead of bringing women and people with addictions to normal criminal courts, "there's a desire to create a new court to deal with these issues," Henheffer said, and "when the highest justice in our country is promoting this, I think it goes a long way to establish such specialized courts."

Henheffer noted Nova Scotia has eight different specialized courts, but they're rarer in New Brunswick.

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person to the court, though it can be a part of the mental health issue.

“A criminal record is potentially very serious, and poses significant limitations on people,” she said.

“When the highest justice in the highest court in our country is saying, ‘People with addictions are not criminals,’ we as a society need to find ways to not make them criminals, by giving them a criminal record.”

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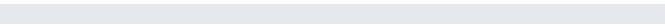
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