

Young adults with ASD learn life skills

CJN STAFF

In Quebec, individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have the right to be schooled and receive government support from ages four to 21.

But with higher rates of ASD diagnosis over the past decade, there are a growing number of young adults who find themselves abruptly cut off from public services.

Helping this population is the goal of the Young Adult Support Program (YASP), a pilot project at Ometz, the social services agency of Federation CJA.

Ometz developed YASP, which was launched in 2015, for 18- to 30-year-olds living with high-functioning ASD or mild intellectual challenges, often coupled with mental health issues.

"There are no services that we know of offered at this level of intensity [for the anglophone community], and those offered through the public sector have very long wait lists," said Marcie Klein, manager of mental health support services at Ometz.

"Each of these young adults falls between the gaps with regard to public services," said Amber-Lee Shattler, a case



Ometz case manager Amber-Lee Shattler counsels a client in the agency's Young Adult Support Program.

manager in mental health support services who leads the program. This often leaves parents struggling to find the support that will enable their children to live in the community.

YASP offers clients "wrap-around" services, including case management, counselling and advocacy, to ensure all available public resources are accessed at no charge. It runs workshops in independent

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living and social skills, including guidance in realizing personal and vocational goals.

Twenty young adults – the maximum – are currently enrolled in the program, Shattler said, and the wait list is lengthening. She is assisted by an intern from the McGill School of Social Work.

"Some individuals come to us with existing diagnoses, and others share that they often struggled with academic and social pursuits, but with no formal diagnosis," she said. "Most communicated a need for intensive support and accompaniment, as they require help navigating

in their communities."

Shattler explained that this often means teaching clients basic skills such as making healthy and affordable meals or accompanying them on simple errands, such as going to the grocery store and learning to use public transit.

They can take courses in computer literacy and participate in a vocational assessment program.

Every second week, Shattler hosts a cooking workshop where clients, as a team, decide on the menu, cook and eat together and, as she quips, perform the final and least favourite task: cleanup.

"Group work is so beneficial," said Shattler, who will be hosting two new life skills workshops this season – one on nutrition and exercise, the other on time management.

The major objective of YASP is to increase these young people's sense of connection to the community by encouraging social interaction and promoting autonomy.

Participants may stay in the program for an indefinite period, but the goal is for them to become autonomous enough to live their own lives. ■

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