

# Community mental health opens many career doors

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Transitional Case Manager Siobhan Andress from Frontenac Community Mental Health & Addictions Services in Kingston, Ont.  
**Photograph by:** Lars Hagberg, Postmedia News

On the doors of the offices at the Frontenac Community Mental Health & Addictions Services in Kingston, the signs read: What Is Working Well Around Here and How Do We Build On It?

For Alan Mathany, director of clinical services, it's a mantra he takes very much to heart. "I've worked in community mental health for over 30 years and I still get excited about going to work every day. That's because you get to focus on what works, and how to maintain and build on that. It can be very rewarding."

Siobhan Andress has been a transitional case manager with Frontenac for the past nine years. As part of her job, she provides short-term counselling to mental health patients transitioning from a hospital to a community setting. She spent her early career working in a youth home; but returned to college to get a behavioural science technology degree in order to enter the community mental health field.

What intrigued her about mental health was a fascination with the brain and understanding how behaviours occur, she says. "I really wanted to understand that and help people manage when they have a mental disorder."

Much of her motivation stems from a realization that mental illness was around her growing up. But like many people, she just didn't see it. "When you're an adult you can put the pieces together and you realize that mental illness often goes undetected. But if you can put a name to it, knowledge is power. And knowing what you're dealing with allows you to help people get better and get on a journey of recovery."

Mathany says demand in community mental health careers is definitely growing as a number of psychiatric hospitals are downsizing and mental health is becoming more focused on community-based support services. This transition has opened up a wealth of career opportunities.

"The focus is now on psycho-social rehabilitation, which means you can look at client from a whole life perspective, from their medical to social to work needs. A lot of people are coming into the field have a variety of paths, such as social work, nursing, occupational therapy, psychology, vocational and recreational counselling – the list goes on."

Steve Lurie, executive director for Community Mental Health Association, Toronto Branch, confirms that workforce needs have become extremely diverse. "This is especially prevalent as the sector is moving to providing a wider range of support to people beyond 1/8 hospital 3/8 treatment, including such areas as housing, daily living activities, peer counselling and socialization. We're also seeing more multi-disciplinary treatment teams which demand a diverse cross-section of skills."

He also notes that turnover in community mental health tends to be low. "People see they are making a difference and like being part of a team."

"Anyone entering this field is in it because they are truly committed to helping others, contributing to society and seeing that people who need help are taken care of," Mathany says.

Educational requirements range from medical degrees to community college-based credentials. According to Mathany, some of the more popular areas of demand include college-based degrees such as behavioural science technology, social service and developmental service – all programs that are geared toward supporting people living in the community. There are also areas such as peer support where a formal degree is not required.

Mathany cautions that anyone interested in an office job might want to look elsewhere. "A lot of people think they're entering the field to do counselling from an office. If that's the case, then community mental health is not the place to be. I'd say about 80 per cent of your time is spent in the on the move, visiting people's homes and doctor's offices, taking people to the bank, teaching life skills, or providing nursing care."

It goes without saying that compassion is a big part of the job. But an equally important quality is optimism, he adds. "A lot of people you work with want help. They want decent housing and a job. And they really want to opportunity to improve their life situation. It can be daunting dealing with some of the

issues we do, but you can't let it drag you down. If you're an optimistic person, you can really get involved and see the changes you can make."

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