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***Written Report***

My Placement With The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

*Introduction*

Over the last couple months, I have had the absolute pleasure of working alongside some incredible people at the Canadian Mental Health Association. This has included daily programming at the YMCA near Spring Garden Rd. and the Dartmouth Seniors’ Centre, grant research on the side, and even driving some members to their appointments across Halifax.

The people who work and volunteer at the CMHA are what make it such an unbelievable program. From the directors Bev Cadham and Marg Murray, who are involved in every daily aspect of the CMHA and are familiar with every member, to the daily programming workers like Robyn and Maddie who run phenomenal daily activities for the members in both Halifax and Dartmouth.

Daily programing included outings at places like the Discovery Centre, the Natural History Museum, and even McDonald’s. Most other days were spent at the YMCA in Halifax (Tuesdays) or at the Dartmouth Senior’s Centre where Maddie and Robyn have daily themes and activities planned (Wednesdays and Thursdays) for all the members who really seem to love each one.

Outside of the daily programming from 1:30pm to 4pm, I have also done some research on social isolation and loneliness post-pandemic to help Marg and Bev with their grant proposals and have also driven some members to their appointments.

Overall, I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at the CMHA and would highly recommend it to anybody looking for a volunteer opportunity, summer job, or practicum placement in the future as it is a great place to learn about mental health and the daily struggles that people face as a result of social issues and barriers.

*Daily Programming*

Due to construction at the CMHA’s normal location at 2020 Gottingen St., Tuesdays were spent at the YMCA where we would gather in the community room. This is where my first experience was on Week 1 as I got introduced to the daily programming side of the CMHA where members can get together and enjoy each other’s company while playing board games, card games, and active games organized by the staff.

Immediately, I was welcomed very warmly by both newer and older members who were simply excited to have another staff member in the room. Certain members in particular were eager to get acquainted and introduce me to the family they had built within the program. The friendships and bonds that the members form together is truly remarkable and is a phenomenal way to combat loneliness that so many of us face. The staff made me feel right at home as they helped me get acquainted with each member and were clear with what my tasks were. Maddie, Robyn, and Bev made me feel comfortable and part of the family that was the CMHA right away and never was I made to feel overwhelmed or overworked.

The tasks I were simple, give everyone the time of day for a conversation and to not allow members to overstep boundaries. This just meant that sometimes they would want me to only talk to them which was not much of an issue. Other than that, I would play cards, get coffee, tea and hot chocolate, and talk with the members of the club as well as help with any activities that were going on such as sports day or Saint Patrick’s day activities. While it was easy work, it was never boring and it was extremely rewarding.

Personally, I was able to develop some great interpersonal skills and my social anxiety got a lot better as a result of all the social interaction with people who are just looking for some company. Not only this, but it made me want to volunteer more and seek more opportunity to support others who are in need of companionship and are feeling isolated or lonely.

Outings on certain days were also extremely beneficial to the members and made for some really fun days. These included trips to the Discovery Centre and National History Museum which both made for some great bonding experiences for the members and I. Whether I was pushing around a wheelchair or helping members get active with some of the amenities, they always made me feel comfortable and wanted to have a good time.

However, as this is a program that revolves around mental health, there are many members who struggle on a daily basis and come to the CMHA for support. While I was instructed to delegate most of the more delicate problems that members had to the full-time staff (to make sure myself and the members were comfortable), there were still times where members were sad, tired, or in a poor mood. Learning to deal with these emotions and people in order to make them feel like you are there for them while also setting boundaries has likely been the steepest learning curve for me during daily programming. It has gotten much easier over time.

I can honestly say that I am becoming more comfortable talking with members who are down and have learned to focus on the moment and give them someone to talk to and either distract from whatever is bothering them or give them an outlet to talk out their problems. Just from being within the CMHA daily programming, I have seen what being in a group setting and the ability to interact with others can do for people in isolation or that are feeling lonely. Whether it is simple card games, mindless conversation, or even music and dancing, all of these things create an atmosphere where people can feel welcome and in good company.

Overall, I would say that daily programming has been the most rewarding and most surprising aspect of this placement in my opinion, as I have met some truly wonderful people and connections that I will make sure to keep up with for a very long time. The things I have learned and the skills I have developed make this placement in daily programming a very useful and worthwhile opportunity.

*Research on Isolation and Loneliness*

From the start of meetings with Bev and Marg, they made it clear that they wanted to create the most useful and practical experience for me possible. This meant that on top of helping with daily programming, they wanted me to use my background in Political Science and my aspirations of Journalism to good use. This came in handy with helping Marg with all of the grants she had been working on during a very busy time of year for them.

I was able to help by gathering research through other websites and organizations to help her develop her grants as well as gather more knowledge on how we can reach out to people in the community regarding the issue of loneliness which Marg sees as an increasingly and severe social issue in our communities. While working on Dr. Jackie Kinley’s political campaign a few summers ago, I learned from a top psychologist just how pressing this issue really was and so I was eager to help Marg with this.

After scrolling through websites and articles and even having some time in the program now, I have learned, above all, that loneliness comes in all forms and degrees, comes and goes, and that there are so many things we can do to help one another through it. Whether it is emotional, social, or existential loneliness; it can be situational or chronic and the intensity may vary as well. So how do we combat loneliness?

Marg Murray of the CMHA offers other ways to combat social isolation, involving different ways to measure loneliness such as the UCLA loneliness scale, the De Jong Giervald scale and other loneliness measures. With these measures, we can gain insight into why certain people are experiencing loneliness and how we may be able to better support them. Being positive, reducing stigma, and taking the soft approach are other important steps in supporting people with loneliness. How do we bring this to the wider society?

By building people’s understanding of loneliness by providing them with the tools to learn more about their situation and what other people are going through, we can better inform the broader society on how to deal and combat their loneliness. There are certain website already, that do a wonderful job at this. Examples include helpagecanada.ca, campaigntoendloneliness.org, and casch.org.

Overall, after my initial review of social isolation and loneliness, I have found countless websites and supports that provide tons of information and ways to get involved through easy to access links. I could see digital literacy being a serious issue for older members of the community who seek support, as much of this support is found online and might be difficult to access if not familiar with the internet. I have also noticed the profound impact of staying healthy and how that affects loneliness both first hand and through researching these websites.

*Helping Members get to Appointments*

This was an exceptional service that the CMHA does not usually offer members. However, sometimes there are members who have nobody else in their lives who are able to take them to a denturist or doctors appointment, for example, and need the help of staff or volunteers to make it to these appointments.

An example of this, was just the other day when I was able to drive the CMHA van and pick up one of their members to bring them to their denturist appointment. This member had no other way of getting to the appointment as family was ill and her anxiety was far too great to take public transit. I was then able to take her to the park for a short visit post appointment and take her home.

This is the type of exceptional service that the CMHA provides for its members. Others include tech support, Monday zoom calls, and other post-program supports.

*Conclusion*

In conclusion, I am very fortunate to have gotten placed here at the CMHA and think I will continue to work here whether under a volunteer role or even a summer job if the opportunity arises. From the staff to the members, everybody is welcoming and kind. I would recommend to any students moving forward who are keen on getting a worthwhile experience that they can carry throughout their lives and future careers. At the same time, social isolation and loneliness is an issue that needs more attention, especially post-pandemic, as many of us are struggling to manage day to day routines. I hope that I can use my experience in politics and a new education in Journalism will allow me to spread this message and possibly enact real change or even just help support people in our community. Funding for the CMHA is very low and this also needs to change as just a little goes a long way.

Thanks for creating this course and providing me with this opportunity!