New government funding to address crippling mental health problem at University of Alberta

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The provincial government has allocated $50.9 million in funding over the next three years to address the issue of mental health on campuses throughout Alberta.

In an announcement outside the Myer Horowitz last Wednesday, Minister of Health Fred Horne said the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge will each receive $3 million to improve and add new staff to their existing mental health services.

Horne said the Alberta Students’ Executive Council (ASEC) will also be receiving a $2.5 million innovation fund to aid all Alberta post-secondary institutions.

The funding comes at a critical time for the U of A, which Vice Provost and Dean of Students Frank Robinson said has been unable to cope with the growing number of students requiring mental health services.

“For many years, we have been turning away students from counselling and the Mental Health Centre,” he said.

“It became very difficult — the spaces were all filled up very early on. It would be November before we’d start turning people away, and some years it would be even sooner than that.”

Robinson said while the Mental Health Centre would never outright turn away someone in a crisis, a general lack of resources and staff made it difficult to keep up with the increasing demands.

Director of the University Health Centre Donna Cave was among many at the university who recognize the severity of the situation, and gave Minister Horne a tour of the units, speaking to undergraduate and graduate students about their experiences.

“For many years, we have been turning away students from counselling,” said Frank Robinson, Director of Student Affairs.

“Some have been aggressive in going to the government... and it wasn’t in response to any particular incident,” Robinson said. “It was just [these students] seeking, as an administrator, how we were able to serve the students that needed help.”

Robinson said with the new funding, he hopes to address the current resource shortage within the University Wellness Services and create a culture around campus where mental health problems can be dealt with and prevented effectively.

“For one thing, I really hope that we aren’t in a situation where we’re turning people away and saying, ‘We know you’ve got a problem, but come back in two weeks,’” he said.

“Then I would also like to have it so that people watch out for their neighbours... so we’re an institution that looks over our shoulder at the person behind us and says, ‘Are you okay?’ and it’s okay for them to say, ‘No, I’m not okay.”

The student-led Health and Wellness Team (H&W) has also been working on preventative measures and educating students about mental health events such as the popular Unwind Your Mind, held each semester around exam time, have helped students cope with stress by providing free workshops, yoga sessions and healthy snacks.

H&W Task Force member Adam Sartore says with this new funding, the team hopes to expand Unwind Your Mind as a platform to create a larger mental health initiative for students, incorporating multiple other student groups and facilities in the effort.

“We’re hoping to use Unwind Your Mind as a platform to create a larger mental health program and mental health focus on campus,” he said.

“By engaging the campus community — the students themselves... and getting their ideas on the table, it is then improved on its own health and wellness. This really is an initiative by students, for students, so they definitely should be consulted and part of the process for expanding this mental health program.”