Gerstein Crises Centre: A good practice aligned with human rights

Human Rights Watch has been advocating for over a decade for a rights-based approach to mental health services that respects individuals’ human rights. This approach emphasizes the importance of informed consent and the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of mental health services.

However, many mental health services worldwide, as observed in more than 60 countries, still rely on coercion and fail to respect international human rights standards. Often, responses to mental health crises involve punitive measures, such as police intervention or forced hospitalization and treatment, which are particularly harmful to Indigenous and racialized groups.

The Problem: Coercive Mental Health Responses

Globally, one in eight people is estimated to live with a mental health condition, yet only an average of 2% of health budgets are dedicated to mental health. Many mental health crises, including those linked to substance use, suicidal thoughts, housing insecurity, and poverty, are met with law enforcement responses that expose people to violence, involuntary hospitalization, forced treatment, and displacement. These approaches often worsen the person's situation, rather than addressing their mental health needs.

A Better Solution: Community-Based Crisis Support

To combat this issue, Human Rights Watch and other advocates push for solutions that are community-based and respect human rights. One such solution is exemplified by the Gerstein Crisis Centre in Toronto, Canada, which has been providing humane, rights-respecting mental health crisis support for over 30 years.

Gerstein Crisis Centre operates a community-based model offering free, confidential 24/7 tailored support to individuals experiencing mental health and/or substance use crises. Unlike many crisis response systems that rely on police intervention or hospitalization, Gerstein Crisis Centre’s services focus on equity, safety, and dignity, addressing the root causes of mental health crises, including trauma, housing insecurity, and poverty.

Why Gerstein Crisis Centre is a Good Practice:

1. Rights-Based Approach: Gerstein Centre provides services rooted in human rights and disability justice, ensuring that people in crisis are treated with dignity and respect. The focus is on the person's agency, recovery, and lived experience, rather than simply resolving the immediate crisis with coercive measures.

2. Lived Experience: The centre values the involvement of people with lived experiences of mental health challenges. For example, Kaola, a former service user, now works as a peer supporter at the centre, helping others navigate crises with empathy and understanding.

3. Holistic Services: The Centre provides comprehensive support, from crisis intervention to long-term mental health care. Services include counseling, support with housing issues, and peer support. The Centre’s non-coercive methods foster a recovery environment where people can regain control over their lives.

4. Addressing Power Dynamics: By focusing on non-coercive care, the Gerstein Centre tackles the power imbalances commonly seen in mental health services. It recognizes the importance of empowering individuals in crisis, offering support without the use of force or compulsion.

5. Community Integration: The Centre is deeply embedded in the community, working alongside other local services, and prioritizes building trust with its clients. This model encourages a sense of safety and belonging, which is crucial for people recovering from mental health crises.

Key Lessons Learned and Good Practices:

* Person-Centered Care: Mental health services should be tailored to individual needs, focusing on recovery and the person's autonomy. Gerstein's model encourages decision-making power to remain with the individual in crisis, ensuring that they have control over their care.
* Community Involvement: Human rights-based mental health services must be integrated into the community. Gerstein Crisis Centre works closely with community organizations, fostering collaboration to support individuals holistically.
* Non-Coercive Methods: Rather than relying on punitive measures like police intervention, Gerstein provides compassionate, non-coercive support. This approach prevents harm and ensures that individuals can heal in a supportive environment without fear of being criminalized or institutionalized.

Conclusion:

Gerstein Crisis Centre’s approach provides a clear example of how community-based, rights-respecting mental health crisis services can serve as an alternative to coercive methods like forced hospitalization or police intervention. This model respects the dignity and autonomy of people in crisis, emphasizing their recovery and control over their own care.

By promoting non-coercive, community-based care, mental health service providers and policymakers worldwide can create more just and humane mental health support systems.

Human Rights Watch and Gerstein Crisis Centre hope that this case study inspires governments, mental health providers, and advocates to prioritize rights-respecting approaches to mental health care that center on the needs and experiences of those in crisis.