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Hard Feelings: An Innovative Non-Profit Social Enterprise on a Mission to Reduce Barriers and Increase Access to Mental Health Supports and Resources

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The number of people living without adequate mental health supports is staggering. Barriers to accessing mental health services continue to keep people from getting the help they need to participate fully in their communities and relationships. Services remain out of reach for so many due to long wait-times, lack of affordable pricing, complexities in navigating a confusing health care system, and even the challenge of knowing where to start. As social workers, we see this daily in our work and our communities. We also know that avoiding the problem or waiting for services is not the solution and, in fact, can make things much worse for individuals and families.

To begin addressing some of these service gaps and challenges, an innovative non-profit social enterprise named **Hard Feelings** recently opened its doors in the west

end of Toronto. After several years of researching the feasibility of the model and raising start-up funds from private donors, the project was launched last year to root the practice and gauge demand for service. The organization's mission is to reduce barriers and increase access to mental health supports through an innovative community of practice.

The Practice Model

The intention behind this model is to offer low-cost counselling as an alternative to the current landscape of mental health services in Toronto that focus primarily on either free publicly funded service or market rate private counselling. Hard Feelings exists between these two systems that are unable to meet the needs of a significant portion of the population: those who have limited capacity to pay for service through benefits, income or a combination of both.

Hard Feelings facilitates the delivery of low-cost counselling. Office space is rented to a community of counsellors who are interested in practising within the mandate and framework of the organization: low-cost (\$50-\$80 per session) and short-term (max 12 sessions, with an option of 3 booster sessions within 12 months of service). This short-term counselling model ensures that wait times are minimal and that access to support opens up regularly.

Counsellors

The counsellors at Hard Feelings are a skilled and talented group of professionals with a variety of experiences that enable them to offer service to a broad range of people. Most have full or part-time jobs in the field, and the majority are MSWs whose services are covered by many student and employee benefit plans. The anonymous demographics collected from counsellors indicate an overall client age range of 18-68. Over one-third of clients are students (undergraduate and graduate) and many are young adults who identify as precariously employed.

While counsellors are not providing crisis or complex mental health service, as mental health professionals well know, the work is rarely anything but simple. As a community of practice, counsellors work together to consult through peer supervision and other training opportunities organized by Hard Feelings. Demand for service since opening has meant that new counsellors' caseloads are generally full within one week of starting

their practice. Since opening their doors on September 12th, the counsellors have completed 130 intakes, 115 individuals have engaged in short-term counselling, with 98 individuals currently receiving service at Hard Feelings.

The Storefront

The counselling offices are tucked into a storefront on Bloor Street West where a curated selection of books and self-care products focused on mental health and wellness can be purchased. This storefront is a critical piece of the organization's model, as it offers a space for anyone to come in, ask questions, browse our books and get a recommendation on services or resources. Since opening our doors, over 950 people have walked in to welcome Hard Feelings to the neighbourhood, chat and find out more.



The staff and volunteers in the storefront are an invaluable part of initiating a sense of comfort and connectedness with people who come into the storefront to learn and talk about mental health in a safe and welcoming space. When a potential client has taken the first step and expressed the need for therapeutic support, they are able to make an appointment either in person or through our website by selecting from the bios of available counsellors. They are in contact with a counsellor of their choosing, creating a sense of familiarity and providing immediacy to the process that is often critical in ensuring support is accessed.

Future Directions

The retail portion of the social enterprise continues to grow and consistently meet sales targets. Income from retail sales combined with room rental fees and donations, cover the basic costs of operation. The intention is to grow the store over the next few years to ensure sustainability

and reduce the need for external funding. It is an exciting model that we hope will be replicated within other communities. We are engaged in gathering information and building systems that will enable us to share our practice model with others. The organization is also considering ways to build community online and within the store through events, groups, workshops, and blogs.

Amid the discussions about publicly funded structured psychotherapy, Hard Feelings offers a viable and timely alternative that is getting things done now, while we all wait for decisions to be made. Imagine if there were similar models, tailored to the specific needs and local interests of communities, across Ontario. What might this mean for access to mental health support for individuals across the province who face barriers in accessing and receiving service? How might this positively impact communities by strengthening individuals who then connect and engage in more meaningful ways? What might this mean for professional counsellors and social workers who are interested in participating in meaningful change and growing professionally with the support of an innovative community of practice?

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To find out more, visit www.hardfeelings.org.

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