

Mental health outreach program in peril

Young adults in need
may fall by wayside,
care workers say

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A steady eight months serving lattes at a Montreal café is a huge accomplishment for someone who used to sleep on the streets and fight imaginary enemies.

Alex, 25, is a shy young man, an immigrant from Algeria and a former Olympic athlete. He spoke to The Gazette on condition that his identity be protected.

When he came to Montreal three years ago, his athletic career disintegrated and he became increasingly despondent and paranoid.

Alex, who was recently found to have bipolar disorder, says his mind played tricks on him. When in the depths of psychosis he'd hear voices tell him what to do, and he interpreted everyday gestures — someone rubbing his nose or scratching an ear — as messages.

Last year while hanging out in the métro, Alex destroyed some chairs. On another occasion, he jumped on the transit rails to recover a baseball cap, and received an electric

shock from the live rails.

He has been arrested repeatedly, but the last incident landed him in a locked psychiatric hospital unit. He was too paranoid to speak to anyone for weeks. His social worker says it took Alex two weeks to realize where he was, what he had done and that he needed help to combat his demons.

Alex did get help and today, his life is back on track — he has a job, an apartment and friends. He hasn't touched street drugs in nearly a year.

But funding for the mental health program that helped Alex get his life back is about to end.

Alex is one of about 100 young adults, age 18 to 30, helped by a mental health unit called Projet Equip SOL. The hands-on team was created by the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal in 2012 to target itinerant youth with psychosis, addiction and other concurrent mental health problems.

"There's a huge gap between the hospital and the street. (SOL) is a way for the hospital to get closer to the patient by providing flexible programs," said Didier Jutras-Aswad, a psychiatrist and addiction researcher at the CHUM.

Community mental health experts say they fear that once SOL's funding grant ends March 31, many young people living in desperate conditions will fall by the wayside.

Psychiatrist Amal Abdel-Baki launched the pilot project SOL, whose name roughly means "on the ground" with the idea of looking to the homeless clientele that already frequents downtown community organizations.

Abdel-Baki, who specializes in early intervention for youth with severe mental disorders, worried that health professionals weren't reaching troubled youth fast enough to make a difference.

Abdel-Baki wanted to reach people where they were most likely to respond to aid.

"It's very difficult to help them," she said. "Often they're homeless, they can't be reached or they don't follow through on their (hospital) appointments."

The longer they live on the street, the worse it tends to become for troubled youth, Abdel-Baki said. There's drug abuse, the stress of homelessness, the persistent serious mental disorders and the trauma of increasing vulnerability on the street. Abdel-Baki said these combinations can shatter a young adult's future.

Abdel-Baki was already heading a team of health care workers at the CHUM's clinic for youth with

mental disorders, which had forged links with other community organizations involved with the homeless.

So when a federal grant for SOL came through a year ago in February, Abdel-Baki's team was able to put the project into action immediately.

Their services include help with applying for birth certificates, medi-

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PSYCHIATRIST DIDIER JUTRAS-ASWAD

care and other identity documents, finding lodgings and employment, and above all, facilitating medical appointments for psychiatric treatment at the hospital.

“Also, many have legal problems,” Abdel-Baki said, over criminal behaviour that has led to run-ins with police, so social workers help them sort through fines and other contraventions.

Several local community organizations — including Chez Pops,

Cactus Montreal and the Centre de santé et de services sociaux Jeanne-Mance — have written letters supporting Abdel-Baki and her team's call for more funding to maintain the project, either through an extended federal grant or by transferring the responsibility for the project to the Montreal Health and Social Services Agency.

The team has made a huge difference for Alex.

A youth worker from a downtown youth shelter, Refuge des jeunes, referred Alex to the team when his behaviour became dangerous.

The Refuge worker told SOL: “You have to look after this guy, or he's going to die,” said Nicolas Girard, a member of SOL who became Alex's social worker after Alex jumped onto the métro track.

Convinced he was fine and everyone else was bizarre (a hallmark of psychosis), Alex refused to speak to Girard, who visited him briefly every day in hospital for nearly 20 days.

“At first, I didn't know why I was there,” Alex recalled. “I didn't know that I was sick.”

Finally, a key moment came when Alex said: “If you want to help me,

get me out of here,” Girard recalled. “I said: ‘Okay, but we have to make a deal. We need to have a conversation. What is it that you want to do?’ ” Alex wanted to call his father back home — he hadn't spoken to his family in two months, and they were extremely relieved to hear from him.

Girard also helped Alex find an apartment with supervised living, sort through immigration papers, get a work permit and apply to cancel his police fines, which totalled a few thousand dollars.

Alex started going to Notre Dame Hospital to participate in SOL's weekly art therapy workshops, psycho-education classes and cooking sessions. He has regular appointments with a psychiatrist and takes medication to control his condition.

Alex continues coming to the workshops, “because there are still things to work on,” he says. But instead of seeing Girard every day, it's now once every two weeks.

“You know, when I got out of the hospital, I had nothing ... and little by little, it turned out fine.”

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