

Ventilator program moves out of KGH; Service helps keep patients out of hospitals

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A Kingston General Hospital program that has been providing patients across the province with ventilators so they can stay at home and out of hospitals has moved into a new home.

The Ventilator Equipment Pool, established more than a decade ago, has moved out of its cramped quarters in the hospital and into a spacious new west-end location that is nearly three times the size of its old home.

Co-ordinator Ray Milton says the program, which serves hundreds of people with conditions such as ALS or other syndromes that require help breathing, allows patients to stay in their homes rather than requiring hospital beds.

"We know that keeping people in their homes is better than having them in the hospital," he said. "And more and more people are choosing to stay in their homes."

The program was established in the early 1990s and is funded by the Ministry of Health.

People who require ventilators, essentially a mechanical pair of lungs, are issued one or two through the program - some people need one 24 hours a day while others might only need one when they sleep. There are 6,700 pieces of equipment overseen by the program, ranging from the ventilators themselves to batteries, breathing hoses, humidifiers and other necessary equipment, and the medical gear is recycled and refurbished when the patient no longer needs it, usually after they die.

Equipment ranges from old-style ventilators, which are about the size of breadboxes, to new, sleeker and much smaller modern models. More than 3,200 people have used the program since it began after KGH won the contract to supply the devices in the 1990s and Milton says the operation is moving into supplying other equipment used to monitor patients' health at home, such as fingertip monitors that track a child or an infant's blood-oxygen level and sound an alarm if it dips to a dangerously low level.

That equipment, which might be used by a youngster with a heart condition, for example, also frees up needed hospital beds and allows patients to be cared for in the comfort of their homes.

Four biomedical technicians service the equipment and also act as telephone troubleshooters for patients adjusting to the new equipment that has been shipped to them.

"There's a little bit of telehealth involved in this, too," Milton said.