



CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH ONTARIO

Pre-Budget Submission 2009



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Table of Contents

- About Children’s Mental Health Ontario 1
- Introduction 1
- Policy Framework 1
- Poverty 2
- Funding for 2009-2010 3
- Questions posed for consultation 3
 - 1. During this period of economic uncertainty and fiscal challenges, what should the Ontario government’s top priorities be for the 2009 Budget?..... 3
 - 2. During challenging economic times, should the Ontario government strive to achieve a balanced budget or run a deficit in order to protect priority programs and services? ... 4
 - 3. Given the current fiscal challenges, what government programs could be delayed, phased in more slowly, or eliminated? 5
 - 4. What further steps can the Ontario government take to promote economic growth and job creation?..... 5
 - 5. How can the Ontario government work more effectively with other levels of government and other key partners during challenging economic times? 6
- Conclusion 6

About Children's Mental Health Ontario

Children's Mental Health Ontario is an association that promotes, supports and strengthens a sustainable system of mental health services for children, youth and their families. Our membership includes more than 90 community-based mental health centres which are the backbone of Ontario's mental health system for children and youth. These agencies provide support to families, and treatment to young people who present with a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems, including: bullying, violence, defiance, ADHD, eating disorders, depression, self-harm, anxiety and addictions. Many of these children and youth experience significant impairment in functioning within their families, schools and communities, and may also be involved with child welfare or the youth justice system.

Introduction

Children's Mental Health Ontario recognizes that the global economic crisis of the past few months has changed the way government will determine its expenditures, prioritize and plan. Indeed, the Minister of Finance has indicated, in his recent Economic Update that in order to "protect the quality of our public services as we manage our finances"¹ we will be running a deficit as a province. CMHO agrees strongly with the rationale that "in these uncertain times, Ontario families count more than ever on the vital services that government provides."² Nowhere is that more true than in mental health services for children and youth. As the economy tightens and parents begin to worry about their future, their children struggle to cope and deal with their stress.

Policy Framework

In 2005 Children's Mental Health Ontario partnered with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services as it developed "A Shared Responsibility: Ontario's Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health." This document emphasizes the need for coordinated care across the sector to improve services for all Ontario children and youth up to the age of 18. There has been agreement from all partners on its vision, "an Ontario in which child and youth mental

¹ 2008 Ontario's Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review (p 3)

² 2008 Ontario's Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review (p 2)

health is recognized as a key determinant of overall health and well-being and where children and youth grow to reach their full potential.”

Since the completion of that important work, CMHO has urged the government to move quickly and decisively towards implementing the framework. These past few months the work has begun with the collection of data about the current nature and extent of services through a “mapping” process. Far too much time has passed without enough concrete action towards reaching the goal of fully implementing this framework, and we continue to be concerned by the slow pace of activity. Tens of thousands of children and families in Ontario are in crisis today, and thousands of children are languishing on waiting lists due to an acute shortage of available services.

A Shared Responsibility emphasizes the need for coordinated care- that families and caregivers, communities, service providers, government and all child and youth serving sectors are collectively responsible for the healthy development of Ontario’s children and youth. The Framework applies to all Ontario children and youth up to the age of 18, and provides strategic direction for ongoing improvements over the next decade – improvements that can help ensure that all Ontarians are ready to handle the challenges of the 21st century.

Poverty

CMHO is pleased that Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Plan continues to be a strong government priority. We are also pleased with the focus on addressing child poverty first. Reducing poverty is a very important step in reaching many children who suffer from mental health issues, as there is a strong connection between the two.

According to the Caledon Institute, “entrenched parental poverty effectively starts a chain of social risk leading to reduced readiness for and acceptance of school, poor behaviour and attendance, higher risk of unemployment, low-status jobs and perceived social marginality. The school drop out rate for children living in low income families is twice as high as for other children and carries lifelong implications for employment and income security. Childhood poverty is associated with lower educational attainment, low earnings in

adulthood, a range of psychological problems and greater likelihood of involvement in criminal behaviour.”³

Children’s Mental Health Ontario encourages the provincial government to focus on providing adequate and appropriate funding to child and youth mental health agencies, especially during times of economic uncertainty, as the incidence of anxiety, depression and other mental health issues in children increases.

Funding for 2009-2010

Children’s Mental Health Ontario requests an additional 3% funding for the 2009 – 2010 fiscal year so that child and youth mental health agencies can avoid further cutbacks in staffing and services as they face higher costs for negotiated salary agreements and many other core expenses. Unlike many other government-funded services, these agencies continue to try to recover from more than a decade of frozen revenues while at the same time meeting the increasing demand for services. A 3 percent funding increase in 2004 and a 5 percent increase in 2007 have enabled agencies to maintain services through this year, but children’s mental health services received no new funding for 2008-09, and another year of flat-lined revenue will inevitably lead, again, to layoffs and service reductions. At minimum, a funding increase to accommodate rising core costs is essential if the government is to honour assertions by both the Premier and the Finance Minister that “now is not the time” to cut services such as health and education.

Questions posed for consultation

- 1. During this period of economic uncertainty and fiscal challenges, what should the Ontario government’s top priorities be for the 2009 Budget?**

Children’s Mental Health Ontario believes that the province has a responsibility to ensure that the services needed by families to cope with the stress of a fragile economy are in place, and in some cases enhanced. Minister Duncan has already indicated in his recent Economic Outlook that both our health and education system will remain priorities.

³ Torjman, S. (October 2008) Caledon Institute of Social Policy: Poverty Policy (p 5)

The province has indicated that the education system is an investment in the future, and that families need to know that our system is preparing the next generation to participate in a globally competitive workforce. The province has also placed a huge emphasis on increasing the number of young people who stay in school and graduate. Both of these are laudable goals, and bode well for the future. The fact remains however that as the economy worsens, young people feel stress at home and cannot cope in school. The health care system alone cannot provide the mental health support services these families, children and youth need on an ongoing basis, and certainly cannot do so as cost-effectively as community-based agencies. The province must ensure that the community based child and youth mental health agencies are well equipped to deal with an increase in the number and scope of children and youth who present with mental health challenges because of increasing anxiety and depression at home. Unless and until these children and youth are provided the supports needed to help them remain in school and be productive and ready to learn, further investments in health and education alone will not produce the outcome the government is anticipating.

2. During challenging economic times, should the Ontario government strive to achieve a balanced budget or run a deficit in order to protect priority programs and services?

In its first mandate, the province was focused on reducing the 5.6 billion dollar deficit it inherited, and achieved that goal. Much of its anticipated spending was postponed or cancelled in order to achieve a balanced budget. The global economic challenges we are currently undergoing were not anticipated by any government, and yet we are in the midst of the worst economic climate in generations. Children's Mental Health Ontario supports the recent decision by the provincial government to protect services, and in so doing run a modest deficit. It is a fine balance that government must walk, and priorities must be chosen. Children's Mental Health Ontario believes that the province has a particular responsibility to families who rely on public services to manage during these difficult times. The number of children and youth who need mental health supports to deal with the anxiety and stress increases, often dramatically, during times of uncertainty. This pattern was clearly documented two years ago when demand for mental health services spiked among the children of Petawawa-based soldiers who were deployed to Afghanistan. More recently, we have seen increased demand in communities such as Windsor and Thunder Bay where the current economic downturn hit early and hard. Children's Mental Health Ontario will continue to encourage the provincial government to recognize this fact and provide

additional funding that enables agencies to meet the increasing demand for services, which will inevitably become even greater in the difficult year or two ahead.

3. Given the current fiscal challenges, what government programs could be delayed, phased in more slowly, or eliminated?

Children's Mental Health Ontario agrees with the direction set out in the recent Economic Outlook to stay the course with respect to funding, even in instances where it will be slowed down.

For many years, spending for physical health services has grown significantly faster than inflation, the economy as a whole, or any other part of the provincial budget. Slower spending growth for the next 2 to 3 years in that one sector would free up money for a host of other urgent priorities, including maintenance of community-based mental health services for children and youth.

In 2005 Children's Mental Health Ontario partnered with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on "A Shared Responsibility – Ontario's Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health". This document sets out the vision and goals for the system of child and youth mental health services across the province, and has been agreed to by all partners. The province has been slow to begin its implementation of the framework, and a great deal of work needs to be done. CMHO encourages the government to press forward on this important work. Implementing this framework itself is not an expensive measure, but it is a critical step in informing the government (and its partners) of the true picture of the mental health needs of the children and youth of this province.

4. What further steps can the Ontario government take to promote economic growth and job creation?

The province can continue its investments in education, as a way of ensuring that we have a skilled workforce to compete in the global economy. However, in so doing, it must recognize that a significant minority of children and youth need additional supports to stay in school, let alone excel. One in five children and youth will have mental health needs before they reach the age of 18. Research has proven that early intervention is critical to providing a hopeful and healthy future for kids struggling with their mental health. In order to increase the number of high school graduates who are prepared to enter the post secondary world, we must ensure that they have been provided with all of the necessary supports to excel in

school. Community based mental health agencies all have close working relationships with their local schools. While annual funding increases are consistent on the education side, the children's mental health sector has been woefully under-funded for more than a decade. In only two of those years have there been any increases at all. Unless the province recognizes that the education system alone cannot meet the needs of successfully educating and preparing our children and youth for the future, we will not reap the rewards of a skilled workforce as the province intends.

5. How can the Ontario government work more effectively with other levels of government and other key partners during challenging economic times?

The provincial government should continue to press its case for fairness in all aspects of funding with the federal government. There is no question that the federal government has a tremendous responsibility in ensuring that the manufacturing and resource sectors, the economic engines of Ontario have all of the supports necessary from both levels of government. The global economic crisis we are experiencing will be impacting Ontario for years to come. As families struggle to make ends meet when the economy makes a downturn, our services are in greater demand as kids try to deal with the stress. Simply put, a healthy economy makes for healthier kids, and the reverse is true as well. We encourage and support the provincial government making its case for Ontario's fair share with the federal government, as it will ultimately help our children and youth.

Conclusion

Children's Mental Health Ontario is pleased to have the opportunity to draw attention to the urgent and growing needs of children and youth with mental health problems across the province. Services cannot be maintained in the face of another year of frozen base funding. It is inevitable that waiting lists for children's mental health treatment will continue to grow unless there is new funding to cover at least the cost of inflation. The agencies serving the child and youth mental health needs will also continue to bleed staff to other sectors, such as health and education, who can afford to pay more due to annual increases to those sectors.

Far too many children are being left untreated. There are a half million Ontario children and youth with mental health problems. We urge you to provide a 3 per cent increase to our sector so that programs and staff levels will be maintained. Children's Mental Health Ontario

looks forward to continuing our work with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on the implementation of the Policy Framework, which we believe is critical to our future success – culminating in a stronger system of services for our children and youth, supported by stable, ongoing funding.