

**AGM Remarks – Glen Newby**  
**23 November 2009**

You have all received a written report from Gordon and me that describes many of CMHO's activities and accomplishments during the 2008-09 year. Rather than cover that ground again now, we thought it would be more useful to speak about where we're at today and also look to the near future.

We all follow the media and know that the province is headed for a \$24.7 billion deficit this year. We have heard the Finance Minister say he would prefer to cut specific programs rather than make across-the-board cuts, but we have also heard the rumours about a possible 5 percent reduction to everything except health and education, just as we've heard rumours about Dalton Days and a variety of other scenarios. There have been strong signals that even Health spending increases, if there are to be any at all, will be in the range of 1 percent next year, instead of this year's 3 percent or the recent pattern of 5 to 6 percent. None of these rumours are confirmed, although we are seeing our own Ministry's determination to curtail children's aid society budgets, apparently even though cutbacks may make it impossible to fulfil their legislated mandate.

At this point, all that's certain is that next year's budget has not been written yet. Almost as certain is that when it appears next March it will include no new funding for children's mental health or any other community-based services. In fact, it's almost impossible to foresee any new funding in the near future, unless the economy takes off in ways that are not even remotely evident today. The message from Queen's Park has been consistent for months: let's talk about what more can be done within existing budgets.

This is not a happy situation for our sector nor for the children, youth and families we serve. Despite funding increases in 2004 and 2007, our capacity to serve the mental health needs of Ontario's children has slipped considerably over most of the past 20 years. The gap between needs and services is growing even wider in many communities during the current recession as demand increases, costs still rise, and wait times grow longer. Many people have suggested that our child and youth mental health system is in crisis, and there's no question that there are many, many young people in our province who are in crisis because they have been unable to access the mental health services they need.

Fifty years ago, during his campaign for the presidency at the height of the Cold War, John F. Kennedy pointed out that "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis'. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis," he advised, "be aware of the danger-but recognize the opportunity."

All of us in this room can readily see the danger in continuing to under-treat the mental health problems of our children and youth. We have been talking about those dangers, at Queen's Park and elsewhere, for years. Unbearable family stress. Poor academic performance. Chronic mental illness through adulthood. Lives lost.

But where, in our sector's crisis, do we find opportunity? If the gap between needs and services is not going to be closed for the foreseeable future by more government funding, what can be done? The truth is that this sector, during our prolonged funding crisis, has developed a certain expertise in identifying and pursuing opportunities. Without much support or any leadership from our partners in government, many of us have re-organized services, amalgamated agencies, formed new partnerships, and found many other ways to make scarce dollars stretch further. Many children's mental health agencies have survived and even thrived by launching income-earning social enterprises, or expanding the scope of their work to serve their clients more holistically as multi-service providers. In fact, our commitment and creativity has enabled our sector to maintain or even increase the total number of children we help despite the fact that the problems we see today seem to be more serious, on average, than those we saw 10 or 20 years ago.

But most of us feel that we have pretty much reached the limits of creativity within the current system. There is now an overwhelming consensus that the system itself needs fixing – and that is where our present opportunity lies.

While the Ontario government's deficit has been growing during the last year or more, children's mental health and the broader field of mental health and addictions have been getting increasing attention at Queen's Park. Although we certainly can't take all the credit, it seems that CMHO's advocacy and policy work has finally gotten some traction. We helped to initiate this change with the work we began and led in 2005 to develop a provincial policy framework for child and youth mental health. Our key messages – 1 in 5, the problems are serious, and treatment works – have registered with all parties and Ministry officials as a result of our collective advocacy and awareness efforts during the last four years.

Within the past year or so, the pace of change has picked up considerably with a new Mental Health Policy Framework Implementation Unit in the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the establishment of an all-party Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, the former Minister of Health's commitment – which is being continued by his successor - to improve mental health services for all ages and across government, and new levels of partnership and collaboration between the Ministries of Children and Youth Services, Education, Health, Community and Social Services and several others.

For the first time in decades – perhaps for the only time during our careers – the window of opportunity to reform the child and youth mental health system has opened at Queen's Park. At the community level, we are more than ready for reform. Within our own agencies and communities, we will all undoubtedly continue to pursue new and creative approaches in the way we organize and deliver services. We have been reforming and changing our services for years but have been frustrated by the limitations of the current system. Now, finally, it appears we have a willing partner at Queen's Park ready to work with us to make change happen.

In the current round of community workshops to present mapping results, the Ministry is being clear that they are now ready to start implementing the policy framework that we all helped to create. The goals of that framework – a coordinated and collaborative system that's accountable and well-managed,

and timely access to a continuum of high quality and effective services – are goals that we all strongly support. Fully achieving those goals will undoubtedly require more resources and capacity, but many steps forward can happen now and in the next 2-3 years even without new funding. After all, I don't know anyone who argues that all of the \$500 million now spent on our child and youth mental health system is being used optimally.

As I step down from the Presidency of CMHO, I am very proud of all that we have accomplished on many fronts during the past 2 years. I believe we have laid the table for real system change not only with our advocacy and policy work, but also with our leadership in moving the field towards evidence-based practice, and in our steadfast commitment to continuous quality improvement through rigorous accreditation.

Our challenge and our task during the next 2-3 years is to seize this opportunity for system reform, to ensure that the coming changes are consistent with our values, and the needs of the people we serve. Of course, we must not stop reminding government that children's mental health services are underfunded. We cannot stop talking about the dangers that the crisis in this system presents to the 1 in 5 children and youth of our province who face mental health challenges. But we must also recognize the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that exists now to develop a better system, one that can readily attract more investment in the future. I believe this is our big chance – this can be a game-changing moment in time - and ensuring that the changes arising from this opportunity are the right ones must be our #1 priority for the immediate future.