



# Children's Mental Health Ontario Santé Mentale pour Enfants Ontario

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## **Address to the 2007 Annual General Meeting**

**by Heather Elbard, President – CMHO Board of Directors**

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### **Designing our Future, Visioning and Change Readiness**

2006 – 2007 has been a significant year for CMHO. Many of the goals we established to enhance child and youth mental health supports and services were realized. These included:

- announcement of Ontario's new Policy Framework – A Shared Responsibility, and initial funding for its implementation;
- a significant base funding increase following a successful lobby campaign;
- launch of The New Mentality, our youth engagement pilot project in partnership with the Centre of Excellence;
- expanded government relations activity with MPPs from all parties and officials from the Ministries of Children and Youth Services, Health and Long-Term Care, and Education;
- growth in membership of accredited agencies, other child & youth-serving organizations, and individuals;
- new accreditation standards that define excellence in child and youth mental health programs;
- launch of our strategic planning for the next 3-5 years;
- and the establishment of several new partnerships, including the Ontario Alliance of Children & Youth Associations.

Other significant events in the child & youth mental health field that occurred during 2006-07 were:

- the establishment of the Mental Health Commission of Canada and its various committees including the Child and Youth Mental Health Committee;
- increased training of parent advocates by Parents for Children's Mental Health;
- a Symposium for the Arts and Child and Youth Mental Health hosted by the National Arts Centre and including participation by CMHO;
- collection of more than 10,000 names on a petition organized by the Consumer and Advocates' Network of the Centre of Excellence to draw attention to the need for implementation of the policy framework.

These are not exhaustive lists but speak to and illustrate the commitment of our membership, Board leadership, PCMH development, partnerships with other agencies and groups, and increased national and provincial awareness of the needs of young people and families that struggle with child and youth mental health challenges. Thank you all for your individual and collective work and support. Our special thanks are extended to Gordon and all CMHO staff who continue to support our work with their personal energy, knowledge, skills, commitment and good humour.

As we speak of these achievements we are aware that much remains to be done if we are to develop sufficiently-responsive and available supports and services and become a province where child and youth mental health is recognized as a key determinant of overall health and well being. I believe that CMHO must and will continue to be the cornerstone for mobilization and leadership to make this vision materialize.

Last year I spoke about the power of individual and collective effort and the strength of assuming that we deserve better for our citizens. This year I want to consider with you the power of envisioning change and being ready for it, on both a personal and organizational level. Genevieve Behrer said "We all possess more power and greater possibilities than we realize and visualizing is one of the greatest of these powers. Everyone visualizes whether he knows it or not. Visualizing is the great secret of success." And it was Martin Luther King Jr., that extraordinary leader of social change, who asked us to "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

As I sat by my daughter's intensive care bedside after yet another of her attempts to harm herself in order to get away from that "black dog" of depression, I realized that I was giving up and letting her sadness pervade my expectations for her future. Of course, it was clear that, at that moment, she could not envision a better outcome. But by dwelling only on the sadness I was also failing her and excluding hope and recovery. From that moment of insight I have developed a commitment to the power of visioning and the importance of seeing potential. I am convinced that much of our promise for the future comes from expressing our concerns not as negatives, but reversing them so they became goals or hopes for change. This thought path led me to consider if I was ready to change my own thinking in such a fundamental way. It will be no surprise to many of you that I was not ready. It took a long period of actively trying to change old thinking habits before the new ones emerged.

I share this experience with you because I see parallels in my personal revelation and our mission to promote and provide a sustainable system of mental health services for our children, youth and their families. Our past and on-going frustration, sadness and discontent with our inability to provide adequate services and supports can too easily produce negative reactions to the suggestions that our children's mental health system can get better or improve. We must not allow our skepticism or our focus on today's shortcomings, to obscure the potential for change, for taking positive actions or succeeding with new ideas.

Buddha tells us that "All that we are is a result of what we have thought". Albert Einstein expressed the same idea in different words when he said "Imagination is everything, it is the preview of life's coming attractions." Because I deeply believe like John Lord that "It is leadership that moves values and vision into action", I am asking each of you to continue with your individual and collective efforts to develop a better system for children, youth and their families with mental health problems in the knowledge that this may change many of the systems and services as you know them today.

My own personal journey since that day sitting in the intensive care unit with my daughter changed many of my professional opinions and practice, allowed me to challenge some of my beliefs and actions, and opened opportunities for fundamental change. It expanded my personal space and horizons, creating a cognitive and emotional shift. It brought me to this role with CMHO. I was able to recognize the elements that had caused my despair and negativity and reversed my usually optimistic outlook.

You undoubtedly recognize elements of negativity in your own environments: professional labeling, rationalization, exclusion and blaming of the family, undermining self knowledge, lack of empathy, monopolies of belief and bias, and too little communication or integration between services or service providers. As a family we coped with these, but for me, the most terrible truth was that the health system in Ontario had no obligation to provide for my daughter's mental health and that many of the care-providers indicated that we were fortunate to receive any support or help at all.

As a citizen board member of CMHO and a parent, I would like to share some of the important principles or perspectives I learned on the journey to wellness with my daughter.

The first of these is 'don't talk about us without us'. Please make sure that, within your sphere of influence, you always include youth and families in the decisions relating to your services. The Consumers and Advocates Network at the Centre of Excellence has asked the Deputy Minister to have youth and families included in the current mapping exercise to begin the policy framework implementation; please insist that this happens in your region. Through The New Mentality we are creating a cohort of empowered youth across Ontario with excellent advocacy skills, and PCMH is rapidly increasing its numbers of trained parent advocates. Let's always remember John O'Brien's words that "Expressions of vision arise from careful listening and thoughtful reflection on the experiences and interests of the people concerned."

A second principle I have learned is that we must pursue the inquiry into rights-based services for child and youth who have mental health problems. We have good evidence that needs-based services have produced a flawed and fractured service system requiring major renovation. Perhaps we need to go that further step and consider a new rights-based paradigm for our future. The recently released UNICEF Canada report stated' that without a permanent institutional mechanism, the well being of the next generations of children will remain dependent on the goodwill of parliamentarians rather than on the rights of children'

A third principle or perspective is that, despite working in a system that creates boundaries and limits, we must continue to focus on and support whole families - understanding and serving their unique needs and cultural differences. Never stop bending the rules or advocating so that you can meet real needs. If you know because of evidence based practice that a family needs support and coaching to develop a supportive home environment for their child rather than a residential placement, stay with that objective.

A final principal I urge you to adopt as your own is the importance of engaging all relevant stakeholders in addressing child and youth mental health needs. Insist that your local planning tables are indeed multi and intersectoral. Some regions have achieved this but others have not. Make sure that you have family and youth organizations also at those tables. If you embrace this family and youth input in both system planning exercises and in the operation of your own agencies, you will make sure there are mechanisms in place to support those important volunteers, including remuneration for their expenses.

I know that if we had a longer time together this morning we could add to these perspectives but I want to make sure that the last words come from one of our youth. Here is Elysse's plea, in the form of a poem written at age 16. Her words speak to the core of why we are all in this room and involved in this cause, not only envisioning a better future, but trying to make sure that change happens for our young people. Elysse's poem is entitled "Save Me from Myself":

Tormented inside feelings, a binding strait jacket  
Holding me in  
Hindering my doing  
Hiding the hurt

An invisible monster  
Eating away at my soul  
Silently deteriorating my hope  
No one can see through this visage  
But I can see my arms  
A map of the sorrow  
Kept deep within this smiling Zombie  
Deeper and deeper plunges  
The hurt dragging it out  
Tearing it up now pouring  
From me

Pouring out of my soul  
Through my veins  
Tormenting inside feelings  
A binding strait jacket  
Now spilling  
Save me from myself

Please help CMHO envision a future that answers this plea for help.