



By

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The first week of each May marks Children's Mental Health Awareness across Ontario – an opportunity to bring public attention to this neglected part of our social and health care system that affects more than 600,000 young people.

We can be justifiably proud of the gains we've made together – families, Children's Mental Health Agencies and our Community partners – in reducing the public stigma aimed at those who suffer, and in the strides made in therapy and recovery.

But behind every optimistic headline announcing another breakthrough in children's mental health, there remain very real threats undermining the hard-won advances we've achieved.

Simply put, Ontario's commitment to meet the needs of children and youth with mental health illnesses has not met the demand for service. The system is reaching the breaking point and until the necessary human and financial resources are securely in place, we risk a social and health care crisis that threatens our ability to meet the challenge.

For many, the crisis has already arrived.

The provincial government knows it has a giant problem on its hands. Experts, parents and frontline workers ask why a province as rich as Ontario can fall so far behind other jurisdictions in its handling of this social-health challenge.

The numbers help explain how we've failed to meet our obligations:

- Only one in six children and youth with a mental health disorder in Ontario receives some form of mental health service

- Since 1993 inflation has increased by 31 per cent. But in 14 of those 16 years core funding for children's mental health services has received no increases whatsoever.
- Flat-line budgets result in operating deficits. To avoid deficits programs are reduced or cut, staff is laid off and vacancies go unfilled.
- There are currently more than 11,000 children on waitlists across the province. The waitlists range from three months to more than a year depending on the type of specialized treatment required.

The 2008 provincial Auditor General's report was devastating in its assessment of the problem. Beyond the obvious shortcomings in funding in part due to the lack of a legislated mandate and mandatory funding for services unlike health and education, the report noted that the Ministry of Children and Youth Services has set a 10-year timeline for implementation of its 2006 Policy: "A Shared Responsibility". How long must today's children and youth wait?

One outcome of Ontario's neglect is the exodus of trained practitioners from public services to the private sector. This is creating a two-tier treatment system where low and middle-income families find themselves on long waitlists while those who can afford treatment head off to private clinics.

Regrettably, there's little likelihood we can expect a quick fix to the structural and funding problems facing children's mental health care in Ontario. In government, all three parties have had an opportunity to repair the problem. Sadly, their collective effort has led to today's crisis.

Children's mental health suffers from a lack of political leadership. Advocates for children and youth with mental health needs are already looking forward to the 2011 provincial election where their litmus test for support will rest with the parties' commitment to fixing a troubled situation before it grows even worse.