



# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FIRST

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH ONTARIO  
STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2023

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO)'s primary goal is to promote a coordinated and high-performing system of care so that young people get the mental health supports they need to thrive. We focus on advocacy, partnerships and member support to achieve our objectives. Our 2020-2023 strategic plan, *Children and Families First*, was developed in 2019 in consultation with our members to guide our work as we endeavor to mobilize to create a high-quality system of care that puts children and families first.

**We know what we need to do. The time to act is now.**

Even with the success of past CMHO advocacy that has influenced federal and provincial commitments to children's mental health, the system overall faces serious risks. Services are not provided equitably across the province. Families struggle to navigate to services. Our members have identified a strong desire to focus on quality improvement and improved accountability but there has been little government support including the lack of standardized data collection and measurement which makes this challenging. And the demand for treatment services, which has soared in recent years, continues to rise.

Our members have a strong track record in successfully treating mental health issues among children and youth. There is an urgent need to expand their service capacity, and support everyone's interests in improving quality, standardization, outcome measurement and coordination of services. If we do not take action now, increasing numbers of young people will experience worsening symptoms, and continue to strain the acute or specialized care systems. Over time, lack of care leads to chronic and more severe mental health issues that persist into adulthood. These scenarios can be prevented.



Advocating for policy to support a quality, high-performing system of publicly provided community-based care is critical to achieve our mission to ensure all kids and young people get the mental health treatment they need. Our strategic plan focuses on serving the needs of children and families, as well as CMHO members and partners who support them. Three directions guide our work:

## #1

### **Children and Families First**

Building on our successful grassroots advocacy work, we will expand access to care, improve equity and increase system capacity, so that the needs of all children and youth with mental health issues are met, regardless of who they are, what needs they have or where they live.

## #2

### **Quality Services within a Quality System**

We will support the delivery of high-quality services and advocate for an easy to navigate, high-performing, accountable and integrated system. Through close collaboration with our members and partners, CMHO will at times take the role of leading policy development, but sometimes will follow or support others who are leading, all with the goal of ensuring that key activities are advanced.

## #3

### **Mobilizing for Sustained Impact**

We will promote the expertise and innovation embedded in our membership and further our sector's reputation as leaders in the child and youth mental health system.

Together with our members and partners,  
we are committed to working together to ensure a high-quality  
system of care that puts children and families first.

# CONTEXT

Our children and young people are not receiving high-quality mental health treatment, when and where they need it. Families are struggling as they try to support their children. Despite serving more than 130,000 children and families each year, CMHO members report the need to reach more children, particularly those from priority and marginalized populations, and to improve the quality of the services they deliver.

**CMHO's advocacy efforts in recent years have achieved significant impact:**

- One-third of \$1.9B of Federal Health Accord funds have been pledged specifically to community-based child and youth mental health and addiction services.
- Each Ontario political party has made platform commitments, with two of three referencing CMHO's #kidscantwait advocacy campaign. All indicated children were a priority population.
- The new provincial government has committed to \$1.9B of new mental health and addictions funding, matching the federal commitment.

**KIDS CAN'T WAIT**

Despite the priority given to children's mental health, access to services has generally not improved and hospitalization rates continue to rise. By mobilizing with our members and partners at this crucial juncture, we can create an Ontario in which children and youth get services they need today to set them on the path to good health and well-being for life. There is an enormous opportunity to hold the government accountable for its promises to expand publicly provided children's mental health services.

Rallying those who care about children's mental health is critical to ensure this issue remains a priority and that action is taken. CMHO remains committed to collaborating and partnering with allied organizations and individuals. Sometimes we lead, sometimes we follow and sometimes we support. We will do what is needed to ensure maximum impact for children, youth and families.

► *CMHO is the voice of the "child" in children's mental health. This means advocating for the needs of our children so that they get the services they need...*

*CMHO Member Survey 2019*

## **Mental health stigma declines and demand for treatment services soars**

The demand for child and youth mental health services far exceeds the supply, as evidenced by long wait times for publicly provided services and soaring hospital utilization rates. As mental health stigma has fallen over the last decade, studies have shown that help-seeking behavior by young people and their families has increased dramatically. Publicly provided child and youth mental health treatment services have declined (in real dollars) in that same time period, resulting in chronic under-capacity. This situation has a significant negative impact on both children and families. Recent data reported by the Canadian Centre for Health Economics at the University of Toronto shows that 25% of Ontario families had missed work because their child had a mental health problem, with an annual economic cost to the province of almost \$0.5B. The government has a widely-acknowledged opportunity to invest in treatment services to reduce pressure on hospitals and reduce spiraling healthcare costs. In fact, estimates indicate that early intervention could result in at least \$140,000 per child in estimated lifetime savings.

With the increasing demand for services, there is an urgent need to deal with the growing burden on children and their families, as well as on the services used when community-based care is not available in a timely, equitable or coordinated way. Hospital or social welfare systems face more acute or complex situations, causing needless distress to youth and families and additional costs to the system, which in cases may have been prevented through treatment in the community. If the rates of help-seeking remain high or increase further, the system will become even more overburdened.

While the advent of new digital and technological advancements will have a game-changing impact on the service delivery system, there must also be a focus on ensuring the quality and effectiveness of those services.

## **Recognition of evidence-based treatment to support brain health grows**

Over the last decade, a substantial body of research has pointed to the need to treat mental health issues in children using a bio/psycho/social approach. This holistic framework identifies the biological origin of mental health issues as well as individual personality traits within the social setting of the family. Treatment within the context of families should continue up to the age of 25, according to the research.

Intervening early and effectively is crucial to enable children and youth to thrive and lead healthy, fulfilling and productive lives. Research shows that mental health problems can be prevented and successfully treated. Without early treatment, symptoms experienced in childhood are more likely to become chronic and more severe over time, with a greater effect on all aspects of their lives as youth enter adulthood.



# The System and Policy Landscape

## Challenges in service delivery

Children's mental health services are delivered by a variety of service providers. Families report visiting their family doctor more than 70% of the time when they have concerns. Family doctors report that they receive less than 5 hours of training in children's mental health. They rank the need for more support as a priority, both in treatment delivery and especially in navigating to more specialized services. Specialized publicly provided community-based services support more than 130,000 children, together with their families, annually.

Families and other professionals indicate that services are difficult to navigate and are not connected. Over the years, the government has not had a deliberate, planned, coordinated system. The result is a highly fragmented system with services delivered through diverse settings, including school boards, hospitals, home care agencies, and community non-profit agencies.

The current system is not equitable. We know that our most vulnerable children are not receiving mental health services. Because of that fact, too often they receive their first treatment in youth justice or child welfare settings. This is particularly true of First Nations youth who have experienced substantial trauma that puts them at much higher risk of mental health issues.

Our members have stressed the need to raise the bar on quality and accountability. Individual agencies measure their outcomes, but for a higher-quality system, there is a need to standardize how we measure outcomes, service experiences, and quality and consistency of services across the province. Currently, there are few supports to create a more standardized system, yet this work is crucial to provide meaningful outcome measures, improve quality, and align with government priorities around accountability.



► *Develop quality metrics for evaluating and demonstrating the effectiveness of our services as a sector.*

*CMHO Member Survey 2019*

## Benefits and risks of Ontario Health Teams

Recently, the government has initiated a new health system organization called Ontario Health Teams (OHTs) which is in line with global changes towards more integrated health systems. While there are benefits of integration and collaboration for children and families, there are also significant risks. The population of children, and particularly those with mental health issues, will always be relatively small and thus will not likely be a priority population within Ontario Health Teams. The OHT model may create a risk that the value of community-based agencies is overlooked.

► *Where is our agency best positioned to be sustainable in the future within Ontario Health Teams?*

CMHO Member Survey 2019

From a service delivery perspective, this new policy framework does not contemplate regional and provincial treatment — this is currently the subject of significant debate and analysis. As new regional system designs are created, there is an opportunity to optimize the children's mental health file under both mental health and pediatric service systems but there is a risk that it would be an insignificant part of both. It is critically important that the community-based infant, child and youth service system is not ignored as the government navigates toward new, integrated health system designs.

► *How do we navigate the new environment, have a strong presence in the unfolding new system, and still guard the excellent child and youth mental health services that have been built?*

CMHO Member Survey 2019

## **The evolving policy approach to children's mental health**

The children's mental health file has struggled to find a permanent home in government. This reflects its overlap across social and health services, and the evolving notion that children can have mental health issues. Currently, children's mental health is located in the Ministry of Health, which reflects the government's interests in taking a lifespan approach to mental health and addictions and in recognizing children's mental health as a medical, rather than a social, issue.

The risk to this approach is that the expertise and dedicated focus on early intervention and infants, children, youth and families could get lost in a lifespan approach. Children's service systems are unique, children's presentation of mental health issues is different than adults, the context of the family is unique and treatment protocols are different. However, the lifespan approach may present an opportunity for CMHO to increase the recognition that mental illnesses often originate in childhood or adolescence, and that early, effective approaches to care could prevent the severity or even occurrence of problems in adulthood.

Any policy or system solution must address the lack of capacity and equity in the child and youth mental health care system before it becomes a crisis that amplifies.

► *Continue to provide high quality child and youth mental health services as a coordinated and integrated system of care.*

CMHO Member Survey 2019

## Who We Are

Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) is the association representing Ontario's public providers of infant, child and youth mental health services.

Our nearly 100 member organizations operate in every region of the province, providing treatment and support to infants, children, youth and families. Services include targeted prevention, early intervention, short- and long-term counselling and therapy, addictions services, intensive services and acute care.

With the combined strength of our members, partners, youth and families, our primary goal is to promote a coordinated and high performing system of care that puts children, youth, and families first, so that young people get the mental health supports they need to thrive.

There is much work to be done. Multiple organizations are analyzing policy, conducting research, and developing recommendations for government on child and youth mental health. CMHO is best positioned to lead advocacy for further investment to improve the quality and access of mental health services for children.

**Together with our members we focus on:**

- **Advocating for government investments, policies, and programs that are responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families seeking mental health services in Ontario.**
- **Building partnerships within our sector — and across sectors — with a range of stakeholders, including our members, government, clients, caregivers, and other care providers to align policy recommendations, improve quality and build grassroots advocacy initiatives.**
- **Supporting our members with policy advice on opportunities and issues, and in navigating a dynamic and changing sector.**

## Strategic Planning Process

In early 2019, Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) launched a new strategic planning effort. This process began in the context of a new provincial government whose vision for mental health and addictions care in Ontario included consolidating all mental health and addictions services — including child and youth mental health — within the Ministry of Health, complete with an Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

In April 2019, the CMHO Board gathered to begin developing a strategic plan to shape the future of CMHO from 2020-2023. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss implications of the new environment for child and youth mental health, and to create a draft for discussion with CMHO membership.

This draft plan was refined throughout the summer of 2019. In September 2019, it was presented to the membership at a special strategic planning session at the annual AGM. Members were asked for feedback, revisions, and suggested edits to the draft plan.

Following this meeting, the CMHO Board met to iteratively refine the document and finalize the strategic plan.



Envisioning an Ontario where kids and young people with mental health needs thrive.

## VISION

Ensure all kids and young people get the mental health treatment they need within a high-performing system.

## MISSION

#1 ▶

**Children  
and  
Families  
First**

### Our Goal

Building on our successful grassroots advocacy work, our goal is to expand access to care, improve equity and increase system capacity, so that the needs of all children and youth with mental health issues are met, regardless of who they are, what needs they have or where they live.

### Our Priorities

- Further develop the case for investment in child and youth mental health and advocate for the government to increase the capacity, quality and equity of the child and youth mental health system.
- Advance partnerships to support grassroots advocacy with key stakeholders, most importantly children, youth and families, to ensure that children and families are on the government's agenda.
- Advocate for equity in the child and youth mental health system to ensure access to services.

### Our Key Actions

- We will play a leadership role in developing advocacy approaches to enable equitable, timely, and appropriate care for all those in need by sharing the positive outcomes of additional investment into children's mental health for individuals, families, communities and society.
- We will elevate and support the voices of youth and families to become advocates and leaders for children's mental health.
- We will nurture existing partnerships and build new ones to achieve the greatest impact in Ontario for children and families.

## #2

### Quality Services within a Quality System

#### Our Goal

Our goal is to support the delivery of high-quality services and advocate for an easy to navigate, high-performing, accountable and integrated system. Through close collaboration with our partners, CMHO will at times take the role of leading policy development, but sometimes will follow or support others who are leading, all with the goal of ensuring these key activities are advanced.

#### Our Priorities

- Lead conversations on system design and integration in both pediatric and mental health and addiction services.
- Develop policy solutions for government to advance evidence-informed treatment and improve accountability and consistency across the system, including primary care, acute care, education and children's services.
- Ensure alignment of policy recommendations among partner organizations that develop policy to ensure that government receives consistent messages.

#### Our Key Actions

- We will work to develop a common vision of equitable service delivery within a high-performing system across sectors, including children's health and social services, education, and adult mental healthcare.
- We will inform, support and guide our members about changes and system-wide opportunities, to help maximize their impact within the context of provincial policy directions.
- We will identify where investments and policies are needed across the system to ensure equity, accountability and high-quality standards, providing analysis and recommendations on policy directions to government stakeholders particularly in areas such as diversity and inclusion.
- We will determine how to leverage the benefits of effective data management to strengthen the case for support and hold the system accountable.

# #3 ▶

## Mobilizing for Sustained Impact

### Our Goal

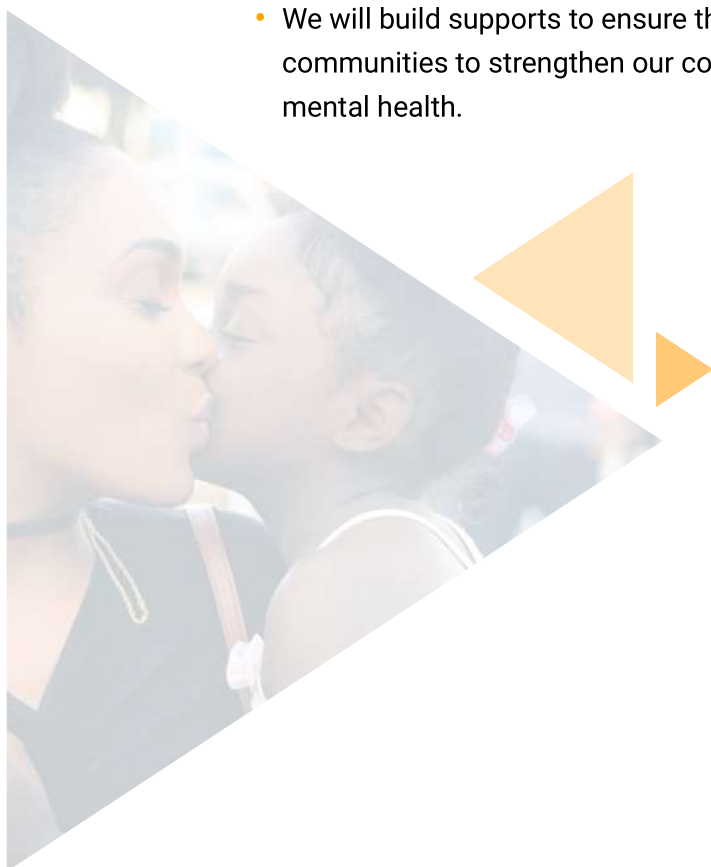
We will promote the expertise and innovation embedded in our membership and further our sector's reputation as leaders in the child and youth mental health system.

### Our Priorities

- Strengthen our capacity by mobilizing new resources and investments.
- Create opportunities for all who want to contribute to positive system change which includes improving equity and enabling clients' voice in governance.
- Support members to maximize their advocacy potential in their communities.

### Our Key Actions

- We will seek opportunities to share resources with others to effectively deliver on our Mission and Vision.
- We will nurture existing relationships and build new ones to achieve the greatest impact.
- We will continue to serve as a credible voice and a thought leader in the sector.
- We will build supports to ensure that our members are ready to take action in their communities to strengthen our collective and shared goal to support children's mental health.





## **What our plan means for CMHO members**

Through collaboration with members across Ontario, we will co-create and drive policy and advocacy efforts that put the mental health needs of infants, children, youth and families first.

## **What our plan means for kids, young people and families**

Our tireless advocacy will ensure that infants, children, youth and families receive the mental health supports and treatment when and where they need them.

## **What our plan means for partners**

All CMHO partners will recognize that they are contributing to achieving an Ontario where kids and young people with mental health needs can thrive.

