

Social Policy • Neurological Health Charities Canada
By Kent Bassett-Spiers, Chair, Ontario Working Group,
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Wired for Success

Next Steps Toward an Ontario Brain Strategy

RECENT ESTIMATES SUGGEST that one in three Canadians will experience a neurological or psychiatric condition in their lifetime. This amounts to more than four million Ontarians—half living with a mental health challenge and the other half living with a chronic neurological disease, disorder or injury (brain condition). The related impact is staggering, not only because the prevalence is so high but also because these conditions affect every aspect of life for entire families.

The impact is magnified by the fact that, for most brain conditions, there are limited treatments but no known cures.

In December 2010, Neurological Health Charities Canada (NHCC) submitted a report to the Government of Ontario titled *Wired for Success: Toward an Ontario Brain Strategy*. This report captured the key themes that emerged from a year of consultation with more than 250 individuals and organizations across Ontario about the needs of Ontarians living with a neurological disease, disorder or injury.

The consultation made two things clear: living with a brain condition is more than a health issue, and regardless of diagnosis, people living with brain conditions share remarkably similar needs. Based on these findings, the NHCC developed an action plan for the government—one that can make a meaningful difference to people's lives today and into the future.

The NHCC decided to focus on collaborating with ministries that have the greatest opportunity to have the most impact. "We have provided the government with tactical recommendations that they can move on now, along with more strategic concepts that will lead to long-term benefit for Ontarians living with brain conditions," explains Kent Bassett-Spiers, Chair of the NHCC's Ontario Working Group. "It was clear that four key ministries could make the most meaningful impact in the short-term—Health, Education, Community and Social Services, and Research and

Innovation—so that's where we focused [our efforts]."

It is important to note that the Government of Ontario recently committed \$15 million to fund a new Ontario Brain Institute through the Ministry of Research and Innovation—an investment loudly applauded by the NHCC.

In making recommendations, it was critical that the NHCC acknowledged the economic realities of the day. "Everyone is sensitive to the current economic environment," says Shannon MacDonald, NHCC's Director of Policy and Partnerships. "We prioritized initial recommendations that are affordable and that build on existing programs while offering value to Ontarians living with brain conditions."

NHCC's report to the Ontario Government includes recommendations to:

- Review current education policies and procedures to better understand how they impact students with brain conditions.
- Enrich Ontario's academic curriculum to include grade-appropriate education about the brain.
- Pilot a multi-disciplinary neurological clinic in Northern Ontario.
- Integrate neurologists with Family Health Teams.
- Enhance and refine medical-school curriculum to focus on general neurology.
- Provide access to a navigator or specialized-services advocate who is knowledgeable about the local-system programs and services and who can provide information and supports through transitions.
- Strengthen the new assessment procedure for Developmental Services and Supports for the transition from childhood to adult services.
- Provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration between researchers, innovators policy makers and consumers with an annual Brain Summit.

■ Launch an annual design competition to develop innovative solutions to challenges faced by those living with brain conditions, with a long-term goal of positioning Ontario as a leader in the neurological marketplace.

■ Establish an inter-ministry panel that meets regularly to identify issues, speak with experts and be responsible for the coordination of services for those at key transitions, including the transition from childhood to adulthood.

As our population ages, the prevalence of neurological conditions is expected to increase significantly. For example, the number of Ontarians with dementia is expected to increase to 2.3 times the current level by 2038. In 2006, the World Health Organization reported that "a large body of evidence shows that policy-makers and health-care providers may be unprepared to cope with the predicted rise in the prevalence of neurological and other...disorders and the disability resulting from the extensions of life expectancy and aging populations globally."

The NHCC has proposed a starting point—a reasonable set of actionable steps that will get us on the right path. This work is important to millions and millions of people in Ontario, across Canada and around the world. Through this work we have the opportunity to help people live better lives, as individuals, families and whole communities.

Neurological Health Charities Canada is a coalition of 26 health charities working to improve the quality of life for Canadians living with a neurological disease, disorder or injury. For more information, visit mybrainmatters.ca or contact Shannon MacDonald, Director Policy and Partnerships (shannon@mybrainmatters.ca). To access the full set of recommendations, visit mybrainmatters.ca/en/ontario-brain-strategy.

