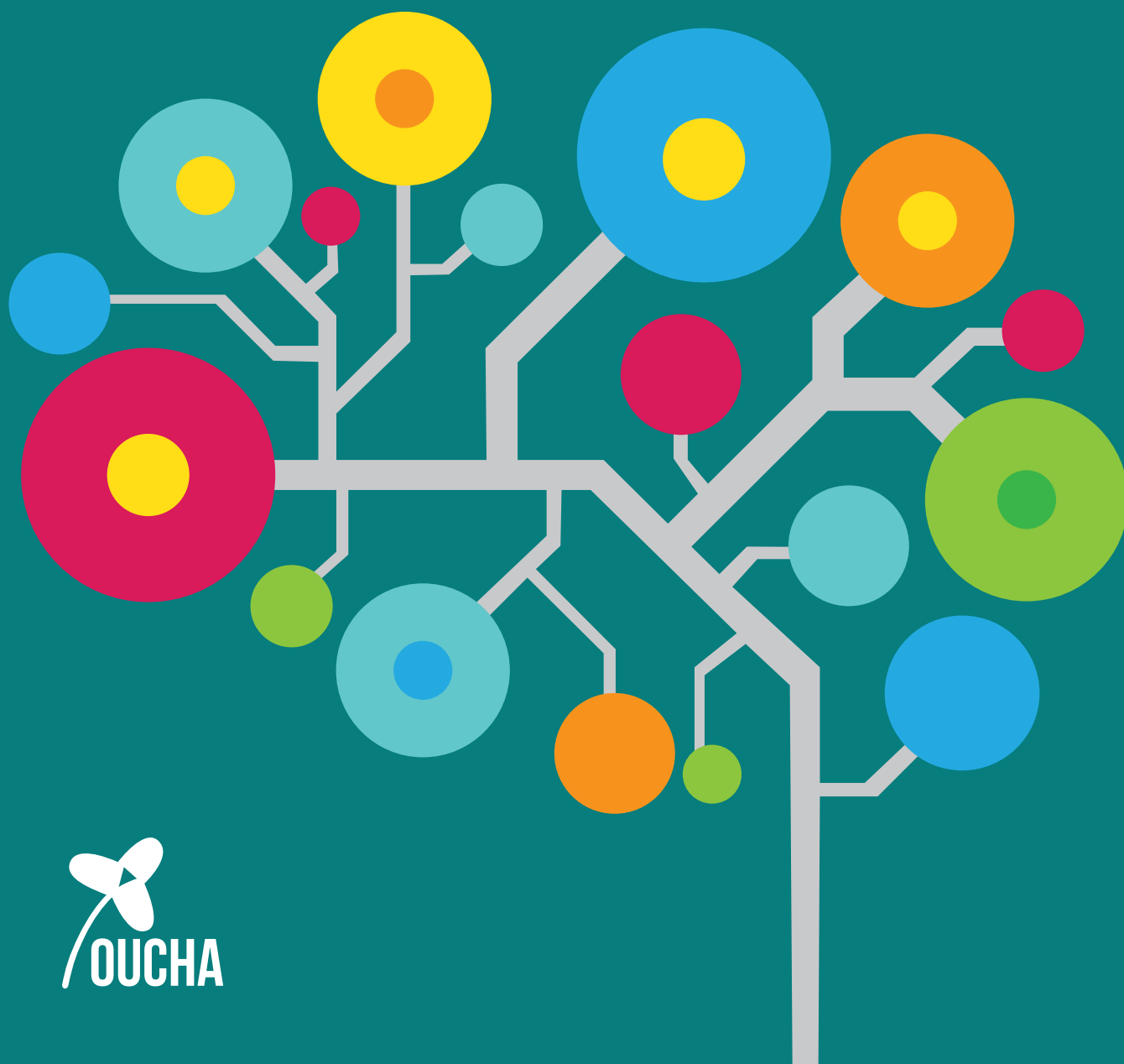# Supporting the Mental Health of Emerging Adults in Ontario's Post-Secondary System

Ontario University and College Health Association (OUCHA)

OUCHA

Introduction

The Ontario government is committed to creating a province where everyone enjoys good mental health and well-being throughout their lifetime[i][ii]. This is laudable from a humanitarian perspective, but also makes financial sense. Drummond[iii] estimated that people managing with mental health issues costs the Ontario government $39B a year including 75% productivity lost for the people and their families. Early intervention and prevention are the best ways to reduce future costs and create a sustainable system. Targeting these efforts to the post-secondary population provides necessary reinforcement of the province's future health and human capital.

How are we, as a society, going to improve the mental health and well-being of our citizens? Three quarters of lifetime mental disorders have first onset by the typical post-secondary education age range of 18-24. Early detection and treatment of mental health and addictions issues have the best clinical outcomes, and are the most efficient method of addressing them. Therefore, identifying and treating mental health and addictions issues in 18-24 year olds is the most sustainable model of mental health and addictions treatment.

"Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Canadian youth and one in five of all deaths among young adults age 15-24 are due to suicide."[1]

The greatest concentration of 18-24 years olds is in Ontario's colleges and universities. In fact, 83% of Ontario's Emerging Adults participate in post-secondary education. This is expected to rise with the Ontario government's increasing support of post-secondary education tuition.

Approximately 800,000 Ontario post-secondary students have variable access to health care on campus. Some campuses facilitate free access to physicians, nurses, counsellors and allied health providers such as dieticians and health promoters, but these services are disconnected from the broader healthcare system, and they are often minimal if they exist at all. Funding streams for these services are cobbled together from OHIP, student fees, and institutional funds. As a result, Emerging Adults –many living away from home – do not always get good care when and where they need it most.

We are members of the Ontario University and College Health Association (OUCHA) and represent health and counselling professionals in Ontario's post-secondary institutions. The purpose of OUCHA is to develop and pursue all measures which will preserve and improve the health of post-secondary students and their respective communities [iv].

It's time for a comprehensive mental health and addictions plan to support Emerging Adults in Ontario.

Why are we concerned about Emerging Adults?

The term "Emerging Adults" (EA) refers to people ages 15-24; a time of life characterised by enormous transition.

 "Three quarters of lifetime mental disorders have first onset by the typical college age range of 18-24".[v] This is the life stage during which early symptoms of diagnosable disorders emerge. Left undiagnosed and untreated, students are vulnerable to more serious symptoms, significant impacts on day-to-day functioning and are more likely to disengage from services and leave school. This combined impact makes prevention, early identification and intervention critical.

Emerging Adults attending post-secondary education go through a number of complex transitions:

- They transition to less structured and often stressful post-secondary learning environments;

- Many move from living at home and being supported by their parents to living away from home without significant daily family support, and;

- Their identities shift from child/youth to adult, requiring new skills and approaches to finances, relationships and life planning.

"Unaddressed mental health and substance use issues lead to underemployment and lack of workforce participation and they increase the human and economic burden of mental health problems and illnesses." [vi]

Students who access mental health care as youth require a shift from pediatric health care to adult health care during their time in post-secondary. International studies show around 50% drop out rates in engaging with mental health services transitioning from child to adult services. [ix] If the student also changes geographical location, an entire new health care team must be implemented. Post-secondary institutions are well positioned and often play the role of bridging students from pediatric to adult health care provision.

Emerging Adults are just starting to develop skills of decision-making and independence. When mental health and addictions issues arise, who are these students going to seek help from? Navigating the health care system can be enormously challenging, particularly in times of transition or diminished mental health. Many students live, study, and work within a very small radius of their academic institutions. Ensuring Emerging Adults have easy access to services at their Post-secondary Institutions will improve health and educational trajectories.

Facts:

1. The 2016 NCHA survey of 25,000+ Ontario Post-Secondary students showed that:

46%

had felt so depressed that it was difficult to function

65%

had experienced overwhelming anxiety

13%

had seriously considered suicide

11%

had attempted suicide

2. 15-24 year olds have the highest rates of alcohol and illicit drug dependence compared with any other age group in Canada [viii] .

3. Mental health problems experienced by children, youth, and young adults are increasing with estimated rates of at least 50 percent by 2020 [ix].

50%

4. University students are more likely to report mental illness symptoms than non-university students [x].

5. The number of students registered with mental illness disabilities within Ontario's post-secondary institutions increased 433% between 2004 and 2014 (MAESD).

433%

Post-Secondary: The Right Time and Place to Support Emerging Adults

Building an appropriate funding model to support Emerging Adults on Ontario's post-secondary campuses.

MENTAL HEALTH IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE. THE PROVINCE NEEDS A PLAN TO SUPPORT EMERGING ADULTS WHERE THEY CONVERGE – OUR CAMPUSES.

The Government of Ontario is invested in providing health care in the right place, at the right time for its citizens. The convergence of Emerging Adults to our post-secondary institutions provides an exceptional opportunity to facilitate early intervention and support for this segment of the population. Current wait times within community and hospital-based mental health

"I'm on OSAP and can't pay for off-campus help. Being able to talk to a doctor and a counsellor on campus for free got me back on track. I wouldn't be in school without them."

–Second year student, University of Guelph Humber

services is such that many students would be at serious risk of dropping out of school before they make it to the top of waiting lists. Students require timely access as close to their home/school as possible.

There is an increasing recognition that mental health issues are a growing concern that impacts the business of post-secondary education [xi]. Anxiety and depression are among the most prevalent afflictions impacting

"I had problems with self harm, depression, anxiety and a few other things and after 4 years of working with my counsellor on campus I have learned ways to cope. My counsellor was able to refer me to get accessibility help when I mentioned I was having trouble reading and I now have the Kurzweil program on my computer and my grades went up exceptionally with all the help."

- 4th year student at Laurentian University

post-secondary students [xv], and several studies have linked these directly to academic performance and student attrition [xvi]. In 2015, post-secondary stakeholders in Ontario identified mental health as an issue that consumes significant institutional resources, and they also recognized that support in this area needs to continue. Increasingly, post-secondary institutions understand that efforts geared to student retention must include support for student mental health, however, building appropriate funding models and partnerships within the broader health system to support these needs has proven difficult.

To support student success and retention, many post-secondary education institutions offer a range of health promotion, counselling, and medical services that are all under increasing pressure and demand. Each institution has to stretch resources to develop their own suite of services from funding options available to them with varying levels and standards and accountability. Under funding and referral to community walk-in clinics and emergency rooms can lead to episodic and discontinuous care for mental health and addictions issues. This does not meet the government's goal of having equal access to health services for all Ontarian.

The lack of coordination between campuses and the public health system results in poor transfer of care for students; prevents comprehensive systems design with shared standards and evaluation; and results in lost opportunities in creating efficiencies and for sharing the expertise to support Emerging Adults. Separation from the public health and regional health systems (LHINs) also results in lost opportunities for better health management of Emerging Adults with a preventative and population health perspective.

A recent Mental Health Commission of Canada report on Emerging Adult Mental Health identified education settings as important access points for mental health services. "Schools could serve as health care hubs, offering services such as mental health support and care and sexual health education and services, including specialists such as psychologists, social workers and mental health nurses. There is particular urgency around ensuring that appropriate, integrated and well-developed mental health policies and supports are developed and enhanced at the post-secondary level" [xviii].

Where are we now?

Shifting from project funding to a provincial plan to support Emerging Adult mental health.

THE CURRENT HEALTH CARE SYSTEM PUTS MORE EMPHASIS ON HIGH COST ACUTE AND HOSPITAL CARE THAT POTENTIALLY CONTRIBUTES TO ONLY 25% OF HEALTH OUTCOMES[XII].

"[Having access to health and counselling support on campus] means getting access to the services to get help before it is too late and the issue has gotten worse."

– McMaster University student

The Drummond Report recommends a refocus from acute care to health promotion/early intervention/community care for improving critical efficacy and cost-savings. This shift is a critical part of the Open Minds, Healthy Minds Strategy.

The MOHLTC goals of improving access to more coordinated and integrated care for patients that informs patients and protects the health care system is commendable[xiii]. However, the current proposal in Patients First to tie patients to a geographical location will limit access to care for Emerging Adults and exacerbate their disengagement from health services, which are particularly critical for those with mental health and addictions issues. Many students travel great distances to post-secondary institutions and call their campuses home for the duration of their studies; they need to access care easily within these new locations.

The 2011 Open Minds, Healthy Minds strategy initiated a focus on child and youth mental health in Ontario. Since then, the Ontario government's $27M investment in Emerging Adults in post-secondary education has made an impact through improving access and processes through Good2Talk, Mental Health Innovation Funds projects, and the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health. These initiatives have helped to create a network of post-secondary clinicians and practitioners who specialize in Emerging Adult care. However, there now needs to be a bold comprehensive plan that goes beyond individual projects to necessary systemic and sustainable change to ensure Emerging Adults are optimized to their fullest capacity.

A comprehensive plan for Emerging Adults

Establishing a comprehensive mental health and addiction strategy and sustainable system for Emerging Adults with clinical hubs located on or near Post-secondary institutions and linked with broader health care systems is well aligned with provincial objectives:

Government Initiatives/Reports	Alignment
Open Minds, Healthy Minds (2011)	Mental health and addictions care will be delivered on or near campuses. Core institutional and community services will be identified at the regional and local level. Locating services on post-secondary campuses will provide the right care at the right place at the right time.
Drummond Report (2012)	Addressing mental health and addictions in post-secondary educational settings, will impove the education and income factors that explain 50% of health outcomes. Utilizing the existing expertise, services, and infrastructure at post-secondary institutions where large populations of Emerging Adults are located will contribute to cost effectiveness and efficiencies.
Ministers' Mandate Letters: Collaborating on shared responsibilities (2014)	Government silos must be crossed to enable the development of a new system and models to support Emerging Adult mental health. Developing community mental health hubs on or near post-secondary education campuses will require the cooperation of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development and the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care in order to provide services and build a culture of health and community wellness. Transitioning care from child and youth services, the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services is the right step forward. Services will need to address other social needs as they impact mental health (Ministry of Community and Social Services). The goal is to increase the number of graduates with optimal health to help build our future economy (Ministry of Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure).
Open Minds, Healthy Minds (2014)	Supporting clinical hubs for Emerging Adults on or near post-secondary institutions will be most effective at acting on the five strategic pillars of promoting mental health and well-being, ensuring early identification and intervention, providing the right care at the right time in the right place with funding based on need and quality.
Patients First (2015)	Connecting post-secondary institutions with regional and public health structures will help create effective integration of services, manage health services and resources better, improve population health, and provide better access and transitions for Emerging Adults with mental health concerns.

Next Steps

It's time to develop a bold system that will comprehensively address the mental health and addictions needs of Emerging Adults. The path forward involves finding new ways to:

1. Partner with the Post-secondary sector in developing action plans that aligns with the recommendations of *Taking the Next Step Forward: Building a Responsive Mental Health and Addictions System for Emerging Adults;*

2. Develop regional mental health and addictions strategies for Emerging Adults that identify Post-secondary Institutions as partners in improving timely access to services;

3. Capitalise on the convergence of Emerging Adults on campus by locating clinical hubs for mental health and additions on or near Post-secondary institutions.

Now is the time to act! Delays will result in increased health, social and financial costs to individuals, communities, and society that we cannot afford.

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End Notes

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