

February 3, 2004

Standing Committee  
Finance and Economic Affairs  
Room 1405, Whitney Block  
Queen's Park  
Toronto, ON M7A 1A2  
Attention: Katch Koch, Clerk

**Re: Pre-Budget Consultation**

Dear Committee Members,

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario appreciates the opportunity to participate and provide input into the Government's pre-budget consultation process.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is a non-profit family-based organization with over 1,400 members and 32 chapters across Ontario. We provide support, education, and advocacy on behalf of families and people affected by schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a serious but treatable brain disease that can deprive a person of contact with reality. It is one of the most serious mental illnesses and is the third most disabling condition of all physical and psychiatric conditions.<sup>1</sup> Schizophrenia, often referred to as 'youth's greatest disabler', generally strikes young people at the prime of their lives, in their late teens and early twenties. For most people, schizophrenia is a chronic, lifelong and cyclical illness.

One in 100 people will develop schizophrenia in their lifetime. In Ontario, this translates to over 120,000 people.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (2001). *The World Health Report 2001, Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope*. Geneva

Schizophrenia has very high economic and social costs:

- In Canada, direct and indirect costs of schizophrenia including health care and administration costs, income assistance, lost productivity, and incarceration are approximately \$4.25 billion annually.<sup>2</sup>
- Less than 20% of people with schizophrenia are employed in the competitive market place.
- Suicide is the leading cause of premature death among people with schizophrenia; approximately 10% will die from suicide.
- People with schizophrenia are over represented among the poor, homeless and prison populations.

Recent developments in the treatment of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses that are characterized by psychosis (a break from reality), have led to significant improvements in the recovery of people affected by schizophrenia or psychosis. These new treatment strategies, known as “Early Intervention in Psychosis”, refer to a set of specialized treatment strategies including: optimal doses of medication, psychological therapy, patient rehabilitation including vocational rehabilitation, and family and community education.

Early intervention and comprehensive treatment is vital for improved recovery from schizophrenia and other psychotic illnesses. Early intervention leads to:

- Improved prognosis and more rapid recovery
- Lower treatment costs and decreased need for hospitalization
- Lower medium to long term health care costs
- Lower doses of medication being needed
- Minimized disruption of school and employment
- Reduced family disruption and distress
- Reduced risk of suicide (many patients attempt suicide before they receive treatment)

Governments around the world are investing in early intervention programs and are recognizing that early and comprehensive care means the difference between long-term debilitating and costly illness, and illness that can be managed as part of a productive life. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the government has targeted the funding of 50 early intervention services by

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<sup>2</sup> Health Canada (2002). *A Report on Mental Illness in Canada*. Ottawa, Canada.

2004, in light of the “growing evidence that early assessment and treatment can reduce levels of morbidity.”<sup>3</sup>

Although five “Early Intervention in Psychosis Programs” are currently operating in Ontario, these programs are unable to meet the high demands in Ontario. The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario encourages the Ontario Government to support the expansion and development of new Early Intervention programs to ensure that all people receive treatment as early as possible and that the devastating consequences of psychosis are reduced.

Ontario is poised to take immediate steps to expand early intervention programs in the province. A province-wide multi-stakeholder group, known as the Ontario Working Group on Early Intervention in Psychosis, has been working closely with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, to expand early intervention programs in this province. This Group, which includes representatives from existing and emerging hospital programs, family, consumer and community organizations, has developed a detailed strategy and proposal to enhance or develop early intervention programs in each of the nine Ministry of Health Implementation Task Force regions. This would ensure that people in all parts of Ontario have better access to early intervention services.

This proposal for expansion of Early Intervention programs has been submitted by the Working Group to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and would cost approximately \$12 million annually.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario recognizes that the government is currently grappling with a large deficit and is looking for cost savings rather than new expenditures. For this very reason, we recommend that the Government fund this expansion of early intervention as a strategy for containing both mental health care and social costs in both the short and the long run. A \$12 million investment in Early Intervention now, will save the government in health care costs, particularly hospitalization, lost productivity, and social costs.

The Mental Health Implementation Task Forces identified early intervention as one of the priorities for mental health reform in Ontario. In addition, the

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<sup>3</sup> In Spencer, E., Birchwood, M. and D. McGovern (2001). Management of first-episode psychosis, *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*. 7: 133-142.

Mental Health Policy Unit of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is currently completing a policy framework which could guide early intervention program expansion in Ontario.

Early intervention is a critical priority for young people and their families across Ontario. By funding the establishment of new programs, and expansion of existing programs, the Ontario Government will:

- Profoundly affect young people. Young people who would otherwise be likely to become dependent on government support will instead be given the chance to become productive members of society.
- Deliver immediate benefits in terms of lower hospital use, better clinical outcomes and success in school and work.

As is so often pointed out, ‘young people are our future’. The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario urges the Ontario Government to support early intervention to ensure that young people with mental illness are given every possible opportunity to become active and productive citizens.

We trust that you will be able to incorporate Early Intervention into your overall budget recommendations

Thank you for considering our submission.

Sincerely,

Mary Alberti  
Executive Director