

Healthy Babies Healthy Children – Meeting with Minister of Children and Youth Services

On July 28th 2010, alPHa met with Minister of Children and Youth Services Laurel Broten to discuss the importance of a renewed political commitment to the HBHC program. alPHa was represented by Linda Stewart (Executive Director), Valerie Sterling (President), Paul Roumeliotis (COMOH Chair) and Ian Gemmill (MOH – KFLA).

An information package was provided to the Minister in advance of the meeting, consisting of a covering letter and a selection of local board resolutions and other advocacy pieces from alPHa and its members dating back to 2001. The package may be viewed here - http://www.alphaweb.org/docs/lib_013002146.pdf

Dr. Roumeliotis referred to the growing body of evidence that demonstrates the measurable impact of interventions in early childhood on health outcomes throughout the lifespan (including heart attacks and cancer later in life) as well as development into adulthood. The importance of supports in early childhood to the success of the current Government's full-day learning for 4- and 5-year olds was also emphasized.

The HBHC program was then specifically discussed as a chronically underfunded program for which there is a growing need, and which is regarded as one of the most important among Ontario's public health programs and services, serving as a point of entry to a broader network of services aimed at addressing developmental obstacles for children in high-risk families.

Dr. Gemmill indicated that current resources allow him to reach 27% of targeted families in his area, well short of the 75% minimum goal of the program. He also reported that his obligated municipalities withdrew \$ ¼ M from their reserves to maintain that level of service for one more year, an extraordinary measure that will not be repeated.

It was explained that the program is predicated on the ability to identify at-risk families, which is best served by an initial screening for all new births, referral of possible high-risk ones to public health nurses for follow-up and possible ongoing supports through home visits and subsequent referral to other services. This kind of follow-up, while aimed at the children, also provides opportunities to provide beneficial public health education and information to the family as a whole.

Dr. Gemmill reiterated that the highest-risk families need to be actively sought out, as they are by definition less likely to avail themselves of beneficial information, programs and services (including basic medical ones) for family health.

While she demonstrated that she understood the design and intent of the HBHC program quite well, she invited a discussion about how to ensure that it is as efficient as can be, especially in the current fiscal climate. She shared her own experience of receiving a call when she became a new mother and wondering if this was a wise use of such a resource. She suggested that broader thought needs to be devoted to devising other ways to foster knowledge within communities so that all people know what programs and services are available to them before they need to make use of them.

She also indicated that key evidence is often missing as concrete justification for all of the elements of the program. This is especially important in a health system that she acknowledged is set up to allocate its resources to treating a stroke victim before enhancing a speech-language program. She asked, for example, what the measurable outcomes of the 5-day visit are. Dr. Roumeliotis indicated that he would forward some of what he has to inform future discussions.

The Minister then referred to the work that is just beginning on the fuller 0-12 year-old strategy, and indicated that there has not been any specific discussion of the HBHC program as yet, but there would likely be opportunities to take a broader look at what it is meant to achieve.

Valerie Sterling thanked the Minister for this initial and productive discussion, indicating that alPHa wishes to position the HBHC program in a way that assists the Government in meeting its priorities in poverty reduction, giving children a strong start in life and restoring its once-strong economy.

alPHa will be following up with the Minister with a letter of thanks, as well as an invitation to a future alPHa meeting, and will be actively seeking opportunities to secure a voice at the planning tables for the 0-12 years strategy.

Please direct any questions about this information through Gordon Fleming at the alPHa office (gordon@alphaweb.org).