

Call to action by Fetal Alcohol working group



Isolation and loneliness are depicted in this image by graphic artist Ren Lonechild, which shows a woman drinking during her last trimester of pregnancy, thereby risking Fetal Alcohol Disorder to her baby. Lonechild is a graphic artist who lives in North Hastings and uses traditional pencil sketches to portray social and political issues. Photo by Ren Lonechild

By Sarah Vance

Fetal alcohol syndrome is a disorder caused by a mother drinking alcohol during her pregnancy; the risk increases with the frequency and amount of drinking.

The condition can create physical, intellectual, and behavioural problems in the children born with it. A person may have a life-long learning and problem-solving disability. In other words, it is a serious problem for both the sufferer and society.

There are 300,000 diagnosed people living with FASD in Canada; 130, 000 live in Ontario, where the ratio of those affected is one in a thousand children.

The Ontario government has initiated 25 cross-ministry roundtable sessions to facilitate dialogue amongst service providers. Out of these sessions, a provincial Fetal Alcohol strategy is being developed; it is set to launch this month.

In Bancroft, a small working group has begun addressing local needs. They're working out of LifeHouse Support facility on Bridge St.

Maryann McConnell-Post and Betty Ann Cornelius have been instrumental in spearheading the call for action, which seeks more consolidated support mechanisms for families coping with the long-term effects of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder.

?I have reached out to over twenty organizations, making telephone calls and sending emails,? said Maryann, an educator, who is

hoping that the provincial strategy will result in initiatives to bridge local gaps. "Over the years I have watched other communities obtain funding, but year after year, I see little action taken in our region."

Last Monday, community support workers from CanGrands (a support organization for grandparents and Kinship families who are raising grandchildren or extended family members), joined with The Ontario Early Years Centre and North Hastings Community Integration to identify regional barriers, and to pursue outcomes sought by local families and children who were also in attendance. "Our goal is to establish a regional advisory group, combined with a parent caregiver support group, with partners in Picton and Belleville," said Maryann. "This is an issue which affects women and we would like to see Maggie's Tamarack at the table. In the future we hope to talk with policing and parole boards, because there is a ripple effect in the justice system."

Education and access to support are priorities for this working group, which has identified that geographic barriers present obstacles for families.

"I think we need to start during the early years and also provide a strategy for educating teachers about what Fetal Alcohol is," said Betty Ann Cornelius of CanGrands, who co-facilitated the meeting on Monday night. "It is not about blaming or shaming, but of providing community education for people from all walks of life."

"Services like Children's Mental Health and Bancroft Community Transit do provide amazing supports," said MaryAnn, who has noted that FASD children do not identify within traditional care models. "Many families are left asking where they fit in."

Conversations directed at reducing the stigma associated with fetal alcohol syndrome, as well as therapies to address the effects of this disorder, continue to be outcomes sought by families in North Hastings. The North Hastings FASD Support Group has developed a Facebook page to help spread the word.

Equine and animal therapies are some of the steps that local families have taken to pursue enhanced outcomes.

"I am thrilled that we have started the ball rolling, because there is a definite need in the community," said Betty, who is a provincial advocate for elders raising grandchildren.