

LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

Response to **Every Door is the Right Door** Discussion Paper
August 2009

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) is the provincial association representing the interests of persons with learning disabilities throughout Ontario. Originally founded in 1963 to assist parents of children with learning disabilities to obtain access to special education services, the LDAO has expanded its mandate to include adolescents and adults who have learning disabilities.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario is pleased to respond to the discussion paper on developing a provincial strategy for mental health and addictions. People with learning disabilities (LDs), of all ages, represent the largest disability group in Ontario. Learning disabilities influence all areas of a person's life, including education, transitions to postsecondary education, sustainable employment, poverty and social assistance, mental health, contact with the justice system and corrections. This is despite the fact that with early identification and diagnosis, the proper accommodations in education and training, and support for individuals and families, people with learning disabilities can become among the most creative, and productive members of society.

Like mental health problems, learning disabilities (LDs) are invisible and are subject to misconceptions and lack of awareness. There is a strong correlation between LDs and mental health issues. The results of LDA Canada's applied research study, **Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities** (PACFOLD), 2007 reported that:

- 14.7% of parents of children with LDs said that their child had been diagnosed with emotional, psychological or nervous difficulties, while parents of children without disabilities reported only 1% of such diagnoses.
- Persons with LDs were more than twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, visits to a mental health professional and poorer overall mental health compared to persons without disabilities.

The Canadian Council for Learning 2009 report, **A Barrier to Learning: Mental Health Disorders among Canadian Youth**, stated that "co-occurrence rates between learning disability and depression are very high. Depression and anxiety are often a response to the learning disability, especially among girls."

The 2009 **State of Learning Disabilities** report from the National Center for Learning Disabilities states that "over 14% of incarcerated juveniles are identified with LDs". Other estimates of youth and adults with identified or unidentified LDs in the correctional system have been higher, for both the US and Canada.

Therefore learning disabilities need to be included in risk factors associated with mental health issues and addictions, and screening for LDs must be part of any in early identification and intervention programs. Specialized training for all professions involved in early identification must include information about learning disabilities and their effects on individuals and families.

Comments from individuals with LDs and/or parents who participated in focus groups in the PACFOLD study are included in *parentheses* to illustrate some of the effects of LDs.

I was teased when I was in school. I was very angry. I spent time in the principal's office, so I missed classes. I also had to stay in class during recess, so I couldn't play with the other kids.

My child wrote her first suicide note in grade 4. She was self-mutilating at 13. She was never invited to go anywhere. The phone never rang for her. She was very lonely.

The lack of identification of my learning disability made me a bit of a black sheep in my family. It had a profound impact on me. My extended family really judged me. I got involved with alcohol and drugs. Maybe if I had been diagnosed, these other secondary issues wouldn't have arisen.

Families of children, youth and adults with LDs deal with enormous stress, not only in their interactions with the individual who has LDs, but also in their pursuit of help from the education and health systems.

My mental health can't withstand meetings about my son all the time. The emotional impact is draining for parents. There's a cost there as well.

The learning disability has put tremendous stress on my marriage. We broke up for a little while because of the cumulative stress.

By the time my son was in grade two, the tantrums were starting. It was becoming way too much for him. There would be two to three hours of tantrums every night. I had to stop working full-time because I couldn't deal with the stress.

Families of individuals with LDs, with or without co-occurring mental health issues, need access to information, education, guidance and support through programs such as parenting support, peer support and respite care. 'System navigators' to help guide families through the mental health 'system' would be very useful, and such persons should be aware of relevant supports and services for individuals with LDs.

Individuals with LDs need to have a smooth transition of services across the lifespan, and to be able to access a range of different services and supports which take into account their multiple needs, including mental health needs and/or addictions.

Lack of coordination of services across government ministries is a huge problem for individuals with LDs in Ontario, and LDAO supports any efforts toward such coordination. Awareness of the impact of both mental health/addictions issues and learning disabilities (LDs) needs to be integrated into a wide network of sectors, including primary health care, education, the workplace and the justice system.

In determining how to proceed with this important initiative, the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario recommends that organizations such as LDAO and consumers, such as persons with mental health needs, disabilities and addictions, be involved in finding the most effective and enabling solutions to the problems raised by the consultation document. LDAO looks forward to participating in such future initiatives.

References

Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD) 2007, Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (www.pacfold.ca/)

A barrier to learning: Mental health disorders among Canadian youth, April 15, 2009, Canadian Council for Learning (www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL200900415MentalhealthBarrier.htm?Language=EN)

The State of Learning Disabilities, 2009, National Center for Learning Disabilities, www.nclld.org/stateofld