



YLC ‘EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITIES’ INITIATIVE OUTLINE

On June 12, 2010, the *Waterloo Region Record* ran a front-page story under the headline: “Region one of Ontario’s worst for self-harm.” According to statistics released by the Ontario Health Quality Council, Waterloo Region ranks as the third worst area in Ontario for people intentionally hurting themselves, with the most severe form of self-destructive behaviour being suicide. Our region was eclipsed only by the exceptionally high rates for intentional self-harm in the two extreme northern regions of Ontario.

While Waterloo Region’s ranking as third worst out of 12 regions is cause for concern, equally troubling is the inability of local experts to explain why Waterloo Region has an unusually high rate of self-harming behaviour.

There is a tendency to view self-harm, and particularly suicide, as a mental health issue. However, a more nuanced approach recognizes that self-harm is not always due to a diagnosable psychological disorder (i.e., mental health). Deserving of equal attention is the contributing factor of psychological distress (i.e., emotional health), which impacts everyone from time to time. In fact, even individuals with a diagnosable psychological disorder are also susceptible to periodic psychological distress.

What that means is the most balanced approach to reducing Waterloo Region’s rate of self-harm is to examine the broad issue of emotional health rather than a narrower focus exclusively on mental health. Addressing self-harm as an emotional health concern ensures everyone has a vested interest in the problem rather than stigmatizing that portion of our regional population with a diagnosable psychological disorder.

Your Life Counts (YLC) is uniquely positioned as a Canadian-based, national, charitable organization with international links pioneering new ways of preventing self-destructive behaviour, the most severe form being suicide. YLC would like to explore the concept of launching a program called “Emotionally Healthy Communities,”

...2

beginning in Waterloo Region. This would initially involve sitting down with a small advisory group, perhaps 5-7 key representatives of different sectors of our community, to discuss if the “Emotionally Healthy Communities” Program has merit and, if so, do we have the necessary resources to launch the concept in Waterloo Region.

The specifics of the program would ultimately need to be the work of a larger steering committee composed of representatives of diverse stakeholders ranging from educators to health care providers to police to politicians as well as members of the local business community (e.g., the high-tech sector).

The support of local media is also essential, in particular the *Waterloo Region Record*. Back in January a general outline of YLC's "Emotionally Healthy Communities" Program was shared with Lynn Haddrall, editor-in-chief of Grand River Media, including the *Waterloo Regional Record*. Lynn confirmed that the *Record* was interested in providing editorial support for the concept. Lynn also indicated that the *Record* might be interested in becoming a working partner in YLC's "Emotionally Healthy Communities" Program through the newspaper's Community Partnerships Program.

It is significant that an organization called the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) is now located at the University of Waterloo and is headed by UW prof Bryan Smale. The CIW measures wellbeing using eight domains: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards and time use. Professor Smale and the CIW might be very interested in helping to develop and test some practical strategies/ techniques for improving individual wellbeing and by extension community wellbeing in Waterloo Region. The focus of the CIW appears to fit very well with the goal of YLC's "Emotionally Healthy Communities" program and the broad concept of fostering emotional health.

In addition to the human suffering that results from Waterloo Region's unusually high rate of self-harm, there is also a huge economic cost due to the increased demands on our health care system, our policing system, absenteeism/lost productivity, etc. The findings of the Ontario Health Quality Council confirm Waterloo Region has a pressing problem with both severe human and economic consequences. Which leads to the following question: Is our region serious about solving this problem?

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