

PRESENTATION TO PEER SUPPORT GROUP
MARRIOTT DOWN TOWN, OCT. 22, 2008

Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to be with you today, and to have been able to meet some of you this morning. On behalf of March of Dimes Canada, I thank you for coming to the conference, thank you for being leaders in your respective communities, and participating in peer support activities. For those among you who are family members, professionals or volunteers, I want to emphasize March of Dimes is concerned for your well being also. Welcome.

Our common mission is to help people with disabilities to participate fully in life, optimize their abilities, contribute to their communities, feel empowered, and have equality of citizenship.

There are many aspects of the work of our Peer Groups that help achieve this mission.

Peer groups offer many opportunities for active engagement in activities of daily living.

Peer groups engage members in sharing their experiences, knowledge and abilities in the interest of helping one another. Peer groups develop leadership skills and advocacy skills, as well as serve to provide caregiver relief. These are all ways in which communities

ultimately benefit. Peer groups give validity to individual experiences of the disease or illness the members have experienced. They help individuals to express and understand their own situation, which makes one feel more empowered. As confidence builds, so, too, will the expressions of individuality and empowerment. Peer groups provide an effective, inexpensive activity, non-medical intervention for delivering rehabilitation and family support through which information is delivered, referrals made, lessons learned and people find new ways to participate and express their independence.

These are but some of the ways in which peer groups work and that this conference might explore. March of Dimes is a vehicle through which groups themselves can exchange information, build knowledge, test ideas, cross refer, document methods and build a consistent, effective practice.

There are several ideas about this practice that I would hope we could work on together. One of the most important is research.

To gain wider support and funding, ongoing evidence-based research is *essential*. Several years ago, I was made aware of several Canadian Stroke Network-funded peer support studies. The framework for more research lies here, with the array of stroke recovery and post-polio groups operating across the country.

Perhaps members and their care providers and family members can articulate areas for further research and Ontario March of Dimes will seek collaborative opportunities and funding to conduct research.

The care of informal caregivers is a significant concern of our organization -- which is positioned in Ontario as the largest service and advocacy organization in the disability sector.

We offer more than a half-dozen distinct services and we daily see tremendous contribution of caregivers who do more than complement the professional who delivers services.

Our society depends on informal caregivers for the elderly and people with disabilities, be they children or adults. It is we who complement the family, and when there is no family, we do our best to supplement with an array of services and inter-agency cooperation.

Canada is remiss in not having a framework for caregiver policy and support. We need national and provincial action, and March of Dimes in urging the government to respond. In the recent national election, we were not alone in addressing this issue. Now, as the new federal government settles in, let us work together to advocate for caregiver policies.

Advocacy is an area of expertise developed by March of Dimes over several decades. We intend to focus our effort on three strategic

priorities: caregiver policies; a national disabilities act, and the expansion of home modifications funding across Canada.

All of these programs would facilitate healthy “aging in place” and alleviate some of the burden on families, while providing more means for people with disabilities to retain independence and autonomy.

Peer support groups within our family can work with our Government Relations and Advocacy Department as we develop web-based information and advocacy campaigns.

We can send you ideas and the tools for advocacy if we find common cause on these issues. March of Dimes’ Board of Directors and senior management are together on these social policy priorities, and they will be reflected in our 5 year strategic plan.

These priorities are further reflected in our wider commitment to being a leader in the field of social action, advocacy and service.

In 2007, March of Dimes co-hosted the first *Festival of International Conferences on Caregiving, Disability, Aging & Technology*, or FICCDAT. This event was the first of its kind, involving five concurrent conferences under one infrastructure, held at one hotel in Toronto.

In 2011, March of Dimes Canada and its partner, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, will again host FICCAT, attracting a wide

range of professional disciplines, consumers, policy-makers and caregivers to come together to consider best practices, policies and research outcomes -- all of which are aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities worldwide.

I invite all of you to put the dates, June 5-8, 2011, on your calendars now. It will be our intent to secure funds to subsidize costs of participants with disabilities. At the local level, your groups might fundraise to send delegates also.

Thank you.