

# Transforming Primary Health Care in Ontario

## Spotlight on Reducing Social Isolation

### WHAT IS SOCIAL ISOLATION?

One of the biggest challenges facing Ontario's health system is addressing social isolation: the condition of being disconnected from family, friends, as well as social groups, supports and spaces in the wider community. It is a key determinant of health<sup>1</sup>, and research shows that people who are isolated for extended periods are more likely to face serious health issues.<sup>2</sup>

People who are socially isolated lack:

**a place in the community** where they can go and feel like they belong;

**opportunities to build new relationships** and nurture developing ones;

**a valued social role** in the eyes of their peers, which provides a sense of purpose and self-worth;

**a sense of social inclusion** because they are excluded from social activities due to barriers such as language, race or sexual orientation and nobody is reaching out to them.

### KEY FACTS: SOCIALLY ISOLATED PEOPLE FACE RISKS TO THEIR HEALTH

- Social isolation and the loneliness that comes with it reinforce social distance. The ensuing lack of good connections raises the risk of depression, addictions and other mental illnesses.<sup>3</sup>
- Loneliness and feelings of exclusion can trigger changes to cells that lead to weakened immune system responses, increased inflammation and a 14 per cent higher risk of premature death.<sup>4</sup>
- A Harvard study discovered a link between loneliness and high levels of a blood-clotting protein that can cause heart attacks and stroke. Researchers examining the correlation said that having 10-12 fewer friends may have the same effect as smoking cigarettes.<sup>5</sup>
- Seniors are especially vulnerable to isolation, and tend to feel its effects more keenly, but 20 per cent of Ontario seniors do not participate in frequent (i.e., at least monthly) social activities.<sup>6</sup>
- Both the quantity and quality of social ties can affect health. According to a 2016 study, having a big social network matters the most for people's health during adolescence and old age.<sup>7</sup>



### OVERCOMING SOCIAL ISOLATION IN ONTARIO

All 107 members of the Association of Ontario Health Centres (AOHC) serve people who face social isolation as a barrier to better health and wellbeing. Each of them reach out to isolated people who might not visit a centre, create opportunities for people to get involved and forge friendships, and provide spaces to facilitate social life in the community – all as part of their regular, daily work. Flip the page to find out more.



<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, What makes Canadians healthy or unhealthy? (2015)

<sup>2</sup> Brian Bethune, The end of neighbours: How our increasingly closed-off lives are poisoning our politics and endangering our health. Macleans magazine. (2014)

<sup>3</sup> Erin York Cornwell et al, Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and health among older adults. Journal of Health and Social Behavior. (March 2009)

<sup>4</sup> John Cacioppo et al, Myeloid differentiation architecture of leukocyte transcriptome dynamics in perceived social isolation. PNAS. (Nov 2015)

<sup>5</sup> David A. Kim et al, Social connectedness is associated with fibrinogen level in a human social network. Proceedings of the Royal Society B. (Aug 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Derek Miedema, Growing old alone - The rise of social isolation as Canada ages. Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (2004)

<sup>7</sup> Yang Claire Yang et al, Social relationships and physiological determinants of longevity across the human life span. PNAS (Jan 2016)



# What Belonging Looks Like and Why It Matters

Cultivating a sense of belonging is just as important to people as developing health care policies and programs that meet their needs, according to a 2012 Ontario survey.<sup>1</sup> Recent research backs up that assertion: people with adequate social relationships have 50 per cent lower risk of premature death than those with poor or insufficient relationships.<sup>2</sup> To address that disparity, AOHC members promote social inclusion and active community participation by:

## Building places where people feel like they belong

In Cornwall, two evenings a month, Seaway Valley Community Health Centre facilitates sessions in a safe environment for LGBTQ+ youth and adults to gather, socialize, and access resources on key issues. Activities range from coffee houses with talent from the community to potlucks and movie nights, with participants' interests and concerns driving the group's programming.

## Reaching out to ensure people are socially included

Women of the World (WOW), based at London InterCommunity Health Centre, provides group and one-on-one support to newcomer women. The goal: to connect them to community social life and resources. The group is led by other women who are also immigrants, who've been trained as peer leaders to promote belonging and inclusion while drawing on their own diverse experiences. The centre's health promoters give peer leaders the tools, knowledge and skills to develop and lead women's groups in their own communities.

## Developing roles for people that increase feelings of belonging and being valued in the community

Knitting in Motion (KIM) is a program at Toronto's Unison Health and Community Services that began as a way for young people to learn how to knit and develop a connection to their community. The program has evolved to include seniors in mentoring roles. This creates an intergenerational safe space where youth and seniors naturally strike up conversations with each other.

AOHC members **create opportunities for people to form and deepen relationships**, a key aspect of belonging that underpins all program development.



LGBTQ Social Gathering at Seaway Valley Community Health Centre

**"This group is a safe space for me. It is one of the few places where I don't have to worry about being myself."**

—program participant, LGBTQ Social Gathering at Seaway Valley Community Health Centre



Women of the World at London InterCommunity Health Centre

**"We share our happiness and our sad stories – we are like sisters. Women of the World is a second family to me."**

—program participant, London InterCommunity Health Centre



The Knitting in Motion program at Unison Health and Community Services

**"The best part of Knitting in Motion is being with everyone, talking, and laughing with them."**

—program participant, Unison Health and Community Services

<sup>1</sup> The role of sense of community belonging on unmet healthcare needs in Ontario, Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey. (2012)

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. What makes Canadians healthy or unhealthy? (2015)