In the Fall of 2010, the Community Legal Clinic and the Social Planning Council of York Region with Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario co-hosted an exciting event in which 22 local leaders learned about a draft framework to support women’s health across Ontario and discussed its’ priority statements. This event was one of five similar events held throughout the province.

The York region participants reflected the diversity of their community and included low-income women, women with disabilities, working mothers, and service providers. They brought their knowledge of women’s health issues in York region to bear on the discussion of the priority statements. From their diverse perspectives, they provided recommendations for strengthening the framework and for applying it locally. They expressed great interest in continuing to build on the discussion that day to influence change in women’s health in their communities.

This Echo Advance shares highlights from a draft framework for women’s health in Ontario, offers a brief description of women in York region, and features the views shared by York region women at the day-long event.

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Key Recommendations for the Framework from York Region Women

- Address the social determinants of health; in particular, affordable housing, childcare, transportation, and pay equity.
- Ensure access to women-specific and women-centred services.
- Increase funding for community-based services, particularly those that are not governed by the Local Health Integrated Networks (LHINs).
- Integrate services while maintaining confidentiality, use e-health records, and ensure similar philosophy of care between services/agencies sharing space.
- Promote and maintain funding for women’s health initiatives.
- Use an empowerment approach to support women’s health issues.
- Build capacity at the community-level to ensure uptake of framework.
- Support data collection using sex- and gender-based measurement; also that it is centralized, consistent, and legislated.

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1 The final Framework will be available early in 2011.

ii In the Spring and Fall of 2010, Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario partnered with Community Development Halton, the Social Development Council of Cornwall and Area, the NorWest Community Health Centre (in Thunder Bay), PILLAR Nonprofit Network (in London) and the Social Planning Council of York Region together with the Community Legal Clinic of York Region (in Richmond Hill) in order to share highlights of a draft framework for women’s health in Ontario and to support women from across Ontario to share their perspectives for strengthening the framework and using it locally. Echo Advances about each event are available at www.echo-ontario.ca.
Working together to build a framework for improving women’s health in Ontario

Women in Ontario continue to experience health disparities that could be readily reduced. Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario has partnered with a diverse group of players to build and refine Ontario’s first ever framework that has set priorities to improve women’s health. We cannot claim to have a quality health care system in Ontario unless we address equity for women and men.

The vision statement for the framework is: improved health and wellbeing for all Ontario women, particularly those who are disadvantaged, through targeted approaches and system changes.

The framework highlights four priority areas for improving women’s health:

1. Improving life circumstances, especially for vulnerable women

   The main way to improve women’s health is to ensure that they have better access to the social determinants of health, such as a decent income, employment, safe housing in healthy communities, education, and freedom from violence, stigma and racism. Sexual orientation, (dis)ability, ethnicity, and English language skills are significant factors that affect women’s health, and influence whether they seek out health services. Aboriginal women are among the most disadvantaged because of the significant history of cultural interference and oppression that has occurred. Women, because of their social and reproductive roles, often have less access to or control over factors that help them be healthy.

2. Supporting access to high quality, evidence-based services

   It is important to maintain access to essential women-specific services (e.g., sexual assault and domestic violence, abortion and family planning, and maternity care) and for women to have access to early stage interventions. Service planning must also consider the unique needs of different groups of women. For example, women coping with poverty, stigma, geographic barriers, or cultural factors are often prevented from seeking out basic services. Similarly, women labelled disabled often require longer appointments and special equipment, which are routinely not available. Francophone women have said they often have to choose between ‘good’ health care services, and services offered in French. Addressing these barriers would result in earlier detection of health issues for marginalized women, earlier treatment, fewer personal and health system costs, and improved health outcomes.

   Social Profile of York Region

   Based on 2006 Statistics Canada Census Data:

   - In York Region, about 25% of female lone-parent families live with low-income.
   - The median income in 2005 for women over the age of 15 living in York region was $23,252 compared to men who made $35,856. Both of these are higher than the provincial average.
   - Between 2001 and 2005, the number of people who are considered visible minorities in York region increased by 53% to 329,955; of these more than half are women.
   - As of 2006, nearly half of York residents (45.7%) report having a mother tongue that is neither English nor French; Chinese and Italian are the most common.
   - The unemployment rate in York region is below that of Ontario (5.4% vs. 6.4%); York women are less likely to be employed than York men (5.9% vs 5.0%).
   - York region has a relatively young population - only 1 in 10 people living here is over 65 years of age.

   Other statistics:

   - In 2008, York Region had 51 emergency beds for women who have experienced violence.

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3. **Improving integration of women-centred health and social services**

Integrating health and social services or providing key clusters of services will better match women’s needs by considering the ‘whole person’. It will also simplify service coordination. For example, women with mental health issues often have experienced trauma and violence, and will be better supported when mental health and trauma services are grouped together.

4. **Improving planning and accountability using a sex and gender lens**

When data are examined to show how women’s health is different from men’s health, and when these data are considered with respect to ethnicity, geography, income and other factors, we can see where we need to focus efforts to improve health and health service outcomes. Similarly, policies need to be considered from a sex and gender perspective so that the policy objectives are met and barriers are addressed.

**Response to the framework’s priorities and actions**

Women from the York Region would like the framework to:
- acknowledge sex and gender differences in health care needs, risk factors, and symptoms;
- be sensitive to diversity;
- recognize that access is an issue;
- promote integration of services; for example, information sharing between pharmacies might identify patients with addiction issues;
- encourage collaboration between agencies and institutions to provide continuity of care;
- highlight data specific to women, which is useful for developing programs and services; and
- use a holistic approach to health.

**Moving the framework forward**

Activities in support of the framework will need monitoring. Key health measures (indicators) will help us track the impact of the framework. The health indicators developed as part of the POWER Study ([www.powerstudy.ca](http://www.powerstudy.ca)) can be separated by sex and also by education, income, and ethnicity where possible. We need to choose health indicators that will reflect improvements in women’s health and women’s perceptions of health and health services.

The framework will support action and improvements in health and quality care for women. The following groups are among the players we believe have responsibility and can support the improvement of women’s health in Ontario: the Ontario government; the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and other ministries; researchers and educators; First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and their governing bodies; local actors such as the Local Health Integrated Networks (LHINs), health and social service providers, related organizations and professionals, and community members; and of course, Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario.
Local action for women’s health is needed

The discussion about women’s health led to the following recommendations for action in York region:

- using the framework to raise awareness about women’s mental health needs, in particular to other community organizations, including local hospitals;
- sharing the framework recommendations with different research organizations, including York University and RIM;
- discussing specific women’s initiatives; for example, the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness would like to use the framework at future community events;
- increasing the number of social services in York Region, including the need for a women’s shelter;
- improving transportation barriers (i.e., cost and service issues) in York Region; and,
- sparking further local dialogue at board and committee meetings to continue the discussion about the framework for improving women’s health.

Echo thanks partner organizations and participants for the valuable learning and sharing that has validated and strengthened the framework for improving women’s health in Ontario. For more information, please contact Simone Kaptein by email at skaptein@echo-ontario.ca or by phone at (416) 597-9687 Ext. 235.

References


About Echo: Improving Women’s Health in Ontario

Echo is an agency of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Our vision is improved health and well-being and reduced health inequities for Ontario women. For more information, please see www.echo-ontario.ca.

About the Community Legal Clinic of York Region

The Community Legal Clinic of York Region promotes universal access to justice and the elimination of poverty through legal representation, summary advice, referrals, public legal education and information, community development, and law reform. For more information, please see www.clcyr.on.ca

About the Social Planning Council of York Region

Our mission is to promote social and economic justice as well as active participation of the citizenry in all aspects of community life in York Region through conducting community based research, promoting social planning, and advancing community action.

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