

Anti-stigma mental health summits for youth, by youth, get a boost from Parliamentarians

By helping young people to harness their desire for social justice, HEADSTRONG offers an avenue to open meaningful conversations, reshaping misunderstanding and misconceptions into compassionate action.



Liberal MP Majid Jowhari & Louise Bradley

Opinion

OTTAWA—We are both lucky to do work that brings us in regular contact with young people. On the heels of Mental Health Week, we have an opportunity to reflect on what we can all be doing—as community members, parents, educators and influencers—to help nurture youth as they emerge into adulthood.

That's why we're so pleased that the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)—together with the support of diverse stakeholders, provincial and territorial governments, school boards and Members of Parliament—is gaining traction with game-changing youth anti-stigma summits.

In 2014, on a cold November day in Ottawa, 130 students from across the country gathered to talk about mental health, break down barriers to seeking help, and discredit the myths that can make mental illness feel scary and isolating.

A little over four years later, 58 regional summits have been held, involving over 9,000 students. It's estimated that the cascading reach—in other words, the number of students who have benefited from the knowledge gained by the core group—has skyrocketed to about half a million young people. Unique in their design and delivery, HEADSTRONG is youth-driv-

en, but supported by community coalitions. This year will see an even greater number of summits, with plans under way for the first territorial summit in the Yukon, and the first HEADSTRONG summit to be held over two days on a Nova Scotia First Nation.

The fact that HEADSTRONG is relevant no matter where you live, or what your community looks like, speaks to the creative forces behind an initiative that lets young people chart their own course. Evidence-based and evaluated by the MHCC, HEADSTRONG is proven to improve help-seeking behaviors by more than 50 per cent.

And getting help for a mental health problem or illness early is not only a predictor of a better outcome, but also the best way to bend the cost curve across the lifespan. Yet, we know that 40 per cent of parents admit they wouldn't tell anyone—not even their family doctor—if their child were experiencing a mental health concern. So HEADSTRONG flips the dynamic, empowering young people to be brave, be bold, and speak up for themselves.

Consider the realities that young people are facing today: relentless peer pressure, the dangerous clutches of social media



Canada's federal Health Minister Ginette Petitpas Taylor. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

and cyber bullying, the unrealistic expectations of Instagram. They must navigate a morass of negative influences, both real and virtual—without the benefit of a fully developed brain.

That's why the we worked together to issue a challenge to Parliamentarians: to leverage the depth of concern and breadth of reach, to be a force for good in the lives of young people. Rooted in contact-based education—which sees young people living in recovery from a mental health problem sharing their story and modeling resiliency—the summits are knitting together high school communities with positive messages and hopeful dialogue.

Modest grants from charitable foundations, investments from provincial and territorial governments, and federal money invested through the MHCC is mobilizing meaningful change in the daily lives of high school

students. We also see a ripple effect from HEADSTRONG, which sees parents, grandparents and extended family relearning the truth about mental health problems and illnesses through the freshly gained wisdom of these young mental health champions.

Through #338 Conversations, a "HEADSTRONG kit" is available to MPs via the MHCC, allowing Parliamentarians to access all the tools and materials they need to organize a pre-summit for community mental

health stakeholders, or help an interested group host a school summit.

From upcoming summits on Tsuu T'ina First Nation in Alberta, to a summit planned at Laurentian University in Sudbury, to the Lorenzetti Foundation in Montreal—which is providing a grant to support HEADSTRONG activities across the country—momentum is growing.

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