

The McConnell Foundation:

Care Renewal: Reaching out to Caregivers

Unpaid caregiving, most often by family members, is the invisible back-up that allows our health care system to keep functioning as it continues to shift away from institutionalized care. Yet the public health system is woefully inadequate in its support to these family caregivers, many of whom are forced to quit their jobs and exhaust their own resources in order to provide care.

If governments had to replace this unpaid work, it would cost \$2 billion per year and would require about 750,000 full-time employees. Recognizing a serious social policy gap, for the past six years the McConnell Family Foundation of Montreal has granted nearly \$5 million to a national program to test different forms of support that could significantly ease the lives of family caregivers.

The program builds on the 1998 findings of a Canadian Association for Community Care (CACC) project that focused on the critical and growing need for flexible respite, noting that "respite should be seen as the outcome derived by the caregiver as a result of being given either time off from caregiving duties, or direct support for his/her needs . . ."

Since program inception, the McConnell Foundation has funded 13 initiatives under the heading of "Care Renewal" with a diverse set of organizations, from Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) Canada (now acting as the overall program secretariat)



The Care Renewal program redefines the meaning of care.

to Caregivers Nova Scotia to the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada.

These initiatives have collectively reached several thousand caregivers. In addition to testing a variety of community and institutional supports for caregivers, the "Care Renewal" group is sharing its growing knowledge with decision-makers including the federal Secretary of State for Families and Caregivers, the Hon. Tony Ianno. McConnell's program includes funds to strengthen the policy voice of caregivers through the Canadian Caregiver Coalition, which has also received support from the Max Bell Foundation.

The "Care Renewal" project has had an impact on many of the practices of its participants. For example, the Tamil Caregiver project run by Providence

Centre in Scarborough, Ontario, has changed the character of the Centre, a long-term care facility started by the Catholic Church, now a public institution. The Centre's catchment area has been transformed over the past 15 years primarily as a result of the influx of thousands of refugees from Sri Lanka. Learning from the Tamil Caregiver project, Providence Centre has adapted many of its practices and policies to better accommodate the growing number of people from different cultures who are using its services.

Pauktutit, the Inuit Women's Association (another "Care Renewal" participant) notes that there is no word for 'caregiver' in Inuktitut but the communities with which it works intuitively

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understand the need to balance family responsibilities with external supports, and they have many concrete and creative suggestions on how to ease the lives of the women who predominantly provide care in the North.

The "Care Renewal" program faces an ongoing challenge in developing the evidence base to

talk to decision-makers about how to address an elusive concept like "respite as outcome". This is the focus for 2005/06 as the program winds down and the Foundation and the participating organizations turn their attention to sustaining the practices that have emerged. It is encouraging to note that the research and policy climate related to family caregiving is considerably more

receptive today than it was ten years ago, driven in large part by an aging population that is moving into its caregiving and care receiving years.

For more information on Care Renewal, please visit: www.von.ca/caregiving_mcconnell_care_renewal.