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## McMaster study proves offering services to single mothers and children on welfare "pays for itself"

Hamilton, Ont. — A pair of studies released today by McMaster University's Faculty of Health Sciences proves that providing single mothers on social assistance with a complete array of services pays for itself within two years.

The findings appear in two parallel studies, titled "When the Bough Breaks" and "Benefitting all the Beneficiaries." Both were conducted by the System-Linked Research Unit on Health and Social Service Utilization.

The unit, headed by Dr. Gina Browne, professor in McMaster's school of nursing and the department of clinical epidemiology and biostatistics, consists of 16 Hamilton-Wentworth and Halton affiliated agencies, works with the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University, and is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health. The unit's mandate is to explore more effective ways of serving people at risk through a unified, intersectoral approach which promotes self-reliance and full-integration into society.

The studies, funded by Health Canada and the Hamilton Community Foundation, determine that it is equally effective, but less expensive, to serve people's whole circumstance with proactive, comprehensive health and social services for mothers and quality childcare and recreation services for children.

"Serving the whole circumstances means offering a menu of services," explains Browne, "instead of leaving individuals to fend for themselves in a fragmented system.

"This is less expensive, and not just in the long-run. There are tremendous short-term financial gains to be had along with long-term societal benefits."

The evaluation consisted of 765 households with 1,300 children, age 0-24 years, and is, by all comparisons, a study of considerable magnitude. Each family was randomly assigned to groups ranging from those receiving no additional services, to those receiving the full spectrum of services, including home visits by public health nurses, job-retraining and recreation for children.

Among the key findings:

- Twenty-five per cent of families offered the full range of services exit social assistance compared to 10 per cent of those without the services. For every 100 mothers offered comprehensive services, 25 will go off welfare, for a \$500,000 savings within two years in excess of the cost of providing comprehensive services to all 100 mothers. Potentially, this represents significant savings to taxpayers. For example, for every 4,000 Ontario single parents on social assistance receiving proactive, comprehensive services, 1,000 would exit from social assistance in two years. Using \$20,000 per household as a conservative estimate for income maintenance and other subsidies, this represents a net savings of \$12 million in two years to the Ministry of Community and Social Services with no further cost to the Ministry of Health for the service.
- Offering recreational services alone helps psychologically disordered children on welfare maintain their social, physical and academic competence at a level equal to that of a non-disordered child. Without the services, the child's competence level actually drops. Recreation pays for itself through reduced use of social and health services (such as probation, child psychiatry and other physician specialties, child psychology and social work.) Providing recreation alone is also associated with good outcomes for the mother, including fewer nervous system problems, less medication usage, less anxiety, reduced reliance on subsidized child care, less counselling and reduced usage of food banks.
- The impact of providing recreational services alone resulted in a 10 per cent greater exit from social assistance compared to parents of children who did not receive this service.
- Offering public health visits alone resulted in a 12 per cent greater exit.
- Offering employment retraining alone also resulted in a 10 per cent greater exit, however, the mothers found recreation and public health visits to be more acceptable services offered, and used them more frequently.

Although the rate of depression is higher among single mothers as they enter social assistance, more than half of those in the study are functioning well despite their circumstances. "There are many capable and competent mothers out there who are poor, but have strength and resiliency," Browne explains. "Their children exhibit a competence that is in keeping with non-poor children, and their level of psychological disorder is actually lower than population averages among those whose mother is not depressed."

Programs such as the current "Healthy Babies" initiative are a huge step forward, she says, "but we need to do more for children over the age of six. We have a generation of seven to 20 year olds who are going without these types of services."

"This work represents the important strategic alliance between universities and the government, working together to solve social and health problems," says Dr. Russell Joffe, dean and vice-president, health sciences. "This unit is the result of the collaboration of McMaster working with our community to answer the community's questions."

"One of the children in our study wanted to take ballet lessons more than anything," Browne adds. "She ended up dancing on stage as the sugar plum in the Nutcracker Ballet. All children need to realize their dreams."

"In a system of national entitlement programs, investing now saves now and in the future."

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