

Autism workers raise flag, awareness for 'fastest growing' disability in world



By Brock Weir

Aurorans living in the Autism Spectrum descended on Aurora Town Hall on Wednesday afternoon, waving a blue streak.

Wednesday was World Autism Awareness Day, and those living with autism, along with teachers, caregivers and parents joined local leaders in hoisting their symbolic blue flag to raise awareness of disorders that are on the spectrum.

For those on the frontlines of autism care, the event was aimed not only to raise awareness, but to also provide an opportunity to boost public consciousness of support services in the community at large.

Aurora was one of many communities across Canada raising the flag at 11 a.m. on Wednesday.

The previous evening, Council got a firsthand account of the work being done on these frontlines by someone who is there every day.

Neil Walker, Chief of Education at the Aurora-based Kerry's Place Autism Services drove his point home asking for a show of hands asking Councillors to consider whether they know someone who has been impacted in some way by autism.

The hands raised no longer surprise Mr. Walker, he said.

'The first thing to be aware of is the incidence of autism is increasing dramatically and it has been increasing steadily for the past 25 years,' said Mr. Walker. '25 years ago, the incidence of autism was one in 1,000 births. Today, the latest stat in the news from the US Centre of Disease Control shows an incidence of 1 in 68 births.'

'It is now the most common and fastest-growing disability in the world and based on these prevalence rates, it is estimated that there are almost 1,300 people with autism spectrum disorder living in York Region alone.'

It is an affliction, he added, which knows no boundaries. Every sector in the country is feeling the impact of a 'tidal wave' of people on the spectrum growing up, entering the school system and then, often, the social service system with adulthood.

For Mr. Walker, and countless people in Southern Ontario, that is where organizations like Kerry's Place can step in to help bridge the gap.

As The Auroran reported last month, Kerry's Place is now in the midst of their 40th anniversary. From its founding in 1974 by a

handful of parents of 12 teenagers living with Autism, it has grown into Canada's largest specialist agency which now serves well over 7,500 families with children or adults with autism spectrum disorder.

“We know as an organization that we can't possibly serve every organization with ASD, nor should we try,” said Mr. Walker. “Part of our mission is to build the capacity and the knowledge, the supports necessary to ensure that every person with ASD can have a high quality of life by helping other organizations be able to support them as well.”

Although Kerry's Place is there to serve people from cradle to grave, it is not simply a motto. It is a philosophy in action. Some clients, said Mr. Walker, are now in the 60s, having been diagnosed with autism when autism itself was first identified and widely recognized as a disorder.

On the flipside of the coin, many clients have just left their teens and in their early 20s are in the difficult position of being out of the secondary school stream and wondering, along with their parents or primary caregivers, what comes next.

“When people finish school there is literally nothing for them and many very capable people, hundreds in fact, are sitting at home in their parents' basements with nothing to do, no future, losing skills and developing additional mental health issues as a result. That is one of the real concerns for Kerry's Place and one of the advocacy efforts to create what is needed for adults in the future.

“Autism awareness results in more funding, more services, and better lives for people with ASD.”

Throughout their anniversary year, Kerry's Place has a number of events planned to mark the occasion, including a special picnic this summer at Town Park, in conjunction with the Aurora Farmers' Market, celebrating their clients, staff, volunteers, and families.