

Hospice, community celebrate opening of Wellness, Grief, and Caregiving Hub



Hope House Hospice, formerly Hospice King-Aurora, marked the start of a brand-new chapter in its storied history of community service with the opening of their new Wellness, Grief, and Caregiving Hub on Friday afternoon.

Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa, Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, and Richmond Hill Mayor David West were on hand for the celebration, which also included an opportunity for Hope House to share the success of a recent two-year Provincial grant.

"Over my 18 years here at Hope House, I have seen this organization grow and thrive because of the dedication and valuable contributions of our staff and our amazing volunteers, and, of course, because of the support of our community – local, regional, provincial and federal," said Hope House Executive Director Heidi Bonner.

"We are gathering here today to celebrate the opening of our Wellness, Grief and Caregiving Hub. It's a special place where we invite our community to visit – a place that is welcoming, a safe place to land during a very difficult time. We want all to know that you don't have to journey alone through illness and grief, and that Hope House is always here to support."

One such programming area that will activate the new Wellness, Grief, and Caregiving Hub is Hope House's HUUG (Help Us Understand Grief) program, which was developed through a two-year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

First awarded to Hope House in 2024, the grant funding was used to develop a program to help children, youth and families who are experiencing a serious illness, anticipating a death, or grieving a death.

Bonner says the resulting program saw a 192 per cent increase in referrals in the first year and, as the two-year grant wrapped, referrals received during the period "is more than the combined referrals we've received for the previous six years."

"The program continues to grow because the need for this type of support continues to grow," said Bonner. "The impact of our HUUG program will be felt for generations to come. We support young people now when they need it the most. Then, as they grow, they remember the support and the strategies that they've been given to survive what they have gone through."

The value of the HUUG program was further highlighted by Julia Zinn, Hope House's Counsellor for Children, Youth, and Families.

"It's an honour to be at the forefront of this work and to help establish this program, which is the only one of its kind in all of York Region," she said. "At Hope House, our vision is that nobody journeys alone through serious illness, end-of-life, or grief and that includes children. However, one in 14 children will experience the death of a parent or sibling before their 18th birthday and 93 per

cent of children will experience a death that's significant to them before their 18th birthday as well. That's 93 per cent of children who are going through these hard things and often they're going through them alone.?

Grief experienced by children is often under-recognized and under-supported, she said, with a prevailing school of thought being that they're young and will bounce back.

?But we all know that's not true, and that's why programs like HUUG are so important?and we are endlessly grateful for the funding from [Trillium] that has allowed us to establish this program and demonstrate its importance here in the community so that we can continue it for years and years to come,? she continued. ?[The program] will continue to support children, youth, and families who are experiencing serious illness, end of life, or grief. Our goal is really to normalize these experiences. We know that this isn't a statistic of very few children. It's a statistical norm that folks are going through this. We want to normalize the thoughts, the feelings, all those experiences that play into that for these families, and also do so in a way that is familiar and more comfortable for kids.?

Among the activities included in the HUUG program include arts and crafts, games, such as ?Question Jenga? that help kids get to know each other and feel comfortable. One-on-one counselling is also offered, while parents can also be involved in the program, where counsellors can impart the tools they need to support kids who are also going through challenging times.

?I'm the local MPP here, but I'm also Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services?when you think of the impact of this program on young people, whether they're dealing with a serious illness or a death in the family, and the support that you and your staff through the HUUG program provide, it goes a long way,? said MPP Parsa.

Added Mayor Mrakas: ?This is a phenomenal place to be opening here in the Town of Aurora. This hub is going to provide a place for people to have supports, connection, and to be able to learn through the grieving process and also through illnesses. I'm hearing about the stories about children that are grieving and losing a parent, and whenever you lose a parent, whether you're a child or you're an adult ? I lost my dad last year, a very difficult time, but being able to get through it was being able to talk to people about it, so I can only imagine what it's like for a child to lose a parent and what they have to deal with, so I thank each and every one of you for all the work that you guys do.?

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