A MESSAGE FROM
THE EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE

This strategic plan outlines the renewed vision for the Owerko Centre for Neurodevelopment and Child Mental Health. Launched in 2015 with a generous gift from Calgary philanthropists Stan and Marge Owerko to the Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation (ACHF), the Owerko Centre is a multidisciplinary research hub with a broad focus on neurodevelopment, neurodevelopmental disorders, and child mental health. Researchers in the Owerko Centre advance knowledge about brain development and child mental health, from the cellular level to public policy, drawing upon a wide spectrum of research methods. We provide a collaborative home and supportive resources for more than 50 principal investigators from across the University of Calgary, representing the faculties of Arts, Law, Kinesiology, Nursing, Science, and Social Work, as well as the Cumming School of Medicine, Schulich School of Engineering, and the Werklund School of Education. Over 300 trainees from the undergraduate to post-doctoral levels contribute to the cross-disciplinary research and engagement of the Owerko Centre’s team of principal investigators.

As we renewed our vision for the Owerko Centre, we reflected on our past successes, including conducting surveys with our researchers and trainees. We consulted with our parent institute, the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute (ACHRI), and other leaders and partners from across UCalgary. The Executive Committee held a series of retreats and established working groups to develop proposals for ways that the Owerko Centre could evolve to continue to provide critical supports for our research community while growing and optimizing the way we deliver impact with children and families in the community.

This new strategic plan continues to provide foundational support for researchers in the fields of neurodevelopment and child mental health here at UCalgary, and it adds a new emphasis on collaborative efforts that have high potential for impact with children and families locally and globally, while also strengthening our international scientific ties. Achieving this vision will require collaboration and new ways of working together. With the support of ACHF, ACHRI and our members, we are confident we can achieve these goals.

Sincerely,

Members of the Owerko Centre Executive Committee

Dr. Susan Graham
Dr. Gerald Giesbrecht
Dr. Catherine Lebel
Dr. Deborah Kurrasch

Dr. Suzanne Tough
Dr. Jane Shearer
Dr. Kara Murias
The Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute brings together researchers and trainees as a multidisciplinary research hub with a broad focus on neurodevelopment, neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs), and child mental health. The Centre fosters a transdisciplinary approach that has led to important breakthroughs and discoveries.

MISSION

To optimize brain and mental health for children and families through research, education, and community engagement.

The Owerko Centre has grown to 50+ members covering disciplines from neuroscience and genetics to psychology, education, public policy and social work.

Members span UCalgary’s faculties including Cumming School of Medicine, Werklund School of Education, Arts, Kinesiology, Nursing and Social Work.

The Owerko Centre has a thriving community of 200+ graduate and undergraduate research trainees and 100+ post-doctoral fellows and research associates.
A hub that connects a multi-disciplinary network of researchers and trainees from across UCalgary’s campus, the Owerko Centre is generating knowledge that represents a multitude of perspectives and tackles some of the biggest research questions. Integrating insights from multiple fields provides a holistic and nuanced understanding of NDDs and sheds light on their causes, manifestations, and treatment strategies. This research is also the foundation of evidence-based policies that can enhance support systems, access to healthcare, and educational resources.

From **2018 to 2023** Owerko Centre members collectively secured a remarkable **$60 million in research funding**.

Owerko Centre members fuel cutting-edge research, publishing an **average of five scholarly articles per year per member**, showcasing their commitment to advancing knowledge and innovation.

Three large-scale cohort studies have **brought together data from over 10,000 families** that has been utilized by many researchers across the world.
Through Catalyst Grants and strategic research funds, the Owerko Centre continues to invest in research ideas to unlock new discoveries and strengthen the research landscape. These investments will align with a strengthened commitment to pursue strategic opportunities that bolster research led by Indigenous scholars. The launch of our Pathways to Independence Grants will enable emerging and promising early career investigators to conduct research and propel them to the next independent phase of their careers.

The Owerko Centre’s large-scale cohort studies including All our Families, Alberta Pregnancy Outcomes and Nutrition, and Pregnancy During the Pandemic, are a unique strength that contribute immensely to building understanding about child health. The launch of a Platform for Cohort Research will support the continuity of these studies and the mobilization of knowledge beyond UCalgary, so it reaches families, community and government. This robust data-sharing infrastructure will benefit researchers within the Owerko Centre community as well as researchers nationally and internationally.

By spearheading a Grand Challenge research program focused on ADHD, we will take an interdisciplinary approach to ADHD research in collaboration with researchers, clinicians, families, and community members.
As a multidisciplinary research centre, we play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of researchers, clinicians, and professionals. Our unwavering commitment to education and training fosters discovery and innovation as graduate students and postdoctoral associates are placed at the forefront of cutting-edge research and clinical practice.

INVESTING IN FUTURE LEADERS

The Owerko Centre remains dedicated to offering awards and grants to support the development and research of trainees and recognize excellence in publication and knowledge dissemination. Trainee grants also empower students to obtain external training to enrich their research and activate new collaborations.

STRENGTHENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

The Owerko Centre’s suite of awards will include scholarships with a strengthened commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Through EDI-focused scholarships, we are building a diverse and inclusive training community of graduate students, with greater representation of students from equity deserving groups, including Indigenous scholars. Scholarships and grants for students not only enhance educational access but also champion equity, ensuring that the talent and brilliance of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are acknowledged and nurtured, regardless of financial means.
Established in 2018 by ACHRI and the Owerko Centre, the Summer Student Workshop Series provides students with comprehensive knowledge and skill development in areas that supervisors find crucial. These highly successful workshops will continue to provide essential resources to students to nurture their growth in research and knowledge mobilization. The series has evolved into a dynamic partnership with other Cumming School of Medicine Institutes including the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute, Hotchkiss Brain Institute, Libin Cardiovascular Institute and Snyder Institute for Chronic Diseases, symbolizing an incredible journey of collaboration and continued growth.

“Owerko Centre funding opportunities are crucial as they help foster innovative research and international collaborations.”
– Shefali Rai, PhD student, 2024 Recipient of the Owerko Centre Spark Grant

“The support provided by the Owerko Centre plays an indispensable role in empowering students, trainees, and postdocs to conduct innovative research with adequate flexibility in brain and child mental health.”
– Jing Zheng, Postdoctoral Scholar, 2024 Recipient of the Owerko Centre Pathways to Independence Grant

“I am incredibly grateful for the support and hope to use what I’ve learned as a foundation in the next steps of my research career!”
– Delaney Barth, Master’s student, 2024 Recipient of the Owerko Centre Training and Education Grant
The Owerko Centre facilitates community engagement and knowledge mobilization to ensure that the profound insights generated at UCalgary make their way into the community to have a lasting impact on individuals and families. Community engagement stands as a cornerstone of the Owerko Centre’s mission, exemplifying our commitment to bridging the gap between academic inquiry and tangible societal impact.

**SHOWCASING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP**

The Owerko Centre has been committed to hosting regular events that unite researchers, clinicians, trainees, and community members with interests in neurodevelopment and neurodevelopmental conditions. The Owerko Centre Conference, the Owerko Family Distinguished Lecture and the Harvey B. Sarnat Lectureship and Mini-symposium, engage participants from the University of Calgary, Alberta Health Services (AHS), and the wider Calgary community to share knowledge, hear from experts and connect with peers. These events showcase local and internationally renowned scientists, reflecting our dedication to drawing global expertise to enrich the knowledge landscape and inspire a culture of curiosity, learning, and innovation.

**CONNECTING COMMUNITY WITH RESEARCH**

The Owerko Centre will strengthen its capacity for community-engaged research through events and initiatives to promote knowledge mobilization and foster collaboration. In 2025, we will launch a new initiative, ‘Science in the City’, a research day dedicated to spotlighting the exceptional work of our talented trainees. With content co-designed and co-developed in close collaboration with community members, this initiative aims to bridge the gap between research and the broader community.
In January 2023, the Little Red Reading House (LRRH) was gifted to the Owerko Centre as part of Calgary Read’s strategic vision to amplify the impact of its programs by harnessing the collective strengths of partners across the community. This will be an ideal space for Owerko Centre members and researchers to grow understanding, identify gaps in knowledge, and pilot test and innovate around best practices. The house will create opportunities for authentic exchange between researchers and community members, ensuring that research outcomes reflect the needs and values of parents, families, educators and program leaders and ensure that program design is evidence informed.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY PRESENCE

The Little Red Reading House opened its doors in 2017 as a welcoming space where children and families could visit and explore the magic of reading in a unique way. Throughout the house, there are nooks and trinkets to discover, and shelves and shelves of books to explore. Every child that visits is invited to pick the perfect book for them to take home and keep.

To expand the impact of the Little Red Reading House, founding organization, Calgary Reads, gifted the House to the University of Calgary, under the umbrella of the Owerko Centre.

With the invaluable support of the Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation, the vision is to continue opening the house’s doors for family visits, while using the house as a community-based research site. Literacy is a key factor in a child’s early development and an important social determinant of health. By blending research happening at UCalgary with children and families from across the community, powerful collaborations can happen.

“The Little Red Reading House now under the stewardship of the Owerko Centre, we will have so many wonderful ways to link UCalgary research with children and families. The cross-pollination of ideas will lead to so many new insights and discoveries in children’s health and well-being.”

– Dr. Susan Graham, PhD, Director, Owerko Centre

Photo courtesy of Riley Brandt, UCalgary
We work hard to foster strong and resilient relationships across our vast network. The Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute demonstrates the impact of collaboration and shared knowledge. Strategic partnerships allow us to transcend boundaries, uncover ideas, create innovative solutions and make a substantial impact on our community.

The Owerko Centre has a strong network of partners and close collaborators:

- We align seamlessly with the continuum of child health research at the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute and the overarching One Child Every Child initiative.
- We join forces with the Hotchkiss Brain Institute and the Mathison Centre for Mental Health Research and Education, advancing brain and mental health research.
- We operate in close partnership with the Azrieli Accelerator, directing investments toward transformative research in neurodevelopmental conditions with the potential to impact lives across the lifespan.
- We partner with AHS and the Mathison Centre for Mental Health Research in co-leading the research program embedded in The Summit: Marian & Jim Sinneave Centre for Youth Resilience.

In 2022, the Azrieli Foundation committed $25 million to launch the Azrieli Accelerator at UCalgary to support neurodevelopment research with a lifespan approach. This strategic fund sits in the portfolio of the Vice-President (Research) and is led by Owerko Centre Director, Dr. Susan Graham. This lifespan investment in neurodevelopment-related research ensures that UCalgary continues to advance as a leader in neurodevelopment research.
In March 2023, UCalgary was awarded an unprecedented $125 million from the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF) for One Child Every Child (OCEC), a transformational child health research initiative. The research priorities of OCEC fall into three broad themes: Theme 1: Better Beginnings; Theme 2: Precision Health and Wellness; and Theme 3: From Vulnerable to Thriving. Owerko Centre Director, Dr. Susan Graham, co-leads Theme Three: From Vulnerable to Thriving, with UCalgary’s Dr. Brent Hagel and University of Alberta’s Dr. Kate Storey.

CFREF funding to Theme 3 will provide additional resources and infrastructure support accessible to Owerko Centre members. With this additional funding, Owerko Centre members can develop impactful collaborations with researchers from across Alberta who are interested in neurodevelopment and mental health in children and youth, particularly those from equity-deserving groups. This will also create opportunities for Owerko Centre researchers to work alongside Indigenous scholars to better understand and improve neurodevelopmental and mental health outcomes for Indigenous communities.

One Child Every Child relies heavily on partnerships with local, provincial, and national organizations that include many child and youth-serving agencies and advocacy groups, several of whom share a common mission with the Owerko Centre.

Photo: Dr. Ed McCauley, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calgary, announced One Child Every Child in 2023. Photo courtesy of Riley Brandt, UCalgary
Philanthropy is at the heart of the Owerko Centre and it is with thanks to the generosity of committed donors that our researchers, trainees, faculty, staff and partners can make important strides in research and understanding that benefits children and families across our community.

The Owerko Centre was established with a generous gift from Stan and Marge Owerko and is funded by ongoing community support through the Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation.

The Azrieli Accelerator is supported through the generosity of the Azrieli Foundation.

The Little Red Reading House is supported by generous community donors through the Alberta Children’s Hospital Foundation.

One Child Every Child is funded by the Canada First Research Excellence Fund with a vision for all Canadian children to be the healthiest, most empowered and thriving in the world.

CONNECT WITH US

Visit us at research4kids.ucalgary.ca/owerko, or email us at owerko.centre@ucalgary.ca.