



Bigger and bolder leadership from the federal government working in collaboration with the provinces and territories is needed now, writes representatives of the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health. Photograph courtesy of Pixabay

Timely access to mental health care must be a top priority

Coming out of the pandemic, Canada will need improved connections to more accessible and inclusive mental health and substance use health programs, services and supports.

Kim Hollihan, Ellen Cohen, & Glenn Brimacombe

Opinion



While we provide our comments in a post-federal government budget world, it is clear that we still have some way to go before we can say we are living in a post-pandemic world. As we continue to do all that we can to ensure our families and friends and society-at-large are safe and well, we know that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on our collective mental health and substance use health. In short, coming out of the pandemic the people of Canada will need improved connections to more accessible and inclusive mental health and substance use health programs, services and supports, not less.

While the recent federal government budget provides a mixture of important investments for mental health, substance use health and affordable housing for priority populations, they have postponed a key commitment made in their election platform; and that is the introduction of a Canada Mental Health Transfer coupled with an initial five-year investment of \$4.5-billion, including \$625-million in 2022/23.

In the view of the 15 national organizations that comprise CAMIMH, to defer such a critical investment is to delay, and in some cases, to deny timely access to care. Each day that passes deepens the impact of COVID-19 on those who need care and continues to hurt those with a pre-existing mental health and/or substance use health problem who are in the queue. Bigger and bolder leadership from the federal government working in collaboration with the provinces and territories is needed now, not in twelve months time or beyond.

Improving timely access to mental health and substance use health care services contributes to taking care of our loved ones, a quicker return to work, resuming of our volunteer and social activities and re-engaging as active members of society. In our view, the health, social and economic dividends that come from investing in mental health and substance use health programs, services and supports are life-saving and financially substantial ... yet we continue to drag our feet on such an important societal issue.

Moving forward, CAMIMH continues to call on the federal government to introduce a new piece of legislation called the Mental Health and Substance Use Health Care For All Parity Act. The intent of this legislation is to align appropriate and sustainable federal funding and the creation of national standards with provincial and territorial health system accountabilities. It will also bring mental health and substance use health from out of the shadows and into the light to ensure that it is no longer neglected by medicare.

For too long, mental health and substance use health programs, services and supports provided by psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists, counselling therapists and counsellors have not been covered by provincial and territorial health plans. This must change.

This proposed legislation will also support and actively build on innovative delivery models of care—of which, some are focused at the primary care and community-based level—that the provinces and territories are actively pursuing to expand

and improve timely access to mental health and substance use health problems.

Given the composition of CAMIMH—which includes organizations representing people with lived and living experience, their families and caregivers, and health care providers—we stand ready to work with all levels of governments and others to make this a reality.

Our mental health matters.

Investing in mental health care is a form of paying ourselves first.

There can be no health without our mental health.

The time to act is now.

Dr. Kim Hollihan (EdD) is co-chair of CAMIMH and CEO of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association. Ellen Cohen is co-chair of CAMIMH and CEO of the National Network for Mental Health, which advocates, educates and offers expertise and resources to increase the health and well-being of Canadians with lived and living experience. Glenn Brimacombe is CAMIMH chair, Public Affairs Committee, and director of policy & public Affairs at the Canadian Psychological Association, and past CEO of two National Health Associations.

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LET'S PROVIDE BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES TO ALL CANADIANS

- 1 Investing in community, home, and residential care to meet the needs of our aging population.
- 2 Funding sustainable and evidence-based mental health services, and formally recognizing Mental Health Parity in legislation.
- 3 Implementing proactive Health Human Resource approaches.