

The Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Alliance

CALL TO ALL FEDERAL PARTIES

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), in any given year, **one in five** people in Canada experiences a mental illness or addiction.

- More than 6.7 million people are living with a mental illness or addiction today. If we include family members and caregivers, these problems impact almost everyone in some way.
- Mental illness strikes early in people's lives. 70% of mental health problems have their onset during childhood or adolescence.
- Canadians in the lowest income group are 3 to 4 times more likely than those in the highest income group to report poor to fair mental health.
- The Mental Health Commission of Canada estimates that the economic burden of mental illness and addictions in Canada is \$51 billion per year. This represents nearly 3% of Canada's gross domestic product.
- According to a 2006 study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, the total societal cost of substance abuse in Canada is nearly \$40 billion, or \$1,267 for every Canadian.

About Us

The [Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Alliance](#) is a broadly based coalition of provincial organizations from across the continuum of care – from community to hospital services and consumer/family organizations. Its members are:

- Addictions and Mental Health Ontario
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- Children's Mental Health Ontario
- Mood Disorders Association of Ontario
- Ontario Association of Patient Councils
- Ontario Hospital Association
- Ontario Peer Development Initiative
- Schizophrenia Society of Ontario

Our mission is to be a unified, responsive voice for progress on shared priorities to better meet the mental health and addiction needs of Ontarians.

In view of the staggering impact of mental illness and addictions on the lives of Canadians, the membership of the Alliance urges all federal political parties to make mental health and addictions an election priority. The Alliance asks for the following commitments from all federal parties:

IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH BY ADDRESSING SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTIONS

A disproportionate number of people with mental illness live in poverty. Poverty, in turn, can be a significant risk factor for poor physical and mental health. Too many people with a mental illness can and want to work but are either unable to find employment, are hindered by social assistance programs that penalize them for working, or are employed in minimum-wage work that leaves them below the poverty line. Housing is becoming less and less affordable in Canada. Meanwhile the federal government is increasingly withdrawing funding from social housing.

- *Canada needs a National Housing Strategy* with a clear vision and measurable targets to ensure that all citizens have a place to call home. Access to clean and safe affordable housing is critical to physical and mental health and wellness. With the right housing and supports, people experiencing mental illness and/or addictions can sustain a stable and healthy environment for themselves and their children.
- *Governments at all levels should work towards the establishment of a Basic Income Guarantee.* Evidence suggests that compared to current social assistance programs, a Basic Income Guarantee could dramatically improve standards of living and health outcomes – at less cost to taxpayers. It would be particularly beneficial for people with mental illness and/or addictions and their children.

ADDRESS ADDICTIONS / SUBSTANCE USE AS A HEALTH ISSUE

Substance use disorders are a health issue. Unlike other mental illnesses, substance use disorders are not covered by the Mental Health Strategy for Canada. Instead, the National Anti-Drug Strategy determines Canada's overarching approach to substance use – which is to treat it primarily as a criminal justice issue. A four-pillar strategy that balances prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and enforcement is needed.

- *Addictions should be addressed through a public health approach*, and strategies for dealing with substance use should be integrated with those that deal with mental illness.
- *The federal government should take further action to solve the prescription drug crisis*. The government should take a leadership role in implementing the recommendations of *First Do No Harm*, Canada's strategy to address prescription drug misuse.

END THE CRIMINALIZATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTIONS

People with mental illness are over-represented across the criminal justice system, including in interactions with police, the courts and corrections system. By failing to provide adequate access to mental health care and supports and by addressing mental illness via the criminal justice system, we have criminalized mental illness.

- *We need to focus more on early intervention*. Children, youth and adults showing early signs of mental illness need timely access to appropriate services and supports as a prevention effort – connecting people to care before they become involved with the criminal justice system.
- *There is also an urgent need to provide better care for people within the prison system*. There must be improved assessment and treatment of mental illness and addictions in the prison system. Segregation is not a substitute for mental healthcare.



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