



PEI CONVENTION CENTRE  
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## ISSUE BRIEF

### B. Funding for mental health

***Resolved, that over the next ten years, all provincial and territorial governments, along with regional health authorities, increase the proportion of their respective health care budgets that is devoted to mental health by two percentage points from current levels.***

**Sponsor:** Louise Bradley, President and CEO, Mental Health Commission of Canada

#### ISSUE

Mental health problems have an enormous impact on individuals, families and the economy. Public spending on mental health in Canada is low, whether measured in terms of the burden of disease represented by mental illness or in relation to spending levels in comparable countries. Lack of funding impedes progress in addressing the “care gap” that sees only one third of people experiencing mental health problems accessing the services and supports they need. Increased spending on mental health by all levels of government is key to addressing this gap.

#### BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization notes that mental illness accounts for 13% of the world’s disease burden. Other assessments put that figure even higher – in the UK, it has been estimated that mental illness represents 23% of the total burden of disease. In Ontario, the burden of illness from mental illness and addictions has been calculated to be more than 1.5 times that of all cancers and more than seven times that of all infectious diseases.

In any given year, one Canadian in five (that is, 6.7 million people) experiences a mental health problem or illness. By the time people reach 40 years of age, one person in two will have had or have a mental illness. All people should all be able to count on timely access to the full range of options for mental health services. However, unlike for other health conditions, only one in three people who experience a

mental health problem or illness - and as few as one in four children or youth - report that they have sought and received the services they need.

Ensuring timely and equitable access to mental health services and supports is a moral and human imperative. Mental health has only recently emerged “from the shadows” to become part of a broader public discussion. There is still a long road ahead before mental health issues are addressed with the same degree of seriousness we devote to physical health. The legacy of the underfunding of mental health and the still pervasive stigma that attaches to mental illness has meant that for far too long people have suffered in silence or have not been able to get the care they sought.

The values that drive the need to make mental health an ongoing public policy priority also reflect many key collective aspirations we share as a society - enabling everyone to enjoy the best possible health and well-being; ensuring that people, in all their diversity, are able to take advantage of fulfilling and satisfying opportunities; and being vigilant to promote justice, fairness and freedom, including from all forms of discrimination. We have rightly moved away from policies that saw many people with mental illnesses shut away in asylums, but we have not successfully completed the transition to a community-oriented system that is best geared to allowing all people experiencing mental health problems to live full and meaningful lives in the communities of their choice.

Moreover, the economic impact of mental health problems and illnesses is enormous. There are different, but complementary, estimates of the overall economic impact of mental health problems and illnesses. While no studies to date have been able to calculate the full costs of mental illness, including costs such as those incurred in the justice and education systems or those borne by family caregivers, it is nonetheless clear from all recent studies that the total direct and indirect costs of mental health problems and illnesses to the Canadian economy are at least \$50 billion per year, and are likely significantly greater.

Yet Canada allocates only 7% of publicly funded health care spending to mental health. This is considerably less than comparable countries such as Britain that devote 13% of health spending to mental health.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

There are many ways to promote mental health and well-being and improve much-needed access to mental health services and supports. Effort and investment will be required from all quarters - public, private and voluntary sectors. Some might suggest that change can be accomplished exclusively through improvements to the efficacy and efficiency of mental health care. While these are certainly needed, it is also clear that increased funding for mental health programs and practices is a crucial component of any plan to address the burden imposed by mental illness on individuals, families, the economy and the country as a whole.

To others, it might seem that additional spending on mental health care would simply increase the total costs to the economy. However, there are compelling reasons to believe that, from a societal perspective, the right investments in mental health care will actually reduce the overall burden over time. By actively promoting mental health, ensuring timely access to services and enabling the earliest



possible intervention, people's recovery will be hastened, easing the longer term burden on the health care system and the overall economy. Facilitating access to care can also speed up people's return to work, as well as reduce workplace costs stemming from absenteeism and "presenteeism." In addition, improving timely access to mental health care will ease the burden on other sectors, such as justice, education and corrections.

Without concerted action to better implement proven practices, the number of people with mental health problems and illnesses and the cost to the Canadian economy will continue to remain large relative to the population and will rise in absolute numbers. If nothing changes, by 2041 there will be over 8.9 million people in Canada living with a mental illness. This represents a 31% increase from 2011, while the total population is only expected to grow by 26% over the same period. At the same time, the costs generated by mental health problems and illnesses will grow over six-fold over the next thirty years to \$306 billion. The present value of the cumulative total cost over the next thirty years will exceed \$2.5 trillion.

### **NEXT STEPS**

In order to promote mental health, prevent mental illness and address the "care gap," the Mental Health Strategy for Canada calls for all levels of government to do their part in raising the proportion of public health care budgets devoted to mental health from seven to nine percent of total health care spending. Since this proposed increase represents a Canadian average, each jurisdiction needs to adjust its budget to contribute its share toward meeting this goal. Most provinces and territories have developed mental health strategies or action plans in the past few years, but these have not generally been accompanied by the sustained investment that is required to bring about significant and lasting change.

Given the complexities of Canada's health care system, the Mental Health Strategy insists on the need to increase investment in mental health but does not specify exactly how this money should be invested. Rather, it recognizes the need for each jurisdiction to focus on the areas it identifies as being the most pressing, but at the same time recommends that governments strive to orient their investments in ways that are consistent with the Strategy's overall plan for change.

Canada and the world continue to face uncertain economic times, which makes this type of investment challenging. But as our economies come to depend more and more on brain power, Canada cannot afford *not* to invest in the future mental health and well-being of its population. Nonetheless, it will take sustained effort from the public to generate the political will required to make the necessary increases to investments in mental health. Health care leaders – and not only those who are directly engaged in the provision of mental health services – need to be at the forefront of advocacy for enhanced investments in mental health.

The oft-repeated saying that there is no health without mental health has never had greater relevance. It is time for health care leaders in every region of the country to stand up for mental health - both by making their voices heard in the corridors of power, but also by putting into action in their own regions and organizations a commitment to parity of treatment for mental health in every aspect of the health care system. Support for this resolution will not only deliver a strong call for governments to do the right



thing, but will also express the determination of the health care sector as a whole to keep mental health “out of the shadows” forever. It is the very least we owe to the millions of people across the country confronting mental health challenges.

**This brief was prepared by:** The Mental Health Commission of Canada.

## REFERENCES

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