



“Shared Perspectives”

A Joint Publication on
Student Mental Health

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Introduction

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It is easy to silo away postsecondary education within the confines of our provincial borders. Our hope with this project is to shed light on an issue with which all students regardless of jurisdiction have to deal. The mental health of students is a unifying theme and priority for student organisations such as ours' across the country.

Unlike some more-easily defined issues being tackled by student organisations, such as high debt levels and youth employment, mental health-related problems remain somewhat of a taboo subject for legislators and university officials alike.

Traditional lack of awareness and a societal inability to separate mental illness from physical ailments has contributed to a grossly underfunded and poorly-equipped postsecondary sector that, while well-intentioned, has failed to grasp the magnitude of the mental health challenges facing its students.

As another generation of students graduate and enter the workforce, empowered by the proliferation of mental health literacy tools to raise awareness and reduce stigma, mental health-related problems that were previous ignored or suppressed are rapidly coming to the forefront of national discussions.

The decision to work collaboratively on this project comes in response to the recognition that a viable solution to this problem will require a collective effort from student organizations and stakeholders across the country. One of the fundamental tenets of our healthcare system is the universality of care. The same principle should apply to mental health; adequate access to services and care should not be dependent on where a student chooses to study.

Among the limited successes and continued challenges this project highlights, we hope that the variance of measures to address this growing student issue across provincial lines can serve as inspiration for future innovative responses to access problems.



The case for consistent, reliable, equitable funding

The **Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS)** represents the interests of over 100,000 Alberta university students across Alberta.

We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, and MacEwan University to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders. Based in Edmonton, CAUS is a non-partisan and active advocacy group looking to ensure a fully accessible and high quality system of education in Alberta.

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Introduction

Reducing the stigma surrounding mental health has been an ongoing and continuing challenge for those within the mental health field. As medical and psychological professionals strive to increase access to resources, and the whole of Canadian society moves forward in understanding this important issue, we see a demographic within the general population experiencing mental health issues on a heightened level: post-secondary students within our country's universities and colleges. Due to a very real understanding of the threat post-secondary students face when dealing with mental health concerns throughout their education, there has been a shift by professionals and advocates highlighting the need for a significant increase in campus resources to support these students.

These requests for increased resources are based on a wealth of data showing more post-secondary students are dealing with mental health issues, more of them are beginning to ask for help, and those with pre-existing mental health concerns are feeling

supported enough to tackle the challenge of post-secondary (MacKean 2011). All of these factors combined with the understanding that individuals within post-secondary fall in the age cohort most associated with the onset of mental disorders, and these students are entering into an environment closely linked to social pressures, life stressors, and substance abuse, bring to light the need for serious investment in mental health resources on post-secondary campuses (*Ibid*).

In line with data across Canada, the situation in Alberta is serious for post-secondary students. Due to the rising concerns around campus mental health supports there have been numerous campaigns raising awareness and the funds needed to assist students as they go through this challenging period in their life. A myriad of stakeholders have been involved in this call to assist post-secondary students; these include students' unions and associations, post-secondary administrations and faculties, and clubs on campus all in collaboration with government departments. The province has realized that for post-secondary students to be successful they must be set up for success. This includes

ensuring resources are available for those who need them, and access to supports throughout the year.

Not surprisingly, stakeholders have stood up to make a call for campus mental health to be a funding priority. Through the hard work of researchers showing that mental health needs are real, and the tireless advocacy work of many, the Government of Alberta has begun the important process of developing a framework for permanent and sustainable campus mental health funding which will only be for the betterment of post-secondary students in the future.

Campus Mental Health in Canada

The question therefore becomes why has campus mental health grown to become such a priority? And the answer is not too hard to find. Research over the last decade has shown that students on post-secondary campuses around the developed world are struggling due to increasing stressors associated with a number of factors (Bewick et al. 2010). MacKean (2011) highlights some of these factors to be increased academic workload, skyrocketing competition among peers, planning ahead for the future, and the ever-increasing costs associated with completing a post-secondary credential. Needless to say there has always been an awareness of the increased susceptibility to mental health issues on campus, but over time these observations have been codified into data with some interesting and alarming results.

One of the most significant surveys on campus mental health in Canada was completed in 2016, in conjunction with the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), who polled over 30 000 students on campuses across the country, and discovered some very disheartening results. 59.6% of college students, over the last 12 months, felt that things were hopeless, 89.5% felt

overwhelmed, 64.5% felt overwhelming anxiety, and 13% seriously considered suicide (American College Health Association 2016). These numbers are in alignment with other data released in the past showing that post-secondary students have mental health concerns and are struggling to find the supports needed to get through their schooling (MacKean 2011).

The Council of Ontario Universities' (COU) submission to its provincial Ministry of Health mirrors the CACUSS' findings. Not surprisingly, they mention that their extensive consultations have shown campus mental health concerns are increasing, along with the prevalence and severity of the cases. These observations, combined with the fact that increased mental health awareness and medication are allowing those with pre-existing mental health illnesses to access post-secondary, are increasing the understanding and proper handling of campus mental health concerns to the betterment of all students on campus (COU submission to the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care 2010).

“59.6% of college students, over the last 12 months, felt that things were hopeless, 89.5% felt overwhelmed, 64.5% felt overwhelming anxiety, and 13% seriously considered suicide”

Lastly, data from the Canadian Campus Survey, in 2004, showed that one quarter of undergraduate students expressed four or more symptoms of elevated distress regarding mental health (Adlaf et al. 2004). These elevated distress symptoms included feelings of unhappiness or depression, being constantly under strain and stress, and lost sleep because of worry and anxiety (*Ibid*).

Again, this data mirrors previous data, and highlights how issues of mental health on campus are not new, but have been prevalent for over a decade. As expected, the Canadian Campus Survey showed that hand in hand with negative mental health symptoms was the prevalence of increased hazardous drinking of alcohol and increased drug use (*Ibid*). One could infer that this increase in negative coping mechanisms could be linked to the lack of campus mental health supports available to post-secondary students in 2004.

Nevertheless, this data, not only in Canada but throughout jurisdictions around the world, has raised some eyebrows to the importance of increased campus mental health supports. There is a systemic approach to campus mental health supports that has become the prevailing dialogue among experts, with the realization resources are limited and all stakeholders must play a role in overcoming this challenge. By looking at the issue holistically, and in collaboration with post-secondary institutions, governments, student services, and students' unions/associations, there is hope that there can be a learner-centered approach adopted benefitting the entire post-secondary system (MacKean 2011).

Campus Mental Health in Alberta

The Province of Alberta, not unlike Canada, has had its own struggles with campus mental health. It is only over the past decade has there been an active campaign to address these concerns. Data released from the same CACUSS College Mental Health Survey, specific to Alberta, shows similar statistics to that of the rest of Canada. 57.5% of students, over the last 12 months, felt that things were hopeless, 90.2% felt overwhelmed, 63.7% had overwhelming anxiety, and 13.1% seriously considered taking their own lives (American College Health Association 2016). It is clear from the data that Alberta's post-secondary students

are struggling with the same stressors that are prevalent in the rest of the country. It is through collaboration on a number of fronts, including student services, Student advocacy groups, administrations, and governments, that stakeholders concerned about campus mental health have begun to share best practices and make an active case for post-secondary mental health funding in Alberta.

Funding from the provincial government has been the goal for most of those involved in this campaign. Research shows students need mental health supports throughout their post-secondary experience, and students themselves have been a driving force behind the campaign to gain predictable, equitable, and long term funding.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS), and its member schools, which include the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, MacEwan University, and Mount Royal University, has been a strong instigator behind the acquisition of funding for campus mental health in Alberta. Our campaign began in 2013, when our students began to actively advocate to the provincial government about what they were seeing on their campuses. There were clear increases in illness related to campus mental health and students' unions/associations knew something had to be done.

Beginning the charge were Vice Presidents Student Life from three CAUS schools, the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. In tight collaboration with their respective administrations, they worked hard to develop a funding proposal to submit to the provincial government in order to secure funding for student mental health supports on campus. Work between the Students' Unions and Administration came to the conclusion that universities themselves, based on their vast amount of established services and resources, were best suited to be the recipients of campus mental health funding.

A pilot project was launched on January 16, 2013 by the Government of Alberta, as a direct result of the hard work and collaboration between students and their universities. The government announced it would be investing \$9 million dollars in grant funding over the next three years for all three schools, with the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge each receiving \$1 million dollars, each year, for mental health funding. This was a massive step in the right direction for campus mental health supports, and the funds would be used to "expand campus mental health services and develop models of care that can be used on campuses across Alberta" (Government of Alberta 2013).

Since the launch of that original pilot project, CAUS welcomed two growing universities into its membership, in 2014, MacEwan and Mount Royal Universities. But due to this move to a new umbrella advocacy group in the province, they were barred from receiving certain mental health dollars to which they both previously had access. Based on this change, CAUS actively campaigned to the government for a new dispersal of dollars that would meet the mental health needs of both of these expanding universities. The campaign was a success, and MacEwan and Mount Royal Universities both received \$250 000 dollars, per year, for three years to support core mental health services in 2014.

With the funds flowing into mental health supports on campus there have been numerous improvements made to campus mental health services on all of CAUS' campuses. For example, the University of Calgary saw serious increases in resources, information, and professional development training for its staff within its Wellness Centre. The University of Lethbridge was able to hire a significant amount of mental health care professionals to meet the increasing demand for campus mental health services, including counsellors, a mental health physician, and administrative staff. A Community Social Work Team was assembled at the University

of Alberta composed of professional social workers to take on the task of providing essential services across campus. Additionally, MacEwan University was able to increase its mental health support staff, specifically hiring two full time psychologists. And finally, at Mount Royal University, the funding was used not only to increase counselling hours for students, but also to hire a Mental Health Facilitator position responsible for campus mental health training and outreach programs.

Clearly, mental health funding, on campuses across the province, is seriously warranted and makes a difference. When supports are increased there are tangible and positive results observed. The hope is, with consistent, reliable, and equitable funding, research data will show the dramatic ways in which campus mental health funding helps post-secondary students.

CAUS continued its campaign for campus mental health funding on an annual basis. With the expiry date for previous funding grants being 2016, all 5 of our Universities came together to actively campaign to the government for additional funding to keep campus mental health supports active. The campaign, which consisted of an active social media and student letter writing component, did achieve additional funds, but only for one more year, and only for three of our five schools.

In the autumn of 2016, the Government of Alberta struck an advisory panel on campus mental health to evaluate the current situation and what could be done to establish a long-term plan for a campus mental health strategy, including coordination with the provincial health care system and funding. Students from CAUS member institutions were involved actively on the panel, and CAUS continued to advocate to the government and stakeholders the importance of consistent and equitable mental health funding.

In Budget 2017, the Government announced that it would be keeping campus mental health funding at a level consistent with previous years. This was all in anticipation of the release of the recommendations from the Advisory Panel on Post-Secondary Mental Health expected in the coming months. Students anxiously awaited the release of this information and how the Government of Alberta would respond to it.

In June 2017, the Government made good on its promise to place the mental health needs of post-secondary students front and centre, and released its seven steps to improving post-secondary mental health. Inspired by recommendations from the advisory panel, these steps included equitable funding for all Alberta's publically funded post-secondary institutions that amounted to over \$25 million for the next three years, integration of on campus mental health supports with the larger health care system, grants for indigenous campus mental health, a review of student aid policies in light of mental health needs, and funding for Healthy Campus Alberta – a grassroots community of practice which brings together stakeholders, including CAUS, involved in campus mental health to share knowledge and resources.

Overall, students were excited and pleased to see years of campus mental health advocacy work come to fruition for the betterment of the post-secondary student population. There is still continued work to be done to ensure that the roll out of these long term plans are done with the well being of students front and centre, but at this point CAUS is very happy to see a long term, sustainable funding plan put in place. We look forward working with the Government to ensure that the mental health of university students begins to improve on our campuses.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, it is clear from both research-derived data and anecdotal evidence that post-secondary students are struggling with mental health concerns during their studies. It is also true that we can see mental health supports are an important facet of a wide spread campus mental health strategy for improved care of students. As more and more previously disengaged individuals are given access to post-secondary, the issue of mental health supports must be top of mind for all stakeholders involved. This issue is prevalent here in Canada, and many provinces, Alberta included, have taken the steps to tackle this issue head on.

Therefore, funding is a significant tool used by governments to aid mental health professionals in their goal of supporting vulnerable students. One only has to look to the Alberta government's funding of post-secondary mental health supports to its five brick and mortar universities to see the continued success of consistent and significant campus mental health supportive funding. We know that this funding has assisted vulnerable students in accessing the help they needed, opened dialogue among university students regarding mental health care and resources, and significantly decreased wait times for the many students who decided to seek help from mental health professionals on campus.

CAUS continues to believe that campus mental health supports are incredibly important, so much so that we have listed this topic as one of our major priorities for the 2017/18 academic year. Due to this priority and its importance to students, CAUS will continue to tirelessly advocate to our provincial government for accountability to students as they roll out their long term funding plan, so that our institutions can carry on with the united goal of providing access and support for the many students we represent.

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Promising investments in campus mental health

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. OUSA is run by a Steering Committee made up of elected student representatives from each of our member associations. Day-to-day activities are carried out by five full-time office staff.

OUSA's approach to advocacy is based on creating substantive, student driven, and evidence-based policy recommendations. Our professional government relations practices ensure that we have the access to decision-makers we need in order for our members' voices to influence provincial legislation and policy.

OUSA is non-partisan and our policies are written and ratified by students.

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Introduction

Every year, the topic of student mental health garners increased interest. Within the Ontario post-secondary sector, student mental health and wellness have been growing as priorities for government, students, institutions, and many other sector stakeholders.

Currently, there are numerous projects involving government ministries and sector organizations that work together to develop new frameworks of care and service, increase collaboration between sector partners, and

raise the profile of mental health as a political and systemic issue. This article will highlight a variety of major government initiatives that have arisen over the past couple of years and will focus on one project that arose from these discussions: the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health.

Until recently, mental health promotion was lacking both on university campuses and throughout the broader Ontario communities. As such, a stigma evolved where many students and community members felt uncomfortable talking about the issues they faced and the challenges that their mental health posed in their day-to-day lives. This stigma disguised the need and usefulness of targeted care by keeping those struggling with their mental health silent. However as the topic grew in public discourse, the Ontario government realized it needed to implement new systems, programs, and strategies to address this clear gap in healthcare.

**“Until recently,
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Improving the state of mental healthcare in Ontario has proven to be a complicated matter, requiring attention to a number of different, though related, areas. While the obvious gap exists in the capacity of frontline mental healthcare services, there are other pieces to the puzzle; initiatives can and should include information to increase awareness and reduce stigma, develop tools and resources for best and enhanced practice, teach positive coping skills, focus on recovery, and provide comprehensive training for faculty, staff and student leaders.

Open Minds Strategy

In response to these gaps, in 2011, the provincial government announced a 10-year strategic plan entitled Open Minds, Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. The broad objective of this plan was to create more effective coordination and integration of mental health and addiction services in the province of Ontario.¹

The vision of integrating better mental health strategies throughout Ontario was outlined through the plan's five main goals:

1. Promoting mental health – where Ontarians are able to recognize and seek the help they need;
2. Ensuring early identification so that symptoms are more manageable and care can be appropriately received;
3. Expanding housing, employment, and diversion, along with transitions from the justice system to ensure stability of living conditions and understanding employers and work environments;
4. Providing the right care at the right time and place to increase better access of resources and interactions within the healthcare system; and
5. Funding based on need and quality to decrease wait times and provide high quality service.²

It was hoped that through better collaboration and integration of service, these goals would become a reality. Additionally, individuals would become more aware of the available resources within their communities and would learn how to access resources that met their specific needs. With an immediate allocation of \$93 million of funding focused on youth and children in the first three years, more than 50,000 youth are now benefitting. There was also an increase of 770 mental health workers in schools, communities, and courts.³

This led into 2012's Moving on Mental Health plan (integrated within the strategy), which identified 14 mental health agencies to take on leadership roles and predicted 20 more to be made available for 2015. Moreover in 2014-2015, the government invested over \$65 million into these initiatives. Again in the 2017 Ontario budget, the government invested an additional \$6 million in funding to support mental health services and supports at post-secondary institutions for three years, resulting in a total investment of \$45 million.⁴

Against this backdrop, mental healthcare on Ontario's campuses became a focal point as well. After the 2011 Open Minds, Healthy Minds strategy, the Government pledged \$12 million to fund mental health projects on college and university campuses for the duration of two years. Then Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities, Reza Moridi, announced on World Mental Health Day 2014 that the safety and well-being of students was the Ministry's most important responsibility. This new funding was used to expand already existing projects from the 2012 Moving on Mental Health launch, which also included campus staff training and increased online support.⁵

A critical part of the Open Minds strategy was the creation of the Mental Health Innovation Fund (MHIF). Launched in 2012, the fund was established to provide financial support for the creation of innovative projects designed to improve on-campus mental healthcare delivery. Following consultation

with stakeholders – including student groups, colleges, and universities – the fund was extended for another two years in 2014.

It was reported that the MHIF supported approximately \$6 million worth of funding for projects proposed by post-secondary institutions and community partners. As of the summer of 2016, the MHIF had supported 32 projects that work towards higher quality and access to mental health services on post-secondary campuses. Furthermore, the MHIF helped form collaborations between mental health service providers. Eligible participants for MHIF funding included: publicly funded universities and colleges of applied arts and technology, Colleges Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, the College Student Alliance, the Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario, and other stakeholders interested in post-secondary mental health and addictions issues in the province.⁶

Centre for Innovation

One of the most promising projects to emerge from the MHIF is the Centre for Innovation in Campus Health (CICMH). Created in 2012, the Centre is governed by an executive committee composed of members from the Canadian Mental Health Association, Colleges Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities, the College Student Alliance, and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). CICMH has the ultimate objective of improving student mental health on our post-secondary campuses.

OUSA researchers met with CICMH staff members, Pearlyn Ng, Research and Knowledge Exchange Coordinator, and Shafqullah Aziz, Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Coordinator. Together, we discussed the origins of the centre, its mandate, successes, and its plans moving forward.

CICMH has been well received throughout the sector, and has had numerous successes since its creation. Since its establishment,

CICMH staff noted that the post-secondary sector has seen a significant culture shift around post-secondary mental health funding.⁶ Specifically on our campuses, the Centre has noticed increased initiative from institutions taking comprehensive approaches with mental health concerns. In the broader community at large, CICMH has noted that campuses are slowly bridging the gaps between their broader communities.⁷ Overall, CICMH has noted a significant culture shift as the province works towards eliminating the stigma around mental health.

Part of the Centre's success also has to do with its timeliness. Its approach is very much in keeping with current perspectives on mental health provision and the attitudes surrounding it. Given its focus on students, resources, tools, and information, CICMH represents the natural next step of what has been more commonly observed and prioritized in mental health research in recent years. For example, it has been long identified that symptoms of mental health difficulties emerge most commonly by or before university age. The change in lifestyle and the new pressures and responsibilities associated with challenging coursework, and for many students, living independently for the first time, contribute to the onset of mental health challenges. The Centre's emphasis on providing education and proliferating toolkits for counsellors and administrators is an invaluable support for their efforts in supporting this vulnerable population.⁸

Moving forward, CICMH has a couple of priorities they hope to accomplish. The Centre will be providing funding to evaluate innovative mental health projects at campuses across Ontario and exploring how these kinds of projects can be replicated or made sustainable, as well as hosting their annual conference discussing innovation in campus mental health.⁹ Additionally, they hope to build the knowledge and skills of frontline staff and student leaders to ensure that our campus communities continue to address the increasing need for mental health

awareness and services, foster collaboration to promote systemic improvement of mental health supports, and develop strategic partnerships to leverage external knowledge to improve the sector overall. Moreover, they aspire to drive even more student engagement in the years to come.⁹ The Centre also hopes to include students more directly in their program design, program delivery, and evaluation so that they can serve as a model for how campuses can do the same.¹⁰ As the Centre continues to progress, its staff recognizes that this will likely be a strategic direction.

Conclusion

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is optimistic about the state of mental health care on our campuses, and the progress moving forward. There are issues that remain to be solved – such as funding levels and the capacity of front line care – however, there are no shortages of partners to work with, and there seems to be political appetite to tackle these problems. Progress is made every year, but it will take consistent effort not to lose momentum in the push to enhance our capabilities in improving and promoting the mental health of Ontario's students. OUSA is looking forward to continuing its partnership with the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health as the province continues to move forward with addressing these issues affecting our campus communities.

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²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴Ministry of Advanced Education & Skills Development, "Ontario Boosts Mental Health Supports for People Across the Province: Province Funding Increased Mental Health Programs and Services Through 2017 Budget," press release, May 3, 2017, <https://news.ontario.ca/maesd/en/2017/05/ontario-boosts-mental-health-supports-for-people-across-the-province.html>.

⁵"Open Minds Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy" last modified November, 2014. http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/mentalhealth/docs/open_minds_healthy_minds.pdf

⁶Ibid

⁷Pearlyn Ng and Shafiqullah Aziz, interview by Danny Chang and Colin Aitchison, Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health office, June 30, 2017.

⁸Ibid

⁹Ibid

¹⁰Ibid

Underfunded, underserved: a generation at risk

The **New Brunswick Student Alliance (NBSA)** is the largest student organisation in New Brunswick, representing over 12,000 postsecondary students across four member campuses. We advocate for a postsecondary education (PSE) sector where any qualified student can attain a high-quality education while enjoying an exceptional quality of life.

The NBSA is governed by a Board of Directors made up of student leaders from the student associations & unions of the New Brunswick College of Craft & Design, Mount Allison University, St Thomas University, and both of the University of New Brunswick's campuses in Fredericton & Saint John. Our members represent the majority of New Brunswick's postsecondary students.

In working to improve New Brunswick's PSE sector, we conduct research and draft evidence-based policy to form recommendations to government. We work closely with government, university administrations, faculty representatives, members of the media, and various partner organisations to keep student issues at the forefront of public discussion and to make students' priorities a reality.

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Introduction

As the province's population ages, its healthcare costs will rise (healthcare spending for seniors averages five times that of citizens under 65)¹. Inevitably, these costs will be subsumed by New Brunswick's students and youth who are currently navigating their way through our PSE sector or embarking on their journey through our labour force. The increased financial burden of an already stretched cohort of New Brunswickers — squeezed even harder by stagnant income levels and a shrinking growth potential — is simply unsustainable.

It is unrealistic to think that students can continue to pay for other people's healthcare when they can barely pay for or access their own. Looking ahead to the next five years, the World Health Organisation anticipates that

the top drain on our healthcare system will be mental illness, an illness that manifests itself in youth 70 percent of the time.

New Brunswick has already been identified as a national leader in the integrated service delivery (ISD) of mental health services at the community level. In its latest budget, the New Brunswick government increased investments both for these ISD units and for community support orders. However, over the last five years it has failed to invest more than four percent of the provincial health budget in mental health services. Furthermore, the government's Action Plan for Mental Health in New Brunswick ignores the specific and unique requirements of youth aged 18-25. The lack of consultation with students and student advocacy groups on the issue of mental health is evident in the action plan's failure to directly address student needs.

Based on feedback from our member unions, all of whom have identified a lack of services available to students on campus and in their communities, the NBSA proposes an opportunity for the PSE sector in the province to develop the capacity to provide targeted mental health services for students on campus.

“It is unrealistic to think that students can continue to pay for other people’s healthcare when they can barely pay for or access their own.”

Mental health on our campuses

New Brunswick’s experience in dealing with mental health has seen the province’s educational institutions react with incredible speed. In the span of five years, university campuses have transitioned from recognition of mental health-related illnesses as a threat to students’ wellbeing to a normalized understanding that this is a serious concern.

In that same timeframe, universities in New Brunswick have witnessed an increase of knowledge- and awareness-enhancement campaigns, designed to break down the barriers created by mental health stigma. Students have taken charge of their own understanding of the issue and have partnered with initiatives such as Wear Your Label, #MyDefinition, Bell’s Let’s Talk Day, jack.org campus chapters, and student union-sponsored Mental Health Weeks.

Today, as a result, mental health discussions are ubiquitous in our communities. Discouragingly though, mental health services on campuses continue to be underfunded or nonexistent despite the increased physiological stress factors directly related to the postsecondary experience. Consequently, students in New Brunswick

feel let down by a lack of institutional capacity of university mental health services to address their growing needs.

As universities across the province embark on comprehensive studies and strategies to respond to the growing and unmet mental health needs of their students, a definitive guiding policy continues to allude the PSE sector and its partners. But policies, necessary as they are in New Brunswick, will not be enough to address the lack of full-time community- and campus-based mental health professionals. This shortcoming is but another symptom of the chronic underfunding of the New Brunswick PSE sector.

The potential of an entire generation of postsecondary graduates to contribute to their communities and pay for the increased healthcare demands of an aging population is at stake. The government ought to take heed or risk exacerbating this problem.

What is next?

The government faces a series of tough decisions in the second half of its mandate. It claims that young New Brunswickers are essential to the province’s future prosperity. If so, then the government also needs to guarantee their wellbeing and healthcare. It does not seem evident enough to the ministries responsible for health and PSE that the mental health problems affecting New Brunswick’s students are costing the province. The economic burden of mental health on the Canadian economy is already a staggering \$51 billion per year. Meanwhile, the cumulative impact of direct costs to the healthcare system is expected to reach \$2.3 trillion over the next 30 years with a \$198 billion impact on future productivity. Add to this an additional \$12 billion a year loss due to burnout.

For all the commendable, campus-led awareness efforts, enhancing students’ knowledge will have a limited impact on their wellbeing if they continue to lack access

to fundamental services. 30 percent of Canadians in their 20s live with mental health problems or illnesses. Yet, average waitlists to see mental health-related services on our member campuses range on average between two (2) to six (6) weeks. On some campuses during the school year, these waitlists grow up to six months long. As a result, advocacy groups on campus are struggling to embolden their fight to tackle stigma-related prejudice but students simply cannot see that help is available to them.

Students cannot continue to drive the mental health conversation without the financial and institutional support by government and the PSE sector. As such, the government has an opportunity here to take an even greater leadership role and ensure that the future of New Brunswick's citizens' mental wellbeing is provided for. Simultaneously, universities should collaborate within the sector and externally to develop best practices and principles for healthy campus communities and learning environments. With increased targeted funding to mental health services, universities can boost training to residence advisors & assistants, as well as to faculty to identify and mitigate problems early.

The significant commitment by the Government of New Brunswick to expand accessibility to public postsecondary institutions through the Tuition Access Bursary indicates that the government could be serious about its investment in the province's students. More work needs to be done, however. The lack of mental health services on campuses poses a significant social barrier to current and potential students.

Mental health organisations such as the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Canadian Mental Health Association have called for an increase to the mental health share of health spending in provinces to a national average of 9 percent. As a province that seeks to be a leader in healthcare and education, the Government of New Brunswick should oblige itself to meet this

goal through an annual share increase of 1 percent per year for the next five years. The government should also dedicate a portion of that funding to cover the need for targeted PSE-related services. Much of this could be allocated from monies guaranteed in the Province's bilateral health agreement with the federal government. That would still require an additional approximate \$40 million investment on the New Brunswick government's part.

The government cannot afford to underfund these services at PSE institutions. The personal consequences for students and graduates joining the labour force have already been identified: they are too significant to chance. Furthermore, the costs on the healthcare system and economic productivity in the province would be too great.

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Turning conversation into action on student mental health

StudentsNS is an alliance of Nova Scotia post-secondary student associations. We give students a united voice in Nova Scotia, helping set the direction of post-secondary education by researching challenges, identifying solutions, and creating the political space needed for these solutions to happen. Our mission is to be an advocate for the creation of an accessible, affordable post-secondary education (PSE) system that is of a high quality that values the student voice in the decision making processes of this system.

Our six member associations are the Acadia Students' Union (ASU), Marconi Nova Scotia Community College Student Association (MNSCCSA), Saint Francis Xavier University Students' Union (The U), Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA), Kingstec Nova Scotia Community College Student Association (KNSCCSA) and Annapolis Valley Nova Scotia Community College Student Association (AVNSCCSA). Taken together, we represent post-secondary students on campuses from Yarmouth to Sydney.

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In recent years, the mental health of young people has gained more and more attention, especially at post-secondary institutions. This topic is being examined by students, parents, educators, government, and other sector stakeholders that are struggling to grapple with a solution to what many perceive to be a crisis.

Mental health has been a growing topic of concern for Nova Scotian students for many years. This province has unfortunately witnessed a number of student deaths that have been related to student mental health, both at the secondary and post-secondary level. As such, students, institutions, researchers, and the government are taking note of the seriousness and severity of the mental health challenges being faced by students.

To begin to understand what is happening on campuses, it is important to note that Nova Scotia is very unique in regards to the post-

secondary system. The province is fortunate to have 10 universities and 1 community college that are all publically supported. All tolled, in 2014-2015, Nova Scotia played host to 54,782 post-secondary students on over 20 different campuses.¹ The large number of students and campuses presents some unique challenges for a province that only had a population of 943,000 in 2015.² With a large population of international and out-of-province students, the makeup of universities and colleges becomes even more unique.³

Student Mental Health in Nova Scotia: The Challenges

Universities are spending a lot of money to address mental health, but one local mental health researcher would argue that they are in fact addressing the wrong areas. This presents the largest challenge in Nova Scotia for addressing mental illness: rather than investing in unmet need, they are addressing

met “unneed.”⁴ The contributing factors to stress being perceived as mental illness are students lacking the skills to make a healthy transition into post-secondary education, such as time management, as well as the illusion that stress is always a bad thing.⁵ Additionally, universities are failing to address the systemic issues that they face. Today, Nova Scotia is a province of less than 1 million people with 11 post secondary institutions who are all competing for students.

Unique to Nova Scotia is the lack of investment by the provincial government. While many other provinces are investing in mental health, especially campus mental health, this government has been relatively silent. Students have consistently raised this concern with the Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, but, to date, only small investments have been made. Below, challenges of youth mental health in Nova Scotia are reviewed, as reported from government.

Report from the Transitions Task Force: This report was released in 2016 by a taskforce the Government of Nova Scotia convened to study how a student can make a successful transition from early childhood education all the way through to the workforce.⁶ StudentsNS was fortunate to be invited to participate in the task force. The report lists support services, including mental health supports as a recommendation to improve post-secondary retention rates, however not specific recommendations to combatting the problem. While it is encouraging that mental health was included in the discussion surrounding student success and transition, having no concrete recommendations on how to address it is a missed opportunity for mental health advocates.

Come Together: This report was put together in 2012 by the government’s Mental Health and Addictions Strategy Advisory Committee.⁷ While this is a comprehensive report with many recommendations to improve mental health across the province through everything

from access to services, to improved literacy, it fails to highlight the specific needs of students studying here. The only concrete mention of this demographic is in the recommendation to “design a province-wide health promotion and early identification and intervention approach” that addresses many groups including “the specific needs of youth and young adults, including junior and senior high schools and college/university students.” The government’s mental health and addictions strategy “Together We Can” also identifies children and youth as a priority, but does not address recommendations for post-secondary students.⁸ The exclusion of post-secondary students in both of these documents is concerning to StudentsNS.

Additional challenges that the government has not addressed include financial assistance and access in rural areas. An unfortunate but frequent consequence for a student that suffers from a mental illness is that they often must change their program planning to include a later graduation deadline or change in full-time status that can lead to a change in their eligibility for financial aid. This can gravely affect a student’s retention and graduation rates from their program. Access to mental health supports in rural areas is also a challenge given the influx of students in particular regions during the school year, and the stress that that can put on off-campus resources. These challenges were identified by the Government of Nova Scotia at CAMET Mental Health Symposium in June, 2016, currently without an action plan to address them.

The government will need to make strategic, meaningful investments in student mental health to ensure that our youth are able to cope with stress and receive the assistance for mental health illness when it is needed.

Initiatives in Nova Scotia

Institutions, community organizations, and student unions have taken the lead at addressing mental health awareness. With

the vast number of students studying in Nova Scotia, this province has need to effectively address the concerns of its students. A majority of youth 12-19 in Nova Scotia have consistently reported "very good" or "excellent" mental health.⁹ We know however, that "children and youth with mental distress and mental disorders are often identified and referred into the system too late - their problems getting worse with time."¹⁰ Due to the fact that many students are reporting more negative mental health realities in post-secondary education, Nova Scotia needs to focus on specific initiatives that have been beneficial to improving mental health literacy. Listed below are various projects currently being utilized to address student mental health.

"we believe that students must also be a critical part of the discussion about addressing student mental health on our campuses"

Transitions: The largest gap in mental health awareness is in mental health literacy. One comprehensive resource that has been developed is the Transitions resource developed by Dr. Stan Kutcher and colleagues.¹¹ It provides a guide to teen health and goes beyond focusing on a deficit-based approach to mental illness and moves to a broad approach to improving the health of all post-secondary students. Its goal is to ease the transition into post-secondary education for students by addressing topics from managing academics, to building healthy relationships, to identifying when help is needed.

Pathway Through Mental Health Care for Post-Secondary Settings: Expanding on the methodology from Transitions, Medavie Health Foundation announced in November 2016 that they would be financially

supporting an initiative to create, evaluate and disseminate a comprehensive and effective campus mental health framework, led by Dr. Stan Kutcher. The framework, which will be field tested at postsecondary campuses in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, could serve as a model across Canada and internationally. Participating institutions include Mount Saint Vincent University, Saint Mary's University, St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia Community College, and Holland College.¹²

Student Assistance Programs: Many students in Nova Scotia have gained access to a Student Assistance Program through their campus health plans. SAPs provide counseling services, among a host of other health services, similar to a traditional Employee Assistance Program found in many workplaces. These services are specifically meant as a solution to the fluctuating hours of on campus counselling services and helping remove the stigma associated with students who need to access help in a more public environment.

Campaigns: Campaigns focused on mental health literacy have been utilized by institutions across the province. The three largest partners in this are jack.org, the Elephant in the Room, and the My Definition campaign. Jack.org is a network of youth working towards changing the conversation around mental health.¹³ The Elephant in the Room campaign is approaching mental health awareness through the use of small blue elephants that are used as a starting point for discussions surrounding mental health in student unions, faculty, and administrative offices, and serve to remind everyone the mental health is everywhere. Finally, the My Definition campaign looks to spread awareness by telling the story of those living with mental illness. The main message is that mental illness never defines an individual, it is only part of their definition.

Conclusion

Given the realities and challenges of Nova Scotia as a province supporting such a robust post-secondary education sector, StudentsNS believes that student needs must be a focus for all parties important in student success: institutions, on-campus groups, community organization, and government. Student mental health continues to be a student need that is not being sufficiently supported. While some partnerships and collaborations, such as Pathway Through Mental Health Care for Post-Secondary Settings, have been formed to focus on a large-scale solution to the urgent call for more resources, it is not enough. As mentioned, StudentsNS believes government has a burden of responsibility to properly fund and strategize efforts to improve the mental health of students in Nova Scotia, just as they are responsible for the health of all citizens in the province.

Just as StudentsNS advocates for the inclusion of student perspective in all areas of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia, we believe that students must also be a critical part of the discussion about addressing student mental health on our campuses.

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