

On the Front Lines

Municipalities can lead mental health solutions

While mental health is an issue that every level of government needs to confront, it's often local governments that are on the front lines. Whether it's primary care, suicide prevention, housing and homelessness, or reducing stigma across the community, municipalities are well-versed in the challenges. In many cases, municipalities are also leaders at providing the solutions.

Given that one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness in any given year, solutions are urgently needed – across the country and in all orders of government. When the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) began its work five years ago, it was the result of a standing senate committee study that found an alarming number of challenges facing Canadians with mental health issues. In response, the MHCC created Canada's first mental health strategy, and is working to reduce stigma, advance knowledge exchange in mental health (moving the country from research to evidence-based action), and examine how best to help people who are homeless and living with mental health problems.

In order to be effective, the commission is looking to municipalities. Working in partnership with municipalities in areas such as seniors' care, housing and homelessness, community policing, suicide prevention, and workplace mental health, the commis-



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sion can implement community-based and community-supported strategies.

Aging Population

Canada's aging population is a concern for every community and jurisdiction. Because local governments have responsibilities for transportation, social housing, recreation, and, in some jurisdictions, long-term care, supporting seniors' mental health is fast becoming a priority issue for

many communities. While cognitive impairments, including dementias, encompass many of the mental health problems and illnesses faced by seniors, other problems, especially mood disorders and substance abuse,



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are equally prevalent. Moreover, vulnerable older adults and seniors with reduced mobility are not only at higher risk of poor physical health, but also of poor mental health.

Local governments can take the lead by making their municipalities age-friendly communities. One way to start is by paying attention to seniors' safety issues and ways the built environment and transportation encourage mobility. Where possible, seniors should be involved in the planning of community and recreation services that meet their needs. The MHCC also offers resources for local governments to consult when guiding local policy and initiatives, including the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Mental Health Services for Older Adults in Canada* and *The Seniors' Mental Health Policy Lens Toolkit*.¹

Homelessness

Ending homelessness is high on the agenda of every Canadian city. There are an estimated 150,000 to 300,000 people who are homeless in cities and towns across Canada, up to half of whom have serious mental health problems. The estimated cost of chronic homelessness is \$1.4 billion a year, primarily because of the high use of emergency services, shelters, and the criminal justice system.

Current responses to chronic homelessness rely heavily upon shelters as a housing option and emergency and acute service to provide health care. These are costly and ineffective

ways of responding to homelessness. In partnership with stakeholders across the country, the commission's *At Home-Chez Soi* project has demonstrated a better way of addressing homelessness by using the Housing First approach. Housing First is an evidence-based practice that provides immediate access to both permanent, independent housing and to mental health and support services offered by community teams. It has been proven to reduce homelessness and make better use of public dollars; and, after just one year, the benefits of Housing First were seen across a range of sectors including health, social services, and criminal justice.²

Community Policing and Front-Line Training

Community policing is another area of municipal jurisdiction that is often on the front lines of mental health issues. Municipal police services encounter people living with mental health problems and illnesses every day. These encounters vary in nature and include crisis response, calls resulting in transport or referral to mental health services, and casual encounters during an officer's daily shift.

According to a surveyed group of people living with mental illness who have interacted with police, the biggest improvement some police services could make is to become better educated about mental health problems and illnesses. They believe this education would promote understanding when dealing with people with mental illness who are in crisis.³

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a program similar to physical first aid, which trains individuals to provide immediate help to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The MHFA Canada program – offered to first responders and health care providers, as well as everyday Canadians – aims to improve mental health literacy, while adding a built-in peer-to-peer support mechanism in the workplace. Currently, more than 70,000 Canadians have been trained in MHFA.⁴

Healthy Workplace Practices

Finally, municipalities have a role to play not only as policy-shapers, but also as employers. Recent MHCC research has made a strong economic case for investing in mentally healthy and safe workplaces. With mental health problems and illnesses rated one of the top three drivers of both short- and long-term disability claims by more than 80 percent of Canadian employers, and with more than 500,000 people away from work each week due to a mental health concern, many Canadian employers are realizing that they can't afford *not* to invest in workplace mental health. In fact, it is estimated that mental health problems and illnesses cost the Canadian economy close to \$6.3 billion in 2011, due to absenteeism and turnover.

Municipalities can model mentally healthy workplace practices by implementing tools such as the *National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace* (the standard). Launched by MHCC in January 2013, the Bureau de normalisation du Québec (BNQ), and CSA Group, the standard is a voluntary tool to help Canadian organizations promote psychological health and safety and prevent psychological harm in their workplaces.

The standard is already being implemented by businesses, organizations and various government employers across Canada.⁵

If we are to improve Canada's mental health system, and truly change the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians around mental health issues, we will need the strength of Canada's municipalities behind us. Many municipal leaders have already stepped up to the challenge. This year, I encourage many more to champion mental health in their communities and make a lasting difference for the individuals, families, seniors, and front-line workers who are dealing with mental health challenges every day. Together, we can build stronger, healthier communities. **MW**

1 Both may be found at <www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>.

2 To learn more about Housing First and the *At-Home/Chez Soi* project, or to request a presentation on the findings from the project and how Housing First could be implemented in your jurisdiction, visit <www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>.

3 To learn more about how to improve interactions between police and people living with mental illness, municipal leaders are encouraged to consult the Police Project, also found on the MHCC website.

4 To find out where training is provided in your community, visit <www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca>.

5 To learn more about the standard, visit <www.mentalhealthcommission.ca>.