

A challenge to Canadian politicians:



Step up and do better!

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Mayor John Tory
Mayor of Toronto
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Dear Mayor Tory,

I'm a high school student from Guelph. For over a year, I've been writing to and meeting with politicians advocating for better mental health and addictions care and services. I wrote to every Member of Parliament, provincial health minister, and Premier. Respecting their non-political positions in the government, I wrote to the Governor General and every Lieutenant General asking them to speak out about the mental health and addictions crisis which touches every corner of Canada.

The results have been overwhelming. I met one-on-one with the federal health minister and received a phone call from the Prime Minister. Local, regional, provincial, national and international media have reported and commented on what I've been advocating for. Now, it's time to approach municipal politicians. The role and responsibility of local politicians in dealing with the mental health and addictions epidemic have been generally downplayed or forgotten. Yet, they are on the frontlines. They are significant players. They must be part of the solution.

The Mental Health and Cities Summit was encouraging. The mayors in attendance got a better picture of the issue from the highest level — the Canadian Constitution — to the lowest level — any street corner in any city. The challenge now is for mayors to use that information in their communities.

Your comment at the Summit that the Canadian Constitution is a barrier to improving mental health services is important and frequently not understood.

Canada is the only G7 country that does not have a national suicide prevention strategy. Canada is in this position because the federal government and the provincial governments argue over where the money comes from and who's responsible for delivering health care services. For them it's a constitutional issue. While governments debate constitutional details, Canadians — families and individuals suffer from the often fatal results of mental illness — fail to have a national suicide prevention strategy that other countries benefit from.

I know that suffering and its too often tragic ends. At the age of five, I lost my mother to suicide. Two years ago, I lost my father to mental illness and related drug issues. Those were — and are — difficult times.

Politicians at all levels need to accept responsibility for the failure of the current mental health and addictions system. In the Ontario Legislature, former provincial Health Minister Eric Hoskins said regarding mental health: *“I think the entire nation recognizes that our efforts as a nation have not been adequate or sufficient, whether it’s the federal government, whether it’s the individual provincial governments, territorial governments, municipal governments.”*

The failure of the current mental health and addictions system is in part the result of politicians quibbling about the Constitution rather than fighting for better care for Canadians. Denying Canadians better care because of constitutional bickering is wrong.

At the summit you said you were against creating new government ministries. With great respect, I differ with you on this point. I’m advocating for the creation of ministries of mental health and addictions at the federal, provincial and territorial levels. I’d like to tell you why.

In August, 2010, the Ontario Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions presented its final report, *Navigating the Journey to Wellness: The Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan for Ontarians*. Each of the three political parties was represented on the committee and the report’s recommendations were presented unanimously. The committee members wrote: *“...we have been changed by what we have heard, and are now convinced that a **radical transformation** (emphasis added) of mental health and addictions care is necessary if Ontarians are to get the care they need and deserve.”* As a result, the committee’s primary recommendation was the creation of an “umbrella” organization to manage and coordinate mental health and addictions services across Ontario.

Significantly, the committee noted how they approached their work. The report states: *“We worked cooperatively throughout our entire mandate, and we hope that this spirit of collegiality will influence those who must now implement our recommendations.”* That spirit of working together to discuss and solve a shared problem is even more important today. Unfortunately, that spirit of cooperation and collegiality has disappeared. Mental health and addictions has become a political game.

In September, 2017, the Ontario Legislature passed first reading of a private member’s bill (Bill 149, An Act to Establish the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions). The vote fell largely along party lines. Some committee members who endorsed the 2010 unanimous report abstained or voted against the Bill. The Standing Committee on Financial and Economic Affairs to which the Bill was referred took no action and failed to debate or hold public hearings and discussions. The government ignored the issue.

The “umbrella” organization recommended by the select committee and the ministry created by the Bill would do essentially the same thing. Both would manage and coordinate services and care across the province. One would be outside of government; the other would be part of government where politicians could be held responsible for the success or failure of mental health and addictions services. Their goals are the same but how to achieve them is different. Both approaches deserve political and public discussion, not government neglect.

I support the creation of a ministry of mental health and addictions for a couple of reasons.

First, the current system of mental health and addictions care has a long, proven history of failing Ontario residents. There’s no need to elaborate on that. Dr. Hoskins summed up the situation nicely. And, you’ve called it a crisis.

Second, the current mental health and addictions system is massively complex, broken and fragmented. In Ontario, there are approximately 10 provincial ministries and nearly 1,000 agencies that provide mental health and addictions services. They spend untold millions of dollars with little knowledge of where the money goes, how it's being spent, and how effectively it's being used. I called the Minister of Health's office looking for these details. They were unable to answer my questions. So, I called other government departments including Department of Finance and the Provincial Treasury. No one had answers. One person even suggested I call Toronto Public Health. I didn't call.

Government spending and support of mental health and addictions services is in disarray. Government must accept responsibility for correcting its own mess. It needs to know precisely how much it spends on mental health and addictions and what's being done with the money. A ministry would bring that money and services together in one place. A ministry would hold politicians accountable. Their constituents would have the final say. An "umbrella" organization would not have that influence.

When we discuss the failure of Ontario's mental health and addictions system, my family has been failed. But it goes beyond my family. Thousands of families and individuals across Ontario have been failed. In 2005, there were around 1,150 suicides in Ontario, my mum included. Every year since she has been gone and governments continue to fail Ontarians another 1,000 people die to suicide. Thirteen thousand people have died under the current system since my mother's death.

We as a province have a responsibility to act to lower these statistics. We have a responsibility to recognize that these statistics are people who have been failed by the Government of Ontario and the current mental health and addictions system. It's time for a radical transformation — creation of a ministry of mental health and addictions.

I'm also advocating for a secretariat for mental health and addictions in the Prime Minister's Office. A secretariat would provide a national focus and leadership on the issue. It would be a centre where politicians from all levels — federal, provincial, territorial and local — could work together to gain a better understanding and pull up their sleeves to get the job done. It would be an ongoing national effort. It would be a place where mayors and local politicians would be part of the solution. I've discussed this idea with the PMO and the Prime Minister directly. Both indicated interest but have taken no action.

Municipal politicians and councils taking a position on mental health and addictions is rare, but it has happened. Last October, the Niagara Falls council supported the idea of a standalone ministry of mental health and addictions. The headline from the Niagara Falls Review is attached. Before people read this and jump to a conclusion, you should know I do not support the NDP on all issues, just as I do not support all positions of any other political party. I support good policy, regardless of the party which puts it forward. Mental health and addictions care should be above party politics. **It's too important to be a mere political game.**

While you and I may have some differences regarding the approach to the mental health crisis, it's important that people with differences talk about the issue and gain a better understanding of each other. I'd appreciate the opportunity to have a collegial chat with you.

It's time for politicians to step up and do better!

Regards,

Noah Irvine

PS. If you're interested in the Select Committee report, it's on the website (www.stepupanddobetter.com.) Click "Documents" at the top of any page. A clip of your comment on the Constitution is also on the site.

CC Cam Guthrie, Mayor
Lloyd Longfield, MP
Hon. Helena Jaczek
Hon. Gaeten Barrette
Hon. Judy Darcy
Hon. John Reiter
Hon. Sarah Hoffman
Hon. Glen Abernathy

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Hon. Robert Henderson
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Hon. Kelvin Goertzen
Hon. Greg Ottenbreit
Hon. Pauline Frost
Pamela Goldsmith-Jones, MP

NEWS LOCAL

Falls council backs NDP push for mental health ministry



By Ray Spiteri, Niagara Falls Review
Tuesday, October 24, 2017 6:22:03 EDT PM



A file photo of Queen's Park.