

2022 Provincial Pre-Budget Submission



MENTAL HEALTH

*Critical to our
shared recovery,
now more than ever*

Introduction

As we enter the second full year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that Ontario seize the opportunity to both protect the progress we have made and build the foundation for a recovery that is inclusive, robust, and focuses on improving access to quality mental health care across the province.

The negative impact of the pandemic cannot be overstated, and we must consider the tremendous toll these last two years have had on the mental health of Ontarians of all ages. Increasing complexity and urgency of mental health and substance use concerns, compounded by lengthy wait times for mental health care, are setting the stage for an ongoing mental health crisis in Ontario.

The pandemic continues to have a disproportionate impact on already-marginalized groups including people with low or no incomes, people experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, racialized populations, immigrants and newcomers, and people with disabilities.

Improving the mental wellness of Ontarians through increased investments in mental health supports, the social determinants of health, and a focus on equity, has never been more critical to our shared recovery.

The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW), the voice of social work in Ontario represents almost 8,000 social workers. Social workers are on the front lines everyday providing vital assessment, treatment, case management, and system navigation to Ontarians across the full continuum of care. In **health care, long-term care, schools, community mental health, private practice** and more, social workers are there to intervene early, reduce barriers to care, and deliver the quality mental health care that individuals, families, and communities need.

As the largest provider of mental health services, including counselling and structured psychotherapy in Ontario, especially in rural, Northern, and remote communities, Ontario's social workers bring a unique perspective that **makes them essential to expanding and accelerating access to mental health supports which must be the cornerstone of Ontario's recovery plan.**

It is through this unique lens that we offer a series of recommendations to ensure the province's recovery includes a strong focus on the mental health and well-being of all Ontarians while ensuring recovery efforts are sustained, vulnerable populations are supported, and safer communities are built.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Accelerate the \$3.8 billion funding commitment over 10 years to 5 years, with funding directed to mental health and addictions services which provide culturally appropriate and culturally safe mental health care across the province.

2

Strengthen mental health care for long-term care residents by mandating the provision of social work services by a Registered Social Worker in all long-term care homes.

3

Increase the number of Registered Social Workers in schools to provide greater access to mental health services, as well as culturally appropriate and safe supports where needed, to students and their families.

4

Increase the rates of social assistance to more accurately reflect the current cost of living.

5

Increase the availability and quality of affordable and supportive housing.

6

Support those leaving detention to engage successfully within their communities by mandating a Registered Social Worker dedicated to discharge planning for all provincial correctional facilities.

Mental health supports are needed now as a key focus of Ontario's recovery

1

Accelerate the \$3.8 billion funding commitment over 10 years to 5 years, with funding directed to mental health and addictions services which provide culturally appropriate and culturally safe mental health care across the province.

Ontario's social workers know all too well the impacts of extended wait times to access mental health care and the disproportionate barriers to care for marginalized and racialized communities. A bold infusion of funding is required to accelerate the [Roadmap to Wellness](#) and build a system responsive to the increased immediate and long-term mental health needs of Ontarians.

The pandemic has only increased the demand and urgency for services. Investments are needed now to eliminate the waitlists and increase services to those living with mental health concerns and to keep these concerns from becoming crises.

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that Ontario spend the 10-year, \$3.8 billion commitment to mental health investment over the next five years to help address the profound impacts of the pandemic on people's mental health, to build a foundation for recovery that includes everyone.

74%

of Ontarians are experiencing increased mental health and addiction challenges; 30% of those are at high risk.¹

In a single week
in Ontario in
2021 there were

4,500

visits to emergency
departments related to
mental health and
substance misuse.²

2

Strengthen mental health care for long-term care residents by mandating the provision of social work services by a Registered Social Worker in all long-term care homes.

The pandemic has been devastating for the long-term care (LTC) sector, highlighting and exacerbating long-standing issues and demonstrating the lack of comprehensive mental health care being provided to residents.

Social workers are key to ensuring that the future state of LTC is resident-centred, sustainable, and supports the best care possible. Registered Social Workers (RSW) provide needed mental health care and system navigation to residents and caregivers and are an asset to LTC staff facing burnout and distress themselves.

The inclusion of RSWs can have a significantly positive impact on the quality of life of LTC residents and their families while reducing costs on Ontario's health care system.³ In fact, studies have shown that social work inclusion on care teams in LTC has decreased readmissions to hospitals, decreased physician office visits, decreased resident responsive behaviours and use of antipsychotic medications, and overall reduced the cost per resident.^{4,5}

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that every licensee of an LTC home ensure that there is at least one RSW for each home and that the RSW is on site for a minimum of 30 minutes per resident per month to provide direct social work services.

Residents in LTC have *higher rates* of depression compared to older adults living in the community.⁶

Despite **40%** of LTC residents in Ontario requiring some form of psychiatric care, **only 5%** of residents receive this care within 90 days.⁷

*Mental health supports are needed now
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3

Increase the number of Registered Social Workers in schools to provide greater access to mental health services, as well as culturally appropriate and safe supports where needed, to students and their families.

Anxiety, depression, and eating disorders amongst our youth are on the rise. School Social Workers provide vital early intervention and mental health support to children, youth, and families who might not otherwise have easy and timely access to such services in their communities.

There is an urgent need for culturally appropriate and culturally safe care within schools through the hiring of School Social Workers to help identify, address, and prevent children's mental health concerns, keeping families, schools, and communities connected. This should include sustainable and long-term funding of Indigenous and racialized social workers in schools to provide culturally safe services and supports.

When students are able to access mental health supports in school, this reduces the waitlist for community-based services for those who need it most. Providing critical early intervention and mental health care to children, youth, and families also has the benefit of offering faster identification which prevents mental health crises and reduces the risk of continued mental health difficulties later in life, setting students up for success in their futures.

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that the government increase access to mental health supports for students by increasing the number of School Social Workers to help reduce the risk of continued mental health difficulties later in life and equip all students with a better environment for academic and professional success.

28,000
children and youth
are on wait lists for
mental health care
in Ontario.⁸

1/2
of Ontario's
children and
youth are at
risk of mental
health issues.⁹

4

Increase the rates of social assistance to more accurately reflect the current cost of living.

Income supports in Ontario, Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), have not kept up with rising costs of living. Making life more affordable for Ontarians and ensuring an equitable recovery for all must start by supporting those who have the least.

A lack of adequate income to purchase food, afford transportation, and pay monthly bills such as electricity and internet results in the financial and social exclusion of these individuals from our economy and community. This is especially the case for Black and Indigenous households, who are three times more likely to be dealing with food insecurity (a key indication of poverty) than non-racialized households.¹⁰ Ensuring that OW and ODSP rates accurately reflect the current cost of living is essential to enable all Ontarians to participate equitably in their communities, the economy, and our shared recovery.

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that the government raise the rate of OW and ODSP support payments to reflect the current cost of living in Ontario to ensure that all Ontarians can participate equitably in social and economic life.

Over **13%**
of families in Ontario
live in poverty.¹¹

Those accessing
OW and ODSP
represent over
840,000
Ontarians living
in poverty.^{12,13}

The social determinants of health must be addressed to enable Ontarians to participate equitably in their communities and the economy

5

Increase the availability and quality of affordable and supportive housing.

There is a growing demand for housing supports for those who are not homeless, yet are not able to afford the average cost of rent in affordable housing. Supportive housing is key to assisting those who are under-housed and homeless to access mental health and other supports that they need.

Without access to supportive housing, those with chronic mental health and addictions issues often turn to hospitals. To further support the ability of individuals to manage their mental health and live well within the community, rather than in hospitals or correctional institutions, investments in supportive housing should be increased and funds should be directed to a proven range of wrap-around supports which provide life skills training, clinical counselling, and crisis intervention services.

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that the government increase investments in supportive housing with wrap-around supports to ensure that Ontarians have the safety and stability needed to effectively manage their health and mental health.

The Auditor General has found that increasing the supply of supportive housing could save the health care system

\$45 million annually.¹⁴

Every ***\$10*** spent on supportive housing saw average government cost savings of ***\$21.72***.¹⁵

6

Support those leaving detention to engage successfully within their communities by mandating a Registered Social Worker dedicated to discharge planning for all provincial correctional facilities.

Incarceration creates unique barriers to housing and employment which necessitates greater connection to community and job services.

Due to their skills and expertise in mental health care, case management, and system navigation, utilizing and optimizing RSWs in discharge planning in corrections can lead to positive reintegration into communities. This will lead to improving outcomes for individuals with correctional involvement and the communities they live in, while reducing long-term system costs that result from recidivism and poor health and mental health status among correctionally-involved populations.

In particular, the expansion of the role of social work can increase linkages and information sharing between institutional staff and community service providers while decreasing levels of poverty in communities as individuals are connected with housing and employment supports.

Recommendation

OASW therefore recommends that the government mandate the use of RSWs for discharge planning at all of the province's correctional institutions to further enhance the provision of comprehensive discharge planning.

Mental health issues are
2 to 3 times
more prevalent in
Canadian prisons
than in the general
population.¹⁶

Interaction with the
criminal justice system
leads to a lifetime of
social and economic
disadvantage and can
reduce the chances of
employment by **50%**;
the effect is even more
prominent for individuals
from marginalized
communities.¹⁷

About OASW

The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) is the voice of social work in Ontario. It is a voluntary, provincial, non-profit association representing over 7,900 members. OASW works to actively speak on behalf of social workers on issues of interest to the profession and advocates for the improvement of social policies and programs directly affecting social work practice and client groups served.

OASW encourages the government to consult with and listen to Elders and community leaders of racialized and Indigenous groups for guidance on how to invest equitably in appropriate resources.

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