

Institute for Advancements in Mental Health Submission to the Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs

August 28, 2020

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The Institute for Advancements in Mental Health (IAM) appreciates the opportunity to share our learnings and recommendations with the Standing Committee. Our recommendations are based on our 40-year history of serving Ontarians who experience serious mental illness.

As COVID-19 has spread across the province, we have become increasingly aware of the impact this is having on our clients and their families, both existing and new. Individuals who have a mental illness or who are predisposed to mental health challenges are especially vulnerable to the impacts of the public health crisis as fear and anxiety, as well as disruption to routine, exacerbate symptoms of mental illness, and psychosis in particular. Social support is often a strong positive factor in recovery and maintaining well-being for our clients. Our services help them to stay well while engaging in the necessary social distancing and self-isolation.

Our services fill a crucial gap in the mental health care system as we work to serve Ontarians with complex chronic mental illness, largely without service fees or strict eligibility criteria. In times of crisis, people look to us for help and in turn, we provide them with the support they need to manage their illness while remaining in the community and out of hospitals. It is essential that we continue to support our clients in the community to reduce hospital visits and reduce the spread of COVID-19 by giving our clients the tools they need to cope with their illness in their own homes.

We are not alone in this work. Across the province, community-based non-profit organizations in the mental health sector have been working diligently for years to serve the most vulnerable Ontarians, decreasing pressures on more formal support systems such as hospitals. The pandemic has hit the non-profit sector exceptionally hard as many organizations rely on in-person fundraising events and donations to maintain operations. It is essential that the province provide support to community-based non-profit organizations so that we can carry on our important work, and scale up services to meet increasing needs, during this pandemic and beyond.

The Institute for Advancements in Mental Health and the Impact of COVID-19

IAM is a connector, collaborator, thought-leader and solution-driven organization focused on supporting, innovating and driving change for better mental health. Our direct services are where we provide one of the few community-based supports for people living with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia and psychosis. We do this through individual counselling services, recovery groups, and navigational support. We support people living with serious mental illness, but address challenges that expand across the entire mental health spectrum. We also support families and caregivers who are often the sole support to someone living with mental illness, both financially and socially. We support communities through information, education, and navigation support to improve our collective understanding of mental health and mental illness.

So far in 2020, we have seen an increasing trend of client call volumes and we expect that these numbers will continue to grow as the crisis continues and even after it has resolved as people come to terms with the impacts of long-lasting stress. The increase in calls are coming, not just from our existing clients, but many with new concerns relating specifically to the virus. Concerns with access to medication, anxiety regarding social distancing and more are becoming common. People who have not been involved with our services in the past are reaching out to seek support in coping with the mental health impacts of the global pandemic.

In this challenging and unprecedented time, supporting the mental health of our clients and extending our services to the hardest hit residents of Ontario is our top priority. To this end, we have taken significant innovative measures to ensure that we continue services and supports, while following Ministry of Health and Public Health guidelines on public safety. Our strong group of counsellors and staff are working tirelessly to provide support – at all levels – through virtual means.

We have increased our service offerings with more support groups for both clients and caregivers. We have also expanded our hours of service on our support line into the evenings, all while moving all of our operations to virtual platforms. We have also reworked the content of our programs to be delivered through virtual means and to include information and skill development that is specific to COVID-19 and public health guidelines.

To manage this scaled up response, we have redeployed staff from other functional areas to offset the needs of our programs, which has impacted our ability to carry out necessary day-to-day operations of the organization. We are trying desperately to avoid layoffs to offset our financial downturn as every staff member is needed to support our clients.

The majority of our funding is generated through donations and corporate and foundation grants. However, with the economic downturn that has resulted from COVID-19, many of our donors are no longer in a financial position to continue to support us. Additionally, we have had to cancel fundraising events and it is uncertain when we will be able to resume these activities. As such, we are already experiencing a significant financial decline for our organization which will make it difficult, in both the short- and long-term, to maintain our current operations.

Nonetheless, we are optimistic that lessons learned during this time will enable us to build further efficiencies as we move forward as an organization. Increasing our capacity now to respond to this crisis will provide us with the tools to recover and stabilize as the global situation normalizes. Enhanced virtual capacities will enable us to continue to spread our services to broader client bases across the province.

Additionally, we are working to build partnerships with other agencies, both in our sector and outside of it, which will enable us to strengthen our efforts to better the lives and experiences of all those who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. It is crucial that we - and other - community-based non-profit organizations in the mental health sector are able to sustain our services to support the rising tide of mental health challenges in our province.

Our Recommendations

1. Sector Stabilization Fund

The demand for accessible and widespread mental health supports has been increasing for some time and this demand has only been accelerated by the pandemic. However, the organizations best equipped to support mental health needs are struggling to keep their doors open. A recent survey by the Ontario Nonprofit Network revealed that 20% of non-profits in Ontario expect to close in less than six months and that there has been over \$90-million in lost revenue among the organizations that completed the survey. Now, more than ever, grassroots organizations, like IAM, are needed to provide vital support to Ontarians. We are in need of stabilization funding for the sector. IAM supports the Ontario Nonprofit Network's call for a \$680-million Sector Stabilization Fund for Non-Profit Organizations to ensure that we are able to continue to support and rebuild communities.

2. Investments to support mental health innovation at the community level.

As the demands for mental health support have increased, so too have the challenges in delivering mental health supports. Service providers have had to transition to virtual means and work-from home models just to maintain basic services. As the realities of service-provision and mental health needs in our province have changed, community-based mental health services are in need of scaling up solutions and developing new programming to meet the changing needs of Ontarians. To solve pressing new challenges, as well as older challenges that pre-dated the pandemic, a new model for approaching these problems is needed.

While health incubators have become more common among hospitals, driving forward solutions to long-standing concerns, the mental health space has not fully experienced the same benefits. Incubators and innovation hubs have the ability to convene critical thinkers and learnings in mental health with investors, foundations, philanthropists, community organizations, corporations, government, and the public to create holistic solutions that start with the “end users” – the clients of the mental health care system themselves. Collaborative innovation projects, aided through the use of digital spaces, can bring together client-driven and evidence-based solutions with the realities of social capital and investment opportunities to ensure sustainability of solutions.

Currently, IAM is working to fill this gap. IAM’s innovation platform is Ontario’s first dedicated community mental health platform committed to effective collaboration with system partners working in the mental health space to develop solutions to our mental health issues. IAM works to create a unique and designated space for mental health innovation in Canada, utilizing a human-centred approach to problem solving and supporting people with mental illness who will also be co-designers among innovators. In this way, we seek to be leaders in endorsing a culture of innovation and collaboration, all while consistently measuring and evaluating the trajectory of our work. Increased investment is needed to expand on IAM’s ability, and that of other mental health innovators, to ensure societies become more conducive places to live, recover and thrive in.

3. Protection for community-based mental health organizations facing insurance challenges related to COVID-19.

Adding to the challenges of community-based organizations during this time, is the recent rise in insurance pricing matched with COVID-19 exclusions that have put undue pressure on community mental health organizations. We need to remove this barrier to service so that organizations following public health guidelines can continue their vital work, without fear of further financial hardship.

In addition to these key recommendations, we echo several other recommendations which were previously expressed to the Premier of Ontario and Minister of Health through a joint letter on May 7, 2020 from an alliance of health care providers including Canadian Cancer Society, Canadian Lung Society, Heart & Stroke and Diabetes Canada with support from IAM among others.

4. Program funding for organizations which provide peer support, information services, and psychosocial support for people from vulnerable populations, such as those with chronic illness and conditions and their caregivers.



5. Ensure the Ontario-Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance Program works for non-profits and charities renting properties in Ontario and provide additional assistance to offset overhead costs of transitioning staff to work from home.
6. Double the provincial portion of the Charitable Donation Tax Credit through to the end of 2021 and make the credit refundable so charitable contributions are treated the same as a contribution to a political party in Ontario.
7. Commit to matching donations from all Ontarians to provincial charities or national charities with provincial offices.

We applaud the province's rapid response and the critical investments that have been made to address the pandemic and we appreciate your attention to our current and ongoing needs during this highly sensitive time.

We welcome the opportunity to elaborate on our recommendations and to discuss how we can help you to implement innovative solutions to the current crisis. For questions, please contact Kaelen Boyd, policy and government relations lead, at kboyd@iamentalhealth.ca or 1-800-449-6367 x 259.

Sincerely,

Mary Alberti, CEO