

Promoting mental health innovation through a prize challenge model:

IAM & MHRC's Mental Health Innovation Prize

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The Institute for Advancements in Mental Health (IAM), is a connector, collaborator, thought leader and solution driven organization, supporting, innovating and driving change for better mental health. IAM innovates in mental health with a focus on returning solutions back to communities, through partnership and collaboration. Through our own in-house services, we design programs around the needs of our clients - people with complex mental health needs and their support circles. In 2017, we created a unique, first-of-its kind community-based mental health innovation platform: a designated space for mental health innovation entrenched within a mental health service organization.

Context

In fall 2019, the Institute for Advancements in Mental Health (IAM) and Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) jointly launched their first-ever national mental health innovation prize to reward and support innovation in the Canadian mental health space.

Why a prize challenge?

IAM and MHRC decided on a prize challenge model to crowdsource and incentivize innovation. Prizes have the potential to create breakthrough innovations, help innovators thrive, and unlock systemic change¹. They can achieve social change in up to seven different ways:

- 1 Identifying excellence
- 2 Influencing public perception
- 3 Focusing communities on specific problems
- 4 Mobilizing new talent
- 5 Strengthening problem-solving communities
- 6 Educating individuals
- 7 Mobilizing capital²

Sponsors find that prize challenges are particularly valuable where traditional research or grant programs and procurement processes are ineffective. The true strength of challenge prizes rarely comes from the size of the incentive³, but from other motivating factors such as: the opportunity to compete, learn, solve a difficult problem, build a network, garner recognition and design an eventual commercial offering⁴.

"A core power of prizes derives from their openness: their ability to attract diverse talent, generate unexpected approaches, and reveal unusual perspectives in the face of a problem or challenge"⁵.

Prizes encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and engage innovators that typically would be excluded from more traditional granting or procurement due to qualification barriers. Winning solutions are more likely to come from a discipline outside of the most obvious one connected to the challenge⁶.

Prize design and activities

This prize challenge will be an annual call to innovators to propose human-centred solutions to complex problems in the mental health space. The prize aims to advance the design and development of innovative interventions which prioritize co-design approaches with people with lived experience; and improve community access and impact to these interventions. Uniquely, this challenge fills a gap by supporting innovations at the prototype stage, where many existing grants reward research. This program asks:

How might we reduce barriers around innovation and crowdsource the best solvers to a complex system challenge?

The inaugural prize challenge centered on youth suicide prevention, a topic for which IAM and MHRC both have interest and expertise. The call for proposals sought to support the development of early stage innovations which responded to the following research question:

How might we reduce incidences of suicide deaths among youth and young adults living with mental health issues with an emphasis on psychosis in areas of Canada with limited access to health and social services?

The national prize challenge was a grant-incubation hybrid that declared the award as either one grant of \$100,000, or two grants of \$50,000 each, depending on the type and scale of proposals received. The research challenge was to enhance an existing support/prototype which met the following criteria:



Focused on the reduction of incidences of youth suicide with an emphasis on individuals living with psychosis or schizophrenia.



Employed an innovative approach that directly involved youth and family members/caregivers in shaping or modifying the design of a solution.



Was evaluated for its effectiveness and applicability if it was an early-stage support OR built out if it was an early-stage prototype.



Was scalable in its implementation.

In a year-long process, the Mental Health Innovation Prize was designed with the following phases: prize planning & initiation, source & selection, full proposals, selecting prize.

Prize Challenge Phases

Prize Planning & Initiation

Funding and partnership
Prize design and initiation
Prize launch

Source & Selection

Additional program set-up
Sourcing human resources
Submissions and evaluation

Full Proposals

Full proposal design
Workshops
Proposal submissions

Selecting Prize

Virtual pitch
Selection and award
Announcement

Prize Recipients

Finalists were selected, and two prize recipients that best aligned with the challenge criteria were Dr. Mark Sinyor and Dr. Christopher Bowie. In their work, researchers Sinyor and Bowie address suicide prevention by building resiliency in youth who may be at risk, and focusing on youth vulnerable to experiencing psychosis, which further increases suicide risk.

Summary

IAM and MHRC’s mental health innovation prize challenge was a successful initiative in its first implementation. Stakeholders across the board were excited by the innovative approach taken and the outlook of the challenge winner(s). IAM is well positioned to support innovators in developing interventions to address wicked problems through co-design approaches - this is part of IAM’s operational approach. This initiative is a great opportunity for IAM and future partners to carve out a meaningful space in the health innovation landscape and build their brand.

¹ “Challenge Prizes: A Practice Guide.” Nesta, <https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/challenge-prizes-a-practice-guide/>

² “And the winner is...: Capturing the promise of philanthropic prizes.” McKinsey & Company, 2009, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/and-the-winner-is-philanthropists-and-governments-make-prizes-count>

³ “And the winner is...: Capturing the promise of philanthropic prizes.” McKinsey & Company, 2009, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/and-the-winner-is-philanthropists-and-governments-make-prizes-count>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

⁶ “Challenge Prizes Landscape Review.” Nesta, 2012, media.nesta.org.uk/documents/challenge_prizes_landscape_review.pdf