

# In It Together 2020

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Foundations  
for Promoting  
Mental Wellness  
in Campus  
Communities

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# Student mental health: A shared responsibility

The mental health and well-being of Ontarians is a shared responsibility that requires collective action.

In any given year, one in five Canadians experiences a mental health challenge or illness, and by 40 years of age, half of Canadians will have, or will have had, a mental illness.<sup>1</sup>

This prevalence means that, at some point or another, mental illness will impact us all.

Postsecondary students are particularly vulnerable. The onset of most mental illness and substance dependency typically occurs during adolescence and early adulthood, which coincides with the very age when the majority of students are first encountering the pressures associated with postsecondary education.

In fact, half of all lifetime cases of diagnosable mental illnesses begin by 14 years of age, and 75 per cent by 24 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

An effective and easy-to-navigate mental health-care system for postsecondary students helps foster student success throughout university and college. It ensures access to the life-long tools needed to build resiliency, and to navigate a continuously changing future and rapidly evolving labour market.

That is why the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), the College Student Alliance (CSA), the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and Colleges Ontario (CO) developed an action plan to address postsecondary student mental health in 2017.

*In It Together: Taking Action on Student Mental Health* advocated for curriculum changes that teach young people resiliency before they enter postsecondary



education. It also proposed culturally diverse counselling and the use of more technology and peer counselling - all free to students, on and off campus.

Integral to the plan was that the Province adopt a holistic approach to support student mental health, drawing on the many strengths that community partners have to offer.

Ontario's universities, colleges and students remain committed to supporting student mental health. Our efforts have resulted in many improvements, including a comprehensive, accessible database of community mental health service providers and an increased awareness around the need to instil resiliency and coping skills as early as K-12.

However, significant challenges still remain. Students continue to face long wait times for mental health services, both on campus and in the community, which has placed increased pressure on postsecondary institutions and campus service providers.

**The Spring 2019 National College Health Assessment (NCHA), a national online survey that collects information on students' health behaviours, attitudes and perceptions, indicated that depression, anxiety and suicide attempts are increasing among Ontario's postsecondary students.**

- 53% of students reported feeling so depressed in the previous year it was difficult to function (up from 46% in 2016);
- 69% of students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety in the previous year (up from 65% in 2016);
- 17% of students reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the previous year (up from 14% in 2016);
- 3.1% of students reported a suicide attempt within the previous year (up from 2.2% in 2016);
- 11% of students had indicated that they had attempted suicide, but not in the previous year.

These challenges have spurred the four organizations – OUSA, CSA, COU and CO – to collaborate once again, jointly putting forward key recommendations and principles to foster a proactive approach in addressing and responding to postsecondary mental health:

- A 'whole-of-community' approach is vital to improving student mental health and well-being.
- All postsecondary students should have access to timely, effective, culturally relevant and flexible on-campus mental health care that responds appropriately to their needs.
- Life-long mental health and well-being for all Ontarians should be promoted through prevention, harm reduction and access to mental health care.

Prioritizing access to effective support will help prevent mental health issues from intensifying and requiring crisis intervention services from hospitals, as the Province works to reduce the burden of hallway health care across Ontario.

We greatly appreciate the \$3.8-billion government investment over 10 years to develop and implement a mental health and addictions strategy across Ontario, and the Province's commitment to engage with health-care leaders, frontline staff and people with lived experiences to address the critical gaps in Ontario's mental health-care system.

The unique challenges of the student aged population require targeted investments to ensure service delivery is provided through appropriate and accessible channels.

**Ontario's universities and colleges provide a range of mental health services that raise awareness for students, staff and faculty. This includes coordinating wellness events, implementing racially specific programming and programming tailored for international students, and conducting wellness checks with students.**

More support for student mental health will positively impact the trajectory of students' lives. It will create a resilient, adaptable population that can navigate through great social and economic change, while leading healthy and fulfilled lives.

Taking action on student mental health will benefit not only students, but also the communities in which they live and the province in which they want to build a future.

If we're in it together, we can build an Ontario that is a leader in mental wellness and advocates for the well-being of its people.

**Universities and colleges work with local health-care and community agencies to develop and implement plans and programming that assist students with mental health concerns. Examples of this include mobile teams of mental health professionals who regularly visit campuses, resource development and after-hours and crisis support for students.**

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# Summary of recommendations

## PRINCIPLE 1:

**A ‘whole-of-community’ approach is vital to improving student mental health and well-being.**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

1. The Province ensure access to a core set of community-based mental health and addictions services across Ontario, providing baseline support for individuals across their lifespan.
2. The Province update the primary care funding model to allow postsecondary students to access care with a second health service team while studying away from their home communities.

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## PRINCIPLE 2:

**All postsecondary students should have access to timely, effective, culturally relevant and flexible on-campus mental health care that responds appropriately to their needs.**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

3. The Province increase funding for campus-based mental health services and supports, such as peer-to-peer programming, frontline counselling services and preventive and early intervention supports.
4. The Province increase funding to postsecondary Accessibility Services offices that provide supports to students with disabilities, including non-physical disabilities.
5. The Province provide funding to maintain the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) and support its mission to help Ontario's universities and colleges enhance their capacity to support student mental health and well-being, while sharing best practices.

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## PRINCIPLE 3:

**Life-long mental health and well-being for all Ontarians should be promoted through prevention, harm reduction and access to mental health care.**

The partnering organizations recommend that:

6. The Province continue their approach of embedding mental health learning in K-12, ensuring that students have the knowledge, resiliency and resources to effectively manage their mental well-being and to seek help if they reach a point of distress in which they are unable to cope independently.
7. The Province support the development of transition programming for students as they enter and exit postsecondary education.

# Principles and recommendations

## PRINCIPLE 1

A 'whole-of-community' approach is vital to improving student mental health and well-being.

Student mental health remains a priority for Ontario's universities, colleges and student advocacy groups.

Through preventive and early intervention programming, and by directing students with complex needs to appropriate care – our institutions are working to ensure students receive the support they need, whether on campus or in the community.

However, gaps in services and delivery still remain – gaps that must be filled through action and resources that exceed postsecondary capacities.

The recent increase in demand for mental health services on campuses has pushed postsecondary institutions to move even further beyond their academic role and, in many cases, act as primary service providers. These mounting expectations on our institutions have resulted in overcrowding and strained on-campus student mental health-care services.

In addition, anecdotal reports have found some students register for courses at universities and colleges for the primary purpose of accessing mental health care – a practice that often occurs in regions where services are not widely available in the community.

Ontario's postsecondary institutions cannot meet this growing challenge alone.

A whole-of-community approach to mental health will ensure that students across Ontario have access to the support they need, when and where they need it.



This approach involves postsecondary institutions, student associations, government, health-care providers and community organizations working together to coordinate the delivery of services. It requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder.

While postsecondary institutions can provide preventative and early intervention programming, or act as a triage to other services, a whole-of-community approach enables health-care providers and community agencies to focus on acute and long-term care.

Government ministries, including Health, Children, Community and Social Services, Education and Colleges and Universities, must work together to structure and deliver services. With clear roles and clear communication, the Province can ensure service gaps are eliminated.

By working together, every stakeholder invested in the mental health of Ontarians can help build an integrated and comprehensive system – one that fills service gaps and delivers timely, resource-efficient, needs-based treatment to students and, ultimately, all Ontarians.

**“** When students, postsecondary institutions, and mental health providers come together, they can create the robust mental health support network that students need to thrive and succeed. In 2017, the University Students' Council (USC) at Western University partnered with the Canadian Mental Health Association-Middlesex to provide free mental health care to students at a nearby clinic, significantly improving access to care for Western students. Government support would help make initiatives like these more common, improving access to supports and ensuring that students receive the help they need.

– Cat D., Western University student

## Transformation and opportunity within Ontario's health-care system

Postsecondary institutions continue to see long wait times for off-campus supports – wait times that prevent students from receiving the help they need.

Barriers to these off-campus supports include financial insecurity, regional disparities, a lack of culturally specific services, and a shortage of mental health professionals.

As the government looks to transform Ontario's health-care system, we welcome the opportunity for the Province to bring key players to the table, including our institutions, government and health-care agencies, to create linkages between sectors. This ultimately has the potential to foster a whole-of-community approach, making the mental health and well-being of those residing in this province a shared responsibility.

The implementation of the Ontario Health Team model of local care delivery and the creation of the Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence are examples of initiatives that can build a connected and sustainable system that strengthens relationships between organizations.

As these initiatives work to build an integrated system, they will help make core mental health and addictions services accessible throughout the province, particularly for underserved demographics, such as Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+ and racialized populations.

**Core mental health and addictions services include: prevention, promotion and early intervention services; information, assessment and referral services; counselling and therapy services; peer and family capacity building support; specialized consultation and assessments; crisis support services; intensive treatment and services; and housing and social supports.<sup>3</sup>**

Access to these core services can ensure consistent treatment delivery, reduce emergency room visits, support patient navigation across the system and lead to better health outcomes for Ontarians.<sup>4</sup> They can also increase access to mental health resources not covered by OHIP, such as psychologists, counsellors and therapists.

While postsecondary institutions are not primary health-care providers, they must be involved in the planning

and development of an integrated approach to ensure the needs of the student population are met.

For example, the primary health-care funding model currently restricts students from accessing a primary health-care provider in their postsecondary community while enrolled with a provider in their home community. This presents a significant challenge for students, many of whom move frequently between their home and postsecondary communities.

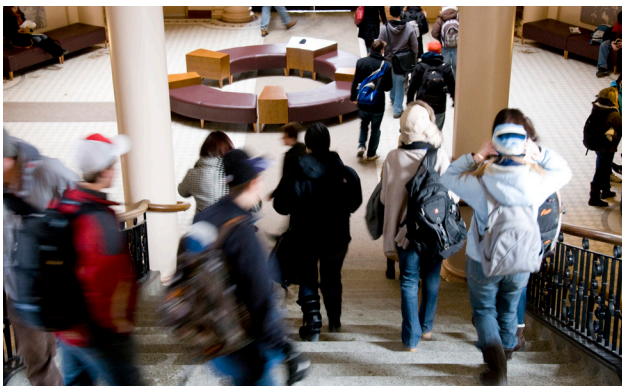
As we migrate to a new model of Ontario Health Teams, we need a provision that allows students to access care with a second health service team during their studies. This will provide them with more touch points to a broader circle of care, ensuring consistency when moving between two communities.

Through continued innovative thinking, stakeholders can work together to increase access to timely, community-based mental health services that are patient-centred and span the spectrum of care – regardless of geographic location.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **The partnering organizations recommend that:**

- 1 The Province ensure access to a core set of community-based mental health and addictions services across Ontario, providing baseline support for individuals across their lifespan.
- 2 The Province update the primary care funding model to allow postsecondary students to access care with a second health service team while studying away from their home communities.



## PRINCIPLE 2

All postsecondary students should have access to timely, effective, culturally relevant and flexible on-campus mental health care that responds appropriately to their needs.

Workplaces, hospitals and schools are seeing increases in mental health-related illnesses, and Ontario's university and college campuses are no exception. The number of students with identified mental health disabilities has continued to grow at an alarming rate.

Between 2011-12 and 2017-18, the number of students registering a mental health disability as their primary disability at postsecondary institutions more than doubled.

These rising numbers have put postsecondary institutions at the frontline of student mental health issues.

“As a student leader, I have the advantage of being informed of all services on my campus. However, after trying to access these services I noticed ways in which the system could be improved in terms of wait times and accessibility. I was able to receive support from my college community through my role as a student leader, however, I worry about students who may not have access to a community and may fall through the cracks. I have realized how vital the community approach to mental health is, and believe that other students on my campus would benefit from having access to a community during times of mental health need.

– MC G., Cambrian College student



## Targeted services for a unique population

Postsecondary students represent a specific population with unique needs.

With 75 per cent of mental health issues first appearing by the age of 24,<sup>5</sup> university and college students are particularly vulnerable. They require targeted services to improve their health and social outcomes and ensure they can live productive, fulfilled lives well beyond their postsecondary experiences.

This means that campus services play a critical role in supporting student mental health and preventing issues from intensifying.

Mental health awareness, mental illness prevention and suicide prevention are most effective when targeted to specific groups, demographics and settings.<sup>6</sup>

Postsecondary institutions offer a range of supports, including wellness programming, accessibility services, crisis intervention and culturally diverse and racially specific services.

“Students and postsecondary institutions have made significant strides in recent years to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. More students than ever are opening up about their struggles and seeking the help they need. Unfortunately, many students still aren't able to access the support needed to assist with the mental health issues they are confronted with. Recent government investments in mental health are a step in the right direction. Dedicating some of that funding to postsecondary institutions would help give students greater access to the services they need, without long wait times or significant out-of-pocket expenses.

– Katlyn K., Laurentian University student

While each of our institutions is actively developing tailored programming to address the needs of its student population, funding is required to create and implement this programming to meet the ever-increasing demand.

When sufficiently resourced to develop awareness, outreach and prevention initiatives, Ontario's

universities and colleges can dramatically impact the course of a student's well-being during their time on campus and over the course of their lives.

Today's postsecondary student population has a variety of life experiences, responsibilities and backgrounds. Students may be coming from across the world, looking for a second career or completing programs they started years ago. Some come straight from high school, while others enter postsecondary education after years in the workforce.

Postsecondary students must balance their academics with other needs and obligations, such as working, commuting, socializing with friends, family commitments and extra-curricular activities. The student of today also has a number of other challenges that may impact their mental health, including financial, food and housing insecurity, job market changes during a rapidly evolving economy, barriers to accessing culturally relevant supports or living away from home or in a different country.

## Innovative solutions on postsecondary campuses

Due to improvements in primary health-care support networks, more and more students with mental health challenges, including multiple and complex diagnoses, have the opportunity to attend postsecondary education – an option they may not have had in the past.

Our institutions are cultivating a campus culture focused on equity, diversity and inclusion that responds to this increasingly diverse student population and community.

As student populations continue to become more diverse – with a unique set of needs and programs they want to pursue (from online to work-integrated learning) – postsecondary institutions will continue to provide

innovative ways for them to access mental health services, regardless of when or where they need support.

Our institutions have reached across sectors to develop partnerships that will help us achieve this goal.

The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH), for example, works with all 44 university and college campuses, as well as health-care organizations and several student advocacy groups to bring together a cross-section of service providers.

Founded by OUSA, CSA, COU, CO and the Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario Division), CICMH shares best practices and produces webinars, toolkits and other resources that ultimately improve mental health services for students and enhance support for frontline staff. In its role as a centralized hub, the organization helps Ontario campuses use resources effectively, reducing inefficiency and duplication of efforts.

The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health has partnered with ConnexOntario to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date list of community mental health service providers. Postsecondary institutions can access this resource online and search by specialization to help students seeking support find resources in their local community.

As postsecondary institutions continue to maximize resources and find innovative ways to serve our students, sustained and robust support for on-campus mental health and wellness services is vital.

Current investments in universities and colleges for mental health are not enough to meet the increasingly complex needs of students. In many cases, our institutions are diverting revenues from general education in order to help fill gaps in campus supports – a process that is inefficient and unsustainable.

Robust and reliable funding for campus mental health services will increase the capacity of universities and colleges to provide customized services that respond to the unique needs of their student populations.

“Mental health is a huge part of my life. I live with four different mental health conditions. When I came to college, I had to forego one of my best treatments, which was group therapy. Although group therapy wasn’t an option at my college when I was a student, it would have been really valuable to have access to it in a manner that reflected the demands of student schedules. Resources dedicated to these types of on-campus services would be welcomed by students.”

- Chloe C., Fleming College student

Peer-to-peer support at universities and colleges helps build resiliency in students, providing them with emotional, social and practical support from others who have faced similar challenges. It is especially impactful for international students studying far from home, many of whom have not yet developed support systems.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The partnering organizations recommend that:

- 3 The Province increase funding for campus-based mental health services and supports, such as peer-to-peer programming, frontline counselling services and preventive and early intervention supports.
- 4 The Province increase funding to postsecondary Accessibility Services offices that provide supports to students with disabilities, including non-physical disabilities.
- 5 The Province provide funding to maintain the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) and support its mission to help Ontario's universities and colleges enhance their capacity to support student mental health and well-being, while sharing best practices.

## PRINCIPLE 3

**Life-long mental health and well-being for all Ontarians should be promoted through prevention, harm reduction and access to mental health care.**

Beyond postsecondary campuses, a life cycle of mental health care is critical for everyone.

Any investment in student mental health must be part of a broader plan to build a connected and integrated system for all Ontarians to access over the course of their lives.

Ontario's universities and colleges support the Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence as a first step to laying the foundation for a comprehensive mental health-care strategy that supports Ontarians across the province.

There is an opportunity for this provincial strategy to incorporate several factors that contribute to the mental health and well-being of Ontarians. These factors exist along a broad spectrum of treatment and care – from wellness and prevention to early intervention, crisis and addictions treatment.

Critical to this strategy is building resiliency and coping skills through prevention initiatives that begin as early as K-12, and integrating proven harm reduction programs that can improve outcomes for those who might be in crisis and struggling with addiction.

A province-wide plan will ultimately ensure individuals understand the services available to them, know when and what type of treatment to seek, and can readily access appropriate supports.

### Improving outcomes through prevention

Prevention programming for all Ontarians will lead to fewer individuals experiencing mental health issues throughout their lifespan.

This proactive approach can help students as early as K-12 become aware of symptoms, making it easier for them to recognize mental health issues in themselves and others, and seek appropriate support.

Early recognition and intervention of mental health issues reduces the risks of suicide, hospitalization and relapses. It also supports a faster, more complete recovery.<sup>7</sup>

Prevention programs and supports can also help Ontarians foster resiliency and mitigate stress while moving between various stages of life. The transition from K-12 to postsecondary, and from postsecondary to the workforce, retirement and beyond, can significantly impact an individual's general health and well-being.

Students transitioning from one stage of their education to the next are faced with unique challenges. For example, those beginning postsecondary education are often adjusting to higher academic expectations while living on their own for the first time and learning to manage their finances. This can lead to increased stress and feelings of loneliness.

Similarly, many new graduates are faced with uncertainty and anxiety as they leave postsecondary education, decide which career path to pursue and look for employment.

Adult learners may also experience a unique set of challenges, particularly if they have experienced a significant life event such as job displacement. Displaced workers typically report lower levels of self-acceptance, self-confidence and morale, and higher levels of depression and dissatisfaction with life.<sup>8</sup>

Giving Ontarians the preventative care they need as they transition through significant life stages will help them mitigate stress and reduce the likelihood of mental health issues becoming acute.



## Supporting those in crisis through harm reduction

Harm reduction is an evidence-based, client-centred approach that seeks to reduce the health and social harms associated with addiction and substance use, without necessarily requiring people who use substances from abstaining or stopping.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, those who access harm reduction services are more likely to engage in ongoing treatment.<sup>10</sup>

Embedding a harm reduction approach into a provincial strategy enables health and social services agencies to meet individuals where they are, which can lead to better health outcomes.

There is an opportunity for government to engage with health-care providers, researchers and postsecondary institutions to work together and use current research to improve the delivery, access, accountability measures and outcomes of mental health strategies.

In a staged approach to mental health care that addresses key demographics, postsecondary institutions can help ensure our students have the tools they need to handle new challenges on campuses and in the workforce.

Government funding and best practice models can further support our institutions as we continue to develop these resources and services, and support a province-wide strategy that addresses the life cycle of mental health care.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The partnering organizations recommend that:

- 6 The Province continue their approach of embedding mental health learning in K-12, ensuring that students have the knowledge, resiliency and resources to effectively manage their mental well-being and to seek help if they reach a point of distress in which they are unable to cope independently.
- 7 The Province support the development of transition programming for students as they enter and exit postsecondary education.

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# Conclusion

Ontario's universities, colleges and student advocacy groups are committed to the well-being and success of our students – the next generation of entrepreneurs, innovators, tradespeople and business and community leaders in the province.

In recent years, our institutions have worked to reduce the stigma associated with mental health challenges on campus and to connect students to the appropriate resources.

Although we've made a lot of progress, there's more work to be done.

The challenge that lays before us is to ensure effective services and strategies are in place to respond to the broad and complex range of issues that prevent timely mental health service delivery to postsecondary students.

The current and forthcoming changes in Ontario's health-care system offer a critical opportunity to transform how the system responds to the mental health and well-being of those that reside in this province.

If we're in it together, government, student associations, postsecondary institutions, health-care providers and community organizations can improve student mental health and well-being in our campus communities.

We can create an integrated, accessible, community-based mental health-care system that responds to the needs of postsecondary students and all Ontarians.



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Partner Organizations

