

A challenge to Canadian politicians:



Step up and do better!



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Date: Feb. 12, 2021

Mr. Justin Trudeau, MP
Constituency Office
529 Jarry Street East
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Montreal, QC
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Dear Mr. Trudeau,

My name is Noah Irvine. This is the second letter I've written to every Member of Parliament regarding Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. MPs who were sitting in 2017 may remember my story. For MPs who were not sitting at the time, here's an overview of my experiences with the services provided to Canadians suffering from mental health and addiction issues.

When I was five, I lost my mother, Lesley Irvine, to suicide. When I was 15, I lost my father, Kent Martin, by accidental overdose. I lost both parents due to this country's beleaguered mental health system. That letter was the first time I talked about the two most tragic episodes of my life. It was a difficult, deeply personal letter to write.

I left out two important details in that letter. First, my mother died on the grounds of a psychiatric hospital where she was an inpatient and had several previous admissions. Second, my father died the day after completing a drug treatment program. Mental health and addictions services, which remain largely unchanged, failed my mother and my father by robbing them of life and me of my parents.

In that letter, I asked the federal government to show leadership in Canada's mental health and addictions crisis by creating a Secretariat of Mental Health and Addictions in the Prime Minister's Office. The secretariat would provide a national table for all government levels – federal, provincial, territorial, municipal and Indigenous -- to discuss the issue and solutions.

Since then, the pandemic has worsened Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. As a result, more decisive action by the federal government is required. Canada needs a Minister of Mental Health and Addictions to provide a seat around the cabinet table to ensure all federal government policies and decisions are assessed from a mental health and addictions perspective. It would provide a national forum to discuss the crisis and develop solutions.

I mailed my first letter to MPs in February 2017 as a Grade 11 student. Four months later, only 40 MPs had responded. Dissatisfied by the number of replies, I went to the media. This gave me some insight into how politicians approach issues.

Today, I'm in my second year at the University of Guelph, completing a BA in political science with a minor in history. As an advocate for better mental health and addictions care, I'm non-partisan and not aligned with any mental health organization or service provider. I'm simply a young man who lost his parents to a system that continues to fail Canadian families. I believe that politicians who can tweet about the importance of mental health on Bell's *Let's Talk* day should have the interest, ability and time in the rest of the year to create tangible policy solutions to address Canada's mental health and addictions crisis.

I gained a much greater understanding of the national crisis when I wrote to every provincial and territorial MPP, MLA and MNA across Canada. While doing so, I read numerous provincial and territorial reports and reviewed countless media reports on the mental health and addictions crisis. In total, I wrote more than 1,200 letters to politicians and others who were in a position to make or influence decisions about the lack of adequate mental health and addictions care. Many expressed support for, or interest in, a secretariat. Many thought municipalities, which are on the front line of the crisis, should be involved in discussions with the other levels of government. Some of the comments I received are attached to this letter.

Covid-19 clearly underscores the gaps in our health care system. The media has given extensive and needed attention to the crisis within the walls of our nation's long-term care facilities. The media and government, however, have given less attention to Canadians who suffer and die at the hands of an inadequate mental health system which is being put under greater stress because of the pandemic.

Every province, territory and the federal government is missing the mark on mental health. The system I speak of is one of failure and mismanagement. It is glaringly under-resourced, a fact well documented for decades (1). Every corner of this country is throwing money into mental health and addictions as a mere patchwork to stop the bleeding. In every region of the country, all levels of government are in complete disarray in combating this growing health crisis. Little is being done to change and **advance** the system.

The federal government needs to provide national leadership in this time of national crisis. To date, I believe our federal government has failed to do so. While health is a "provincial matter" constitutionally, that does not negate the fact that in a federation we must collectively work together in times of crisis. Saskatoon Mayor Clark emphasized this in a letter to me where he wrote:

The reality in which we currently find ourselves, however, is that the problems of the modern world will not be solved by one government or one group acting in isolation. Rather, what we need are partnership and collaborative efforts among levels of government to address these complex, thorny, yet important issues.

Our federation's important health issue, post covid-19, will be mental health and addictions.

From the territories to our Indigenous communities and our largest cities, the mental health and addictions crisis is everywhere and in every region of our country, including in your riding. It is a national crisis. It is getting worse. It requires national leadership. A seat at the cabinet table is needed.

The federal government must step up and do better!

Yours truly,

Noah Irvine
(Audi Alteram Partem)

PS. Attached is a page with six statements about the mental health and addictions crisis in your constituency and across Canada. Please take a minute to circle your responses and return by email or regular mail. If you'd like to say more, please do so.

(1)
Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addictions Services in Canada, final report of the Standing Senate Committee of Social Affairs, Science and Technology, May 2006

Navigating the Journey to Wellness: The Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan for Ontarians, Select committee on Mental Health and Addictions: Final Report, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, August 2010

Not to be Forgotten: Care of Vulnerable Canadians, Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care, November, 2011.

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Of the more than 1,200 politicians to whom I wrote, few responded with their opinions and suggestions on how to address Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. Of those who did reply, here are some of their comments. It is reassuring to know that some politicians take the crisis seriously. It is a disturbing reality that they are so few and far between.

Former Alberta Premier Rachel Notley:

Our government is interested in the concept of a federal Addiction and Mental Health Secretariat. Raising the profile of substance use and mental health issues and better coordinating the federal government response would benefit both Canadians managing substance use and mental health issues, as well as provincial and local governments. I encourage you to continue bringing attention to these issues and advocating for change across Canada, at all levels of government.

Yukon Premier Sandy Silver:

We also support further federal work on mental health and addictions, which could potentially include a Secretariat of Mental Health and Addictions as you propose. HSS (Yukon Department of Health and Social Services) and the Government of Yukon are open to discussing such a Secretariat if it is identified as a key initiative by the Prime Minister's Office.

Yukon Minister of Health and Social Services Pauline Frost:

You rightly point out that mental health and addictions are among the most pressing health challenges facing Canadians today.

Former Health Minister Glen Abernethy of the North West Territories:

Your call for us to do better is exactly on point. We can do better, and we must work to do better... As stated in your letter, this responsibility belongs to all of us. We all have a role to play in the health and wellness of our communities, territories/provinces, and pursue better health and wellness as a whole.

Former Federal Minister of Justice Wilson-Raybould:

The issue of mental health and suicide is incredibly complex, and it is imperative for us to work together to tackle it, as a country and across all levels of government. As an Indigenous person, this rings especially true.

Federal Minister of Defence Harjit Sajjan:

Mental health is a serious issue, and it must be addressed collaboratively by all levels of government.

Saskatoon Mayor Charlie Clark

The reality in which we currently find ourselves, however, is that the problems of the modern world will not be solved by one government or one group acting in isolation. Rather, what we need are partnership and collaborative efforts among levels of government to address these complex, thorny, yet important issues.

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	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree	
1. There is a mental health and addictions crisis in my constituency.	5	4	3	2	1
2. The covid pandemic has worsened the crisis in my constituency.	5	4	5	2	1
3. Canada has a mental health mental and addictions crisis.	5	4	3	2	1
4. All levels of government need to work together to resolve the crisis.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The federal government needs to provide leadership in the mental health and addictions crisis.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The federal government should create a Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions to provide national leadership.	5	4	3	2	1