

A challenge to Canadian politicians:



Step up and do better!

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The Honourable Scott Moe
Premier of Saskatchewan
Office of the Premier
226 Legislative Building
Regina, SK
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Dear Premier Moe,

My name is Noah Irvine, a grade 12 student in Guelph, Ontario. I am writing to you to tell you my story of loss and advocacy.

In 2005, at the age of 24 my mother took her life, leaving behind her family and her 5-year-old son. Then, in 2015, my father lost his lifelong battle with addictions and mental health issues at the age of 40. Both died far too young. As a result of those experiences, I made the decision in February, 2017, to be an advocate for change in the mental health and addictions system.

My advocacy started with a letter that I wrote as an in-class assignment but gave it little thought after that. My teacher, Jill Goodreau was so moved by the letter she said, "You have to send it." With her encouragement, I sent that letter to every Member of Parliament across the country and to six MPPs in the Ontario Legislature. The letter detailed my story of loss, the result of an all-to-common story of inaction by too many governments.

I heard back from only 40 of 338 MPs and two of the six MPPs. This was a definite disappointment. To me, it clearly highlighted that our elected representatives care very little about people suffering mental health and addictions issues. Or, they are not in touch with the average Canadian. This made me think. How could I get my story out to the public and who would tell the nation my parents story? That's why in August 2017, I sent a media release to countless media across Ontario and Canada.

On August 23, my hometown paper GuelphToday.com and Global TV's Mark Carcasole became the first to tell my story. They clearly pointed out that the poor response to my letter was wrong and that I deserved respect from the individuals who are supposed to represent Canada. I could not agree more. The issues of mental health and addictions do not stop in the municipality of Guelph. Mental health and addictions issues transcend all political boundaries and constituency boundaries.

After those stories were published, responses from MPs started to roll in. I met with the Prime Minister's Office for 90 minutes, met one-on-one with the Federal Minister of Health and received a call from the Prime Minister. All of them agreed that we as a nation need to do more and that we all have a

responsibility to create a health care system that addresses both physical health and mental health. I approached them with the idea of a federal secretariat of mental health and addictions to advise and provide an ongoing national focus on mental health and addictions. All of these individuals seemed keen on the idea and were generally supportive. A secretariat for mental health and addiction complements the federal government's commitment of 5 billion dollars to the provinces and allows for a national leadership role to be established.

After those meetings, I thought about how I would engage with the provinces and territories. I sent another letter to every Minister of Health in every province and territory. In that letter I asked them to consider the creation of a Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions in their jurisdictions, if they haven't done so already. I also asked for the Ministers of Health to realize the great burden that mental health and addictions has on all facets of our nation. They for the most part responded quickly.

Your Minister of Health, the Hon. Jim Reiter wrote back: "In Saskatchewan, we recognize that access to appropriate mental health and addictions service is important... We are in the process of preparing for the transformation from 12 health regions into one for the whole province by the end of the year. This will allow for more standardization of mental health and addictions across the province." Your province's "transition" is important step for the people of your province who suffer from mental health and addictions.

I would like to tell you why – in addition to my personal experience – I'm undertaking with advocacy campaign for ministries of mental health and addictions at all levels of government.

In 2010, a select, all-party committee of the Ontario legislature discovered that mental health and addictions services were funded or provided through at least 10 ministries. In addition, the committee noted that community care is delivered by 440 children's mental health agencies, 330 community mental health agencies, 150 substance abuse treatment agencies, and approximately 50 problem gambling centres. Such a fractured and uncoordinated system of care is probably common in many provinces. Any action which helps relieve some of this confusion is progress.

The all-party committee unanimously recommended the creation of an "umbrella" organization to design and coordinate the mental health and addictions system. This addressed the committee's primary concern: *There is no single organization responsible for ensuring that mental health and addictions services and supports are delivered consistently and comprehensively across Ontario.* British Columbia took this idea of a single organization a step further and in 2017 created the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions. In Ontario, Bill 149 to create a ministry of mental health and addictions has gone to committee for further discussion. The vote to move the Bill to second reading was – unlike the unanimous committee report -- largely along party lines. Mental health and addictions is not and should not be a political issue.

I advocate for the creation of ministries of mental health and addictions at the federal, provincial and territorial levels because of the documented, continuing and growing failures of the current system despite increases in government spending; the lack of focus on an issue which too often ends in terrifying and tragic results; and, the failure of politicians to take responsibility for the needless and preventable deaths which occur throughout Canada because of poor mental health and addictions care and services.

Because meetings of Health Ministers are irregular and often end up being squabbles over money and how to spend it, there is no ongoing, continuous discussion on mental health and addictions. There is no leadership. As a result, I'm also advocating for the creation of a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions within the Prime Minister's Office. A secretariat would provide a central point where politicians from all levels of government – federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal – could focus on mental health and addictions. This broad political involvement is important. As former Ontario Minister

of Health Eric Hoskins said in the Legislative Assembly on Sept. 13, 2017, with regards to mental health, “I think the entire nation recognizes that our efforts as a nation have not been adequate or sufficient, whether it’s the federal government, whether it’s the individual provincial governments, territorial governments, municipal governments.” A secretariat could provide leadership across all political boundaries.

In discussions, phone calls, email, written correspondence, and meetings I’ve had with provincial Ministers of Health, federal cabinet ministers, Members of Parliament, mental health service providers and members of the Ontario Legislature, there’s broad agreement that the current system of mental health and addictions care is failing. They also agree mental health and addictions are not and should not be political issues. These shared understandings can be the basis for discussing and exploring new, innovative, more effective and more efficient ways for providing care to Canadians.

We lose too many people every year from this preventable epidemic of mental health and addictions. The inaction of too many governments has given birth to a mental health crisis. In Canada, it is a reality that 4,000 Canadians die from suicide each year. Unfortunately, prisons have become our largest providers of mental health and addictions treatment. Veterans, people who have served this country, should not be sent home to a system that fails their needs. My mother and father should not have had to suffer in silence while complacent and content governments stood back and watched it happen. I should not have to tell you that my parents will never see me graduate from high school. However, it’s a reality that happens far too often and to far too many families in this country.

You, I and every Canadian must accept our responsibility to end the epidemic of mental health and addictions which continues to spread throughout our country. As Canadians working together we can do more to stop the cycle of inaction and the cycle of needless Canadian deaths.

I hope you will consider those two ideas — a secretariat for mental health and addictions in the Prime Minister’s Office and departments of mental health and additions at the federal, provincial and territorial levels.

In addition, I encourage you to speak out at every opportunity to give a voice to those who suffer in silence. You have the ability to give a voice to a large group who are often forgotten and surrounded by stigma. You have the ability to give a voice to those who cannot find theirs.

Premier, I was an orphaned at 15. I am not the first, nor will I be the last. No child in this country should watch as governments continue down the path of inaction when we have lost so much already. Please make your province an example of a government willing to take bold steps forward. I’d appreciate the opportunity to discuss this with you.

Thank you for your commitment to a better Canada for future generations. By working together, Canadians will find a way to beat the mental health and addictions epidemic and save countless lives.

Sincerely,

Noah Irvine

