

## Briefing for Party Caucuses in NS

### The role of psychologists in mental health care

Psychologists play a special role in ensuring the well-being of Nova Scotians. In particular, clinical and school psychologists have expertise in the evidence-based assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of emotional, cognitive, developmental, and behavioural disorders. In fact, the privilege to assess and diagnose mental conditions is restricted to physicians and psychologists in several of Canada's jurisdictions. Thus, when allowed to practice to scope, psychologists complement other mental health practitioners, who bring their own particular knowledge and skill sets to the mental health field. For example, psychiatrists have expertise in the prescription of medications for mental illnesses; social workers bring a perspective that addresses psychosocial and relational issues; and other paraprofessionals (e.g., mental health counselors) assist in the prevention of addiction and mental health challenges.

### What are the challenges Psychologists are facing?

1. In the public system there have been a number of issues that negatively affect retention and recruitment of psychologists. As reported in the APNS Public Sector Psychologist survey:
  - Shortage of resources and reductions in staff are affecting the standard of mental health care. Psychologists have the skills and expertise to provide the best possible care, but do not have the resources and support required to allow them to use those skills.
  - Limited respect and support from supervisors and management, which appears to stem from a lack of understanding regarding defined roles and the scope of practice of psychologists (as distinct from other professionals), and which serves to limit psychologists' autonomy and ability to practice psychology-specific skills.
  - Limited availability of and support for appropriate professional development and continuing education in evidence-based therapies for psychologists working in the provincial health system.
2. In Private Practice:
  - Too much demand for service, resulting in longer than desired wait times and practitioner burn out, because of barriers relating to accessibility of services in the public sector.

### What needs to change?

1. Psychologists must have a role in inter-professional collaborative practice teams throughout NS. There is a great deal of talk about collaborative teams, but these rarely include psychologists. There is a need for increased awareness of the key role that psychologists should play in inter-professional teams (Refer to HEAL, 2018. The Canadian Way 2.0 document; specifically, "Priority Issue 2: Mental Health" page 13 and 14).
2. There is a need for more psychologists in management and leadership positions in the public system. Increased participation of psychologists on government advisory committees would help to ensure our expertise is utilized.
3. Nova Scotians need increased access to psychological treatments that are based on scientific evidence of effectiveness.
  - **Access in schools:**  
Students need access to evidence-based psychological therapies within the school day. A client-centered system brings the full array of services to where people are.
  - **Access in hospitals:**  
We need an increase in the number of psychologists in primary care settings and use of telehealth to increase access for the public.

- **Access in public sector in general:**  
Retention of psychologists in the NSHA/IWK system would improve, and recruitment would be more effective if we increased/enhanced the currently-lacking professional development opportunities for psychologists.
- **Access in private practice:**
  - We must increase insurance coverage for private-practice psychologist services within government programs (e.g., Dept of Community Services) and for government employees.
  - Access to service would be improved if government provided tax credits for pro bono assessment and treatment. Some psychologists provide pro-bono or pro-rated services on a case-by-case basis, in response to financial hardship. We believe that a tax credit would improve psychologists' ability to be responsive to such needs.
  - Access to service would be improved if government allowed private practice psychologists into collaborative practices under the same framework as family practice nurses. The framework exists for being able to make some private practice psychological services available under MSI. Within Primary Care, a physician can hire a family practice nurse as an employee of the practice, allow that nurse to work to their full scope, and bill MSI for the nurse's work to recover the costs. With the framework already in place, psychologists could be hired and paid by the doctor, work providing assessments and intervention, for which the doctor would bill MSI under existing billing codes for counselling and psychotherapy.
  - Access would be improved if government created a one-tiered mental health and addiction system. Currently, mental health care is a two-tiered system in Nova Scotia. People who do not have private insurance or a decent living wage cannot afford to access private practice psychological assessment and therapy. The Government of Nova Scotia needs to create a one-tiered system by allowing private practice psychologists to bill MSI for clients not covered by third-party health insurance.
- 4. There should be a psychologist on the interprofessional team at the IWK. Currently at the IWK, there is an interprofessional team of social work, occupational therapy, nursing and physicians who meet the health needs of children and adolescents who are admitted to Child Health inpatient floors (MSNU – Medical, Surgical and Neurosciences Unit, PMU – Pediatric Medical Unit, and PICU – Pediatric Intensive Care Unit). There is no psychologist on this team. Most world-class children's hospitals do have a psychologist dedicated to these teams. There is sufficient research to show that psychological services reduce in-patient stays and improve patient health outcomes.
- 5. The focus cannot be entirely upon treating the ill; a comprehensive plan should also include mechanisms to help maintain good mental health by increasing support for evidence-based prevention initiatives.
  - There is an abundance of international evidence on preventing substance use problems and reducing health care costs, primarily through more strategic regulation of the tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis industries. The only one being regulated in reasonable accordance with that evidence is tobacco. Second only to tobacco, the drug that is costing our healthcare system more than any other, with more than 50,000 patient bed days per year in Nova Scotia, is alcohol (heart disease, cancer, injuries, etc.). We need to take an evidence-based approach and regulate advertising, price, and availability, to reduce illness, death, and healthcare costs.
  - There is also solid evidence of prevention of mental illness through initiatives such as school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, which are currently only provided in a handful of schools in Nova Scotia.

In concluding, we are confident that a fiscally responsible mental health care plan for Nova Scotia would benefit from improving access to evidence-based psychological services and prevention initiatives and by ensuring psychologists are able to work to their scope of practice within the public health and education systems.