

A challenge to Canadian politicians:



Step up and do better!

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Mr. Yens Pedersen, MLA
Constituency of Regina Northeast
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina, Saskatchewan
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Dear Mr. Yens,

My name is Noah Irvine, a high school student in Guelph, Ontario. I am writing to all Saskatchewan MLAs to raise an important issue that has personally affected myself and my family. Thirteen years ago, I lost my mother to suicide. I was five years old. She was just 24. Then in 2015, my father lost his battle with mental illness and addictions. He was 40.

These two losses, as tragic as they may be, inspired me to call upon politicians across Canada to do more for individuals like my mom and dad. They are not the only individuals to die in our mental health and addictions system. They are examples of those lost and suffering from our ineffective and dysfunctional system.

I write to you not because you are a member of a political party or hold a position in government. I write to you as an MLA who, like every other politician, represents constituents who suffer in Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. To find the answer to the crisis, party politics must be set aside.

I began to write letters to our elected representatives in February 2017, with a letter to all Members of Parliament. It was a call for the federal government to step up and start the desperately needed transformation of our mental health care system. Out of 338 MPs, only 40 responded. Many were form letters. Many did not attempt to address the crisis or engage in new, bold ideas which are necessary to combat this national public health emergency.

After six months, I went public with my story. Media across Ontario and Canada, along with international media, told my story and the troubling reality — our elected representatives are ignoring a national public health crisis. After my public outcry, I was welcomed to the Ontario Legislative Assembly where I advocated for the creation of a Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions. This proposed ministry would centralize mental health and addictions services in the province as it is desperately needed.

Between August and early October, I met with the Prime Minister's Office and the federal Minister of Health and spoke with the Prime Minister about the creation of a federal Mental Health and Addictions Secretariat. When speaking with politicians or reading provincial reports on the subject of mental health, there are two recurring themes. First, there's a lack of centralized and well-coordinated services at the

provincial level. Second, there is a lack of leadership at the national level. These failures continue to cause more deaths and suffering among people who are struggling with mental health or addictions.

In November 2017, Saskatchewan Health Minister Jim Reiter wrote to me about your province transitioning from 12 health regions to one. This has been done in other provinces. He directed me to Saskatchewan's *Inter-Ministerial Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan* which the government endorsed in December 2014. This 10-year plan details recommendations in a number of areas including: enhanced access and capacity, prevention, family-centered services, partnering with First Nations, stigma reduction, cultural sensitivity, breaking down silos and increased awareness. These are common themes in most reports I have reviewed.

In the section titled *System Goal: Transform the System and Sustain the Change* the plan talks about creating a "strong guiding coalition", "sharing a common, compelling vision," "cross-sector leadership," and, exploring "partnerships with the private sector and municipal governments." The plan, however, does not identify any government office or another body to be responsible for achieving these goals. The cross-ministry initiatives part of the plan assigns 22 initiatives to four lead ministries. This leaves individuals and families requiring mental and health and addictions service to deal with up to four government departments. The silos remain. The ineffective system will continue to leave individuals and families behind.

Over the past year and a half, I've communicated with more than 600 politicians at all levels of government regarding Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. The feedback is interesting. Current politicians claim without hesitation that their political predecessors failed to deliver the care Canadians need and deserve. However, many are unprepared or unwilling to make the bold decisions necessary to resolve the crisis.

What bold decisions? 1: Create Ministries of Mental Health and Addictions. The crisis crosses multiple departments and agencies. The task of bringing all of those programs together to deliver effective and efficient care is enormous. It can't simply be made a project of health departments which already face significant challenges. 2: Support creation of Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions in the Prime Minister's Office.

I advocate that we can no longer walk alone within our own jurisdictions to deal with this national crisis. We as a nation must work together. Every major city, province, territory, First Nations, Metis and Inuit group — and the federal government — have a responsibility to work together to prevent the crisis of mental health and addictions from spiralling out of control. I'm advocating for a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions in the Prime Minister's office to provide national leadership in a national crisis.

Everyone I've communicated with, at any level of government, agrees we need to work together to resolve the crisis. Support for the creation of a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions is growing.

Premier Rachel Notley stated in her letter to me:

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 wrote:

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 Pauline Frost wrote:

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

Health Minister Glen Abernathy of the North West Territories wrote:

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.

Federal Minister of Justice Wilson-Raybould wrote:

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 wrote:

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

Saskatoon Mayor Chris Clark 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 partnerships and collaborative efforts among levels of government to address these complex, thorny, yet important issues.

As can be seen, in the statements above, everyone acknowledges that we must do better. From federal cabinet ministers to premiers, health ministers and mayors, we all understand that we must do better for this nation.

I call upon you as an MLA, to step up and do better for your province, your community, and your country. My mom and dad should not have died because our country has an ineffective mental health and addictions system. It is up to you and every MLA, MPP, MNA and MP to work together. Put aside partisan politics which will only divide us on an issue which needs and deserves unity. Only then can we finally create the medicare system which meets the physical and mental needs Canadians.

It is up to you to finally lay the groundwork for national unity, for my mom and dad and the thousands of other Canadians and Saskatchewanians who need and deserve a functioning mental health and addictions system.

I thank you for your commitment to our nation's health care system.

It is time to step up and do better as a nation,

I look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

Noah Irvine