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Stabilize. Sustain. System Build.

2024 Ontario Budget
Recommendations

#KIDSCANTWAIT

2024 Ontario Budget Recommendations



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Kids Can't Wait

Before the pandemic, 28,000 children and youth were on wait lists for community-based mental health care, with some waiting upwards of two years. Decades of chronic underfunding, shortages of mental health professionals, and a crisis retaining them in the community sector, combined with the toll of the pandemic and rising needs, have created a dire situation for Ontario families. These gaps in care are even more significant for Northern communities, rural and remote communities, and equity-deserving groups.

Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), the association representing 85 of Ontario's child and youth mental health agencies, recognizes that the Government of Ontario has heard the urgent calls of children, youth, and families and made historic investments in child and youth mental health this past year.

For the 2024 Ontario Budget, we are asking the government to continue to partner with us on our strategy to invest \$140 million over four years to stabilize, sustain, and system build in community child and youth mental health so that every infant, child, youth, and family in Ontario has timely and equitable access to high-quality mental health services.

STABILIZE: Ensure stability for infants, children, youth, and families by closing wage gaps between community child and youth mental health and the hospital and education sectors, so there is capacity to meet mental health needs across Ontario's communities.

SUSTAIN: Start by developing a Workforce Strategy to create a sustainable and responsive community child and youth mental health sector, able to meet the growing demand for services while taking much-needed pressure off hospitals, schools and primary care.

SYSTEM BUILD: Maximize the impact of all new investments by partnering to build system data and quality improvements and to provide timely and equitable access to services and treatment for all families.

Addressing the Crisis in Child and Youth Mental Health

The crisis in child and youth mental health has reached a breaking point. With the increased prevalence of mental health challenges amongst children and youth, demand for services continues to rise. Notwithstanding targeted recent investments, decades of underfunding have resulted in a system unable to meet needs across the province, with families too often turning to hospitals in crisis.

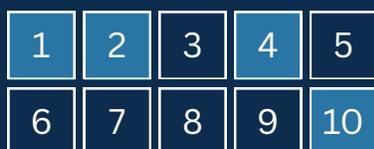
At the same time, the community child and youth mental health sector is facing a health human resources crisis, similar to the rest of the healthcare system.

Before the pandemic, 200,000 children and youth with significant mental health needs received no treatment at all.

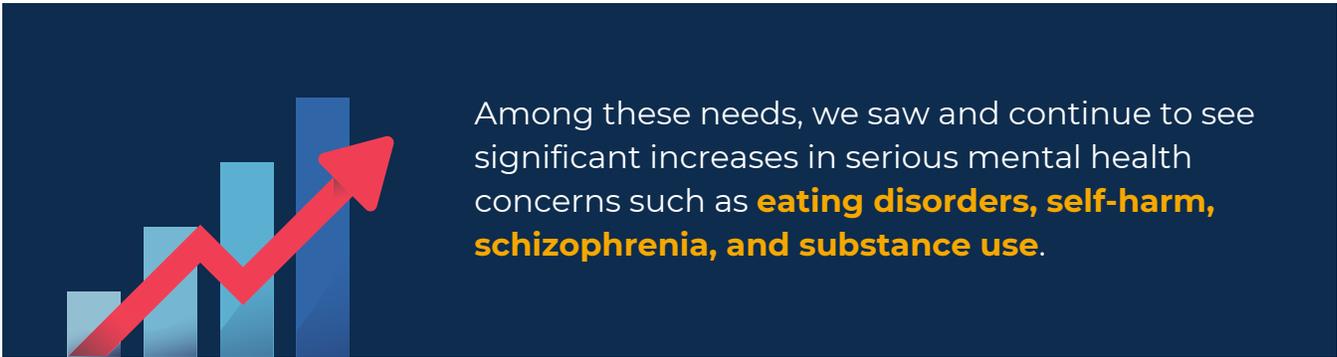
Rising Prevalence, Demand, and Hospitalizations

A recent report from the Conference Board of Canada shows a decline in the number of young people reporting excellent or very good mental health over the past two decades. The use of healthcare services by children and youth for anxiety and mood disorders has significantly increased over the past decade.

In 2022, hospital data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) showed that **over 1 in 4 hospitalizations (27%) for children and youth were for mental health conditions.**



Of the top 10 reasons children and youth ages 5 to 17 were hospitalized, mental health issues took the **first, second, fourth, and tenth spots.**



Hospitals play an important role in our healthcare system. But for children and youth with mental health and addiction issues, hospitals are the place for stabilization, not the place for treatment. It is also very costly—Ontario spends approximately a quarter of a billion dollars each year on preventable hospital visits for child and youth mental health.

Long Wait Times and Service Gaps, Particularly for Equity-Deserving Groups

Before the pandemic, 28,000 children and youth were on wait lists for community-based mental health care. A further 200,000 children and youth with significant mental health needs received no treatment at all.

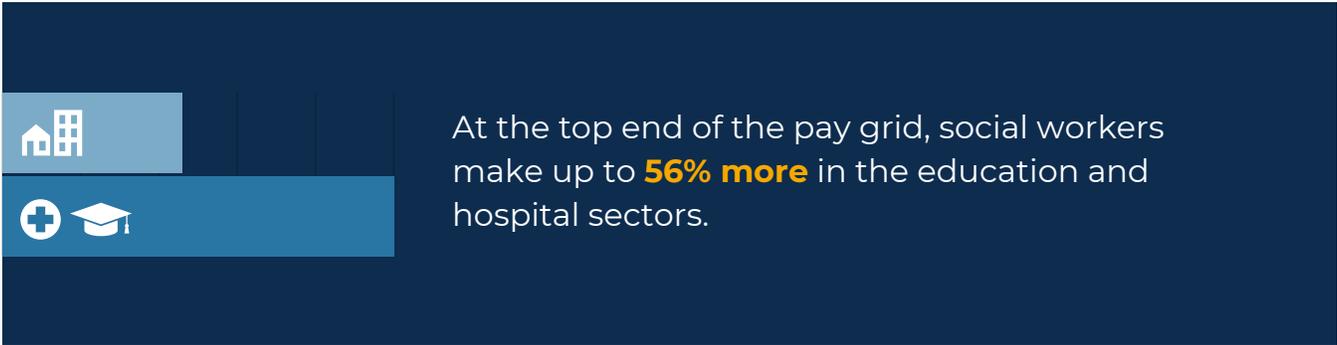
This is because in some communities, especially Northern, rural, and remote areas, and for some populations, for example, transitional-aged youth and those with concurrent needs such as addictions or autism, the treatments and supports that children, youth, and families need do not exist at all.

There are significant barriers to accessing care for racialized and marginalized populations who struggle to find treatment that is culturally appropriate, identity-affirming, and responsive to their experiences and intersecting needs. At the same time, Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth and those navigating their sexual orientation and gender identity have the highest rates of anxiety and depression.

Health Human Resources Shortage

At the same time, there is a health human resources crisis in the community mental health and addictions sector. **Agencies have vacancy rates as high as 30% and high turnover rates of 20%.** Community child and youth mental health centres struggle to recruit and retain the specialized mental health professionals needed to provide critical treatment and supports to families.

The leading cause for this is significant wage gaps with other sectors. According to a compensation analysis undertaken with our partners at Addictions and Mental Health Ontario (AMHO) and the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division (CMHA Ontario), **wages are as much as 50% lower** in the community mental health and addictions sector compared to equivalent roles in education and hospitals.



2024 Ontario Budget Recommendations

The Ontario government has heard the urgent calls of youth and families and has made historic investments in child and youth mental health this past year. However, last year’s base funding increase for Ministry of Health community mental health and addictions agencies primarily mitigated further crises and has helped to keep doors open in the face of rising demand and acuity of need.

This is why, for the 2024 Budget, we are asking the Government of Ontario to invest \$35 million and commit to a stable, multi-year funding plan so that together we can:

1 STABILIZE
Ensure stability for infants, children, youth, and families by closing wage gaps between community child and youth mental health and the hospital and education sectors so there is capacity to meet mental health needs across Ontario’s communities.

2 SUSTAIN
Start by developing a Workforce Strategy to create a sustainable and responsive community child and youth mental health sector, able to meet the growing demand for services while taking much-needed pressure off hospitals, schools and primary care.

3 SYSTEM BULD
Maximize the impact of all new investments by partnering to build system data and quality improvements and to provide timely and equitable access to services and treatment for all families.

Stabilize

Ensure stability for infants, children, youth, and families by closing wage gaps between community child and youth mental health and the hospital and education sectors so there is capacity to meet mental health needs across Ontario's communities.

Last year's five percent base budget increase to Ministry of Health-funded community mental health and addictions providers helped begin to bring stability to our sector. Even with this new funding, approximately **one-third of the members surveyed still had to reduce staff positions** to adequately increase the salaries of those who remained. A shortage of mental health professionals contributes to long wait times for services, and when families finally get access to care, they often have to repeat their story with a change in clinicians. Shortages in the sector put additional pressures on organizations and, in turn, impact the ability to adequately staff the services, programs, and evidence-based interventions that families rely on across Ontario.



Impact on Communities and Populations and Intersections with Mental Health

Uneven wages across the children's sector means other critical programs that provide life-changing and sometimes life-saving services are also at risk. There are areas in the system serving many communities and populations that are not receiving much-needed new investments. Programs like those supporting the infant and early years help to prevent mental health issues from developing by intervening early. At the same time, these programs address the social determinants of health by including wrap-around supports for families.

There are also unique challenges for those with co-occurring addiction and mental health needs, transitional-aged youth moving into the adult system, Francophone youth who are underserved, and justice-involved youth who have intersecting mental health challenges. In fact, data shows a higher risk for this population, with about 25% of justice-involved youth having complex mental health issues requiring intensive treatment.

The health human resources crisis is also exacerbated where there are already service gaps. In the North, a lack of specialized services and live-in treatment, coupled with a lack of mental health professionals, contribute to significant equity issues and are impacted by the availability of physical and social infrastructure due to geography and distance. Taken together, the need to stabilize service system capacity now has never been clearer.

We recommend that the government stabilize the community child and youth mental health sector now by:

- ▶ **Closing the wage gap:** Address the wage disparities that exist between community mental health and addictions and other sectors that employ mental health professionals by meaningfully committing to closing the wage gap. This recommendation is part of a [broader call](#) with our community health sector partners to close the wage gap facing community-based providers.
- ▶ **Removing barriers:** Prevent fragmented approaches in funding and policy and put targeted strategies and incentives in place to support and build the workforce in community child and youth mental health.
- ▶ **Targeting needs for specific populations:** Enable targeted approaches within the integrated system of care supporting the mental health and well-being of infants, children, youth, and youth in the justice system.

Better supporting underserved communities and priority populations is key.

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS)-funded sector partners, such as Infant and Parent Mental Health programs and community-based youth justice programs, have not received funding increases in over 15 years and were excluded from the five percent increase received by Ministry of Health-funded agencies.

As an example, by better connecting youth justice programs with mental health supports and services and by providing supports that are culturally responsive, we can begin to address service gaps and enable equitable approaches. This can be achieved by applying a systems of care approach, including targeted funding consistently applied to Infant and Parent Mental Health programs and Youth Justice partners funded by MCCSS.

Sustain

Start by developing a Workforce Strategy to create a sustainable and responsive community child and youth mental health sector, able to meet the growing demand for services while taking much-needed pressure off hospitals, schools and primary care.

To ensure that infants, children, youth, and families have timely and equitable access to the high-quality mental health treatment they need when they need it, we must continue to build capacity. A Workforce Strategy also needs to consider the growing demand across the continuum of care and, in particular, for intensive treatment.

The loss of clinical or direct services professionals, who are often moving to other sectors, impacts not only the number of available services but also their quality in a context where many agencies are reporting more complex and acute mental health needs coming through their doors.

These impacts are further exacerbated for underserved regions and populations that already have inequitable access to services due to regional differences in system and workforce capacity and a lack of qualified mental health professionals who are representative of the populations they serve and trained to provide culturally safe, identity-affirming, and trauma-informed care.

Ontario needs a child and youth mental health Workforce Strategy to sustain and build a system that provides timely and equitable access to high-quality care for all families.

Developing a strategy allows for the long-term health human resources capacity planning required in child and youth mental health to address the continued demand for services in the community. A stable, sustainable, and thriving community child and youth mental health workforce is key to providing high-quality service and addressing the inequities facing equity-deserving families.

We recommend that the government enable a sustainable and responsive community child and youth mental health sector by:

- ▶ **Developing a Workforce Strategy:** Focus on recruitment and retention strategies that attract mental health professionals and prevent turnover into other service systems.
- ▶ **Addressing service gaps:** Ensure timely access and service availability in child and youth mental health across Ontario's regions and address operational pressures and infrastructure needs by investing in capital improvements.
- ▶ **Reducing wait times:** Addressing wait times enables capacity-building in the sector, including the scaling and development of culturally relevant services and programs, and at the same time, takes pressure off other parts of the healthcare system so families don't turn to emergency departments in crisis.

System Build

Maximize the impact of all new investments by partnering to build system data and quality improvements and to provide timely and equitable access to services and treatment for all families.

With a stabilized and sustainable community child and youth mental health sector, we can begin designing and building a system that will optimize services through continuous improvement to support accessible, high-quality, and equitable services.

Recent investments in children's health and pediatric care are a critical start to system-building and addressing gaps in care, particularly for children and youth with intensive needs. Despite existing challenges, the child and youth mental health sector is already showing innovation in several provincial system initiatives that are building and improving the system, including:

The Provincial Training Initiative (PTI), a partnership of CMHO, Lead Agencies (via Lead Agency Consortium or “LAC”), and the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (or “KI”), is creating a model to increase sustainability by increasing the number of expertly trained clinicians in the workforce to deliver evidence-based treatment services.

OneStopTalk/Parlons Maintenant (OST/PM) is a new provincial access program providing referrals and assessments, as needed, to child and youth mental health services.

Building integrated capacity with provincial foundational and advanced training for mental health and autism providers, including Francophone providers, to better address co-occurring needs.

We recommend that the government maximize the impact of new investments, working with provincial leaders at CMHO, KI, and the LAC, to prioritize provincial system-building initiatives that advance:

- ▶ **Equity:** Support the development of a Provincial Equity Strategy for the child and youth mental health sector in recognition of the significant influence of the social determinants of health on mental health outcomes for equity-deserving communities.
- ▶ **Quality:** Support the development of a Data Strategy by ensuring that data is consistently available, collected, and evaluated across child and youth mental health to support the best possible mental health outcomes for children, youth, and families.
- ▶ **Access:** Within an integrated systems of care approach, scale successful and innovative models of treatment that enable system capacity building and impact in the community while embedding youth and family voice, addressing service system gaps, and enabling better pathways to care.

Envisioning a Brighter Future

Stabilizing, sustaining, and system building in community child and youth mental health is key to addressing the crisis in mental health.

New investments in community-based child and youth mental health centres are urgently needed to begin to close the pay gap and keep the staff we have in order to expand specialized services and treatment. At the same time, it is critical we begin to maximize the impact of any new investments, including moving forward on provincial system priorities like a Workforce Strategy, a plan to advance equity, and a Data and Quality Strategy for community child and youth mental health.

Community-based child and youth mental health centres are well-positioned to ramp up services and respond to local needs. As part of the system of care supporting the mental health of kids and families, community child and youth mental health provides services and treatment across the continuum of need and can support primary care providers, work with other child and youth-serving sectors, partner with schools to make transitions easier for students and expand pathways with hospitals to provide better collaborations for ongoing care.

The children and youth of today who do not get the help they need become the adults of tomorrow who are more likely to struggle with addictions, mental health issues, and undiagnosed disabilities. They can go on to have challenges with long-term employment, housing, justice, and economic needs. Every window where we can intervene early—whether as an infant, child, or young person—is a chance to change a child’s entire life for the better.

The Ontario government has shown its commitment to child and youth mental health this past year, and now is the time to continue on that path. **Our kids and families can’t wait.**

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