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Ministry of Health
Hon. Christine Elliott
777 Bay Street, 5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
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Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
Hon. Todd Smith
438 University Avenue, 7th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
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April 12, 2021

Dear Minister Elliott and Minister Smith,

Thank you for your leadership and service during this most difficult time for Ontario and Canada. I know that every day there are multiple critical issues vying for your attention. As the former Correctional Investigator of Canada and Ontario Independent Advisor on Corrections Reform, I am writing on the urgent matter of the future of the 24-bed intensive mental health treatment program for youth in custody at the Syl Apps Youth Centre (SAYC) in Oakville.

The Syl Apps program supports youth with the most complex mental health issues in the Province. It is highly specialized and takes referrals from other youth centres across Ontario that are unable to meet the intensive treatment needs of this group of young people. The clinical profiles of these youth are characterized by an average of four concurrent diagnoses that typically include high suicidality, major depression, bipolar disorder, personality disorder, significant behavioural issues, addictions, and psychosis. Most of these young people have cycled between foster care, youth custody and hospitalization. Untreated, they easily find their way into the adult criminal justice process. A recent study by the Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada (OCI) found that 57% of prisoners aged 18 – 21 in federal custody had spent time in provincial youth custody, the majority had spent a period of their life in care, and almost all had mental health and substance misuse histories. Nearly 40% of this population was Indigenous and 12% was Black. The OCI study laments the lost earlier opportunities to intervene that could have prevented further harm, criminalization, and victimization. Treatment at Syl Apps can save lives, save downstream costs, and contribute to community safety.

This is not the time to reduce forensic treatment capacity. There is not an oversupply of clinical resources for youth with complex needs, and post-pandemic demands are predicted to increase. I am aware of the Government of Ontario commitment to improve both access to mental health care and the outcomes for patients. These goals will be supported by keeping the SAYC program open. In keeping with the

recommendation of the joint 2018 MOHLTC and MCSCS Expert Advisory Committee that MOHLTC should directly deliver and oversee healthcare services in correctional facilities, I urge that you not only keep the Syl Apps 24 bed program open, but also that responsibility for its operation be transferred to the Ministry of Health.

Sincerely,

Howard Sapers

Cc: Janet Menard, Deputy Minister, MCCSS

Helen Angus, Deputy Minister, MOH