

Hon. Todd Smith
Minister of Children, Community and
Social Services
Macdonald Block Rm M2B-88,
77 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, ON M7A 1N3

Hon. Michael Tibollo
Associate Minister,
Mental Health and Addictions
Whitney Block, 1st Floor, Rm 1618,
99 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, ON M7A 1W3

Hon. Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
College Park, 5th Floor,
777 Bay Street,
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

April 15, 2021

Dear Minister Smith, Minister Elliott and Associate Minister Tibollo:

Re: Youth Justice Centre Closures

On behalf of the Provincial Human Services and Justice Coordinating Committee (HSJCC), we are writing to you today to ensure the mental health and well-being of our most vulnerable Ontarians continue to be supported during these challenging times. **We are urgently requesting that you take immediate action to address the closures of youth justice centres across the province, and especially in northern Ontario.**

On March 1, 2021, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) announced the closures of 26 youth justice centres, many of which were in northern Ontario. Youth were moved from the closing facilities to other centres, some of which were many hundreds of kilometers away from their home communities.ⁱ In many cases, family members were not informed that the youth would be moving.ⁱⁱ First Nations communities were not consulted during the government's decision-making process, even though many of the impacted youth are Indigenous.ⁱⁱⁱ Members of the HSJCC Secretariat were pleased to meet with Assistant Deputy Minister David Mitchell last month to discuss how the HSJCC Network can support the work of MCCSS, as well as to discuss the youth justice centre closures. The Provincial HSJCC urges your ministries to work together to address our concerns on this issue.

The Provincial HSJCC is concerned that in northwestern Ontario in particular, youth were transferred many kilometers from their home communities without their families being notified. Many of these youth are vulnerable, identify as Black, Indigenous or racialized, and live with mental health issues, addictions and/or neurodevelopmental disabilities. The Grand Chiefs of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Grand Council Treaty #3 called the closures "traumatizing" to Indigenous youth and condemned the lack of notice or transition planning in an open letter to Premier Ford.^{iv} **The Provincial HSJCC would like to know what steps are being taken by MCCSS' Youth Justice Division to implement the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.**

It is unclear where each youth has been moved, how each youth will return home and how the needs of justice-involved youth will continue to be met in each community. **The Provincial HSJCC would like to know whether there is a plan to reintegrate the youth back to their home communities and a plan to determine how to meet the needs of local justice-involved youth.** We propose that your ministries develop a plan to repurpose the infrastructure from each facility that was closed as well as reinvest the funds for the operations of these facilities into holistic programs

for youth and/or community-led projects such as youth wellness hubs, walk-in youth services, diversion programs and new treatment facilities for youth. The Provincial HSJCC encourages your ministry to consult with local partners in each community to develop these plans, including the reintegration of youth who were transferred, community needs assessments for justice-involved youth, reinvestment of operational funds and utilization of infrastructure.

The Provincial HSJCC is also concerned that MCCSS has cut all funding for justice-involved youth with complex and chronic mental health issues at Syl Apps Youth Centre (Syl Apps). The occupancy rate for Syl Apps was nearly 80 percent in 2020/21 and there is often a waitlist for admission.^v More than half the youth at Syl Apps are Black, Indigenous and/or racialized, and many live with an average of four diagnoses of mental illnesses, substance use issues, neurodevelopmental disabilities and other chronic conditions. These youth have complex needs that cannot be met at other youth justice centres, and without treatment, may continue to be involved with the criminal justice system as adults. **The Provincial HSJCC urges your ministries to work together to continue funding mental health treatment for youth in custody with complex and chronic mental health issues at Syl Apps Youth Centre.**

The Provincial HSJCC is concerned that some of the most at-risk youth in Ontario are not receiving the mental health treatment and specific supports they require to ensure they do not enter the adult justice system. **We ask that you consult with local communities to determine how to rectify the closures of youth justice centres by reinvesting in mental health and justice programming for youth across the province, and especially in northern Ontario.**

We thank you in advance for your ongoing willingness to work with us on these issues. The Provincial HSJCC is committed to working collaboratively with government and partners across the health, social services and justice sectors to ensure our vulnerable, priority populations and their mental health and well-being continue to be supported.

Please feel free to contact us through Shawn Chirrey, Director of Public Policy, Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario, by email at schirrey@ontario.cmha.ca should you have any questions, comments or wish to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,



SARA DIAS

Sara Dias
Co-Chair, Provincial Human Services and Justice Coordinating Committee
807-468-1838 Ext:229
sdias@cmhak.on.ca

cc Vijay Chauhan, Chief of Staff, Minister's Office (MCCSS)
Allan MacDermid, Chief of Staff, Associate Minister's Office (MH&A)
Heather Watt, Chief of Staff, Minister's Office (MOH)
David Mitchell, Assistant Deputy Minister (MCCSS)

About the HSJCC Network

Ontario's [Human Services and Justice Coordinating Committee Network](#) was established in 1997 in response to a recognized need across the province to coordinate resources and services, and plan more effectively for people who are in conflict with the law. Our priority consideration is for, but not limited to, people with a serious mental illness, developmental disability, acquired brain injury, substance use issues, and/or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The network is a cooperative effort of the Ministries of the Attorney General, Children, Community and Social Services, Health, and the Solicitor General.

Our network includes 1,600+ members across Ontario. Each HSJCC is a voluntary collaboration between social service organizations, mental health and addictions organizations and partners from the justice sector, including police services, legal aid services, Crown attorneys, correctional and probation officers. There are 14 Regional HSJCCs who work to improve the issues that impact individuals regionally who require human services as they navigate through the criminal justice system. Over 39 Local HSJCCs provide education and training for their members, coordinate care for justice-involved individuals in their communities and provide input to regional committees.

The Provincial Human Services and Justice Coordinating Committee functions as a planning body, supporting the individual and collective efforts of the Local and Regional HSJCCs. The table also identifies and addresses provincial service and policy issues, makes recommendations, and identifies system level solutions.

Earlier this year, the Provincial HSJCC provided a pre-budget [submission](#) to the Minister of Finance to inform the 2021-2022 provincial budget.

Our network requested \$50 million in annualized funding in support for human services and justice services across Ontario, and \$500,000 increase for our network to continue our work to support this population. This request mirrors the provincial investment that was made at the inception of our network over 15 years ago. We strongly encourage you to consider this request, as a funding increase is crucial to sustain our existing capacity and meet growing demands. Our network would be happy to work with government to develop a multi-year investment plan for these funds.

ⁱ Nishnawbe Aski Nation. (March 3, 2021). *Closure of Youth Justice Facilities and the Impact on Children from Northern First Nations*. Letter to Premier Doug Ford. Retrieved from <https://www.nan.ca/news/closure-of-youth-justice-facilities-and-the-impact-on-children-from-northern-first-nations/> (NAN).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*; Children's Mental Health Ontario. (March 4, 2021). *Immediate Government Action Needed to Restore Access to Life-Saving, Needs-Based Mental Health Services to Kids in Ontario's Youth Justice System*. Retrieved from <https://cmho.org/immediate-government-action-needed/> (CMHO).

^{iv} *Supra*, note i (NAN).

^v *Supra*, note iii (CMHO).