

## WE ARE CANADA'S NATIONAL COLLECTIVE VOICE FOR HEALTHCARE

Organizations for Health Action or HEAL is a national coalition of 43 national health organizations dedicated to improving the health of Canadians.

Our members are professional associations of regulated health care providers and organizations of health charities that provide a range of health care services across Canada.

To learn more, visit [www.healthaction.ca](http://www.healthaction.ca)



### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES (found on HEAL website under 'About Us')**

The members of HEAL are committed to enhancing the health of Canadians<sup>1</sup>, with the continuous improvement of fair, equitable, efficient, and effective health services, and systems. As active participants in the development and implementation of our health systems we commit to these guiding principles for health and health care in Canada.

1. All Canadians value health and timely and accessible health care.
2. Health is broader than the provision of health care, embracing health promotion, disease prevention and economic and social policy underlying determinants of health and healthy communities.
3. Access to quality health care, irrespective of ability-to-pay, is a basic Canadian value.
4. Sustaining the national character of health services requires adherence to a common set of principles.
5. Finite public resources are available to support the health of Canadians and the national health insurance system.

### **Introduction**

Canada's health care system has been significantly strained over the years despite fundamental values such as universality and equity of access. As we look towards the future, it is crucial that

<sup>1</sup> "Canadians" refers to the entire population in Canada, including all individuals currently living in Canada.

we learn from these challenges and proactively invest in the necessary reforms to ensure the long-term success and resilience of our health care system. Collaboration between all levels of government is essential to ensure that our health care system is adequately supported and sustained.

The health care system we built decades ago requires innovative approaches to re-envision the health-care services that we need today. Increased funding, more agile approaches and systemic reform are all needed to ensure that Canadians' health needs are met now and into the future. If implemented, the key recommendations outlined in this consensus document will enhance the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of health-care services for all Canadians.

HEAL encourages the federal government to continue to embrace a strong leadership role in the consistency of health care delivery across the country, elevating the voice of all health care providers across the country.

**Building a Healthier Future:** HEAL's recommendations for a healthier nation are designed to support health care workers across the country, regardless of whether their services are covered under the public health plan, by private insurers, or by Canadians who pay out of pocket. Our members work diligently in support of their professions, patients and partners and are equipped to identify areas that require more support from the federal government.

This consensus document outlines three critical areas of focus necessary to create a sustainable health care system that meets the needs of Canadians, today and into the future.

Section 1: Addressing the Health Human Resource Crisis

Section 2: Investing in Mental Health Parity

Section 3: Community-Based Care

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### **Addressing the Health Human Resource Crisis**

Canada's health care system has been under significant economic, resource and infrastructure strain for years, which was exacerbated by the pandemic. Despite longstanding calls for increased support, our health system now faces an acute health human resource crisis, characterized by severe worker shortages impacting treatment accessibility and efficiency. Moreover, the current health care workforce is experiencing unprecedented stress, burnout and compassion fatigue, and many are leaving or planning to leave their profession.

HEAL recognizes the federal government's recent efforts to mitigate these challenges, including increased funding, new bilateral health agreements with provinces and territories, and the establishment of 'Health Workforce Canada' in collaboration with the Canadian Institute for Health Information and Health Canada. These initiatives are commendable steps towards addressing the health care crisis.

However, the pervasive issue of staff shortages remains urgent and widespread, leaving no community or health profession untouched. According to Statistics Canada, 11.2 per cent of permanent health care workers reported that they intended to leave their positions within the next year, with 20.7 percent pointing to too large of a workload as the reason they intended to leave<sup>2</sup>. Further, 87 per cent of health care workers reported feeling stressed at work, while 45 per cent of workers reported poorer mental health compared with the pre-pandemic period<sup>3</sup>.

To effectively address the evolving needs of Canada's diverse communities and to combat the widespread shortages of health care professionals and the health challenges they face, it is crucial to develop a National Health Human Resource Plan. This plan should encompass comprehensive data collection and accountability measures, strategies for enhanced recruitment and retention of health care workers and students, and a strong focus on the wellness and mental health of practitioners.

The proposed National Health Human Resource Plan will assist with the following gaps in our health care system:

- Health Care Worker Data Analysis and Accountability Measures

To accurately predict current and future health care practitioner needs, a comprehensive, pan-Canadian database is needed to better understand gaps in services. Collecting and analyzing information on the demographics, distribution and skills of health care workers will allow policymakers to bolster the workforce where it is most needed and allow for ongoing funding to match demographic need. A more comprehensive national data regime would promote transparency, trust, and flexibility, fostering a more responsive and equitable health care system.

Further, more robust digital data collection would meaningfully improve accountability mechanisms and ensure that resources and workers are utilized effectively, government funding is efficiently deployed, and outcomes are managed, monitored, measured, and reported. Enhanced data collection would also foster a “needs-based” approach to health workforce planning.

- Recruitment, Retention and Development of the Workforce

The recruitment, retention and development of health care professionals is critical to solving Canada's labour shortage and ensuring timely care for patients. This includes accelerated timelines for the accreditation of internationally trained professionals, while maintaining Canada's rigorous health care standards, and ensuring greater access to timely accreditation exams and comprehensive bridging programs.

In addition, modernizing the ability of health care professionals to practise across Canada, with

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada (2023). *Study: Quality of employment of health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230810/dq230810a-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

greater interprovincial mobility and mutual recognition, would go a long way to alleviate shortages, especially in rural and remote areas. By collaborating with the provincial and territorial governments, the federal government can play a key role in bolstering the health care work force by creating nationally recognized standards and reducing administrative burdens.

- **Wellness of Health Care Workers**

Increased levels of fatigue and mental health challenges faced by Canadian health care workers greatly impact the ability to attract new students into studying and working in health care professions. The federal government must work in collaboration with provinces and territories to ensure support for the overall health of health care workers, so they are incentivized to join and remain in the workforce to provide quality care while maintaining their own well-being.

This includes providing support systems in the field and professional development opportunities that foster increased resilience, career satisfaction, and retention within the health care sector.

**HEAL Recommendation:** That the federal government collaborate with provinces and territories to establish a comprehensive data system for health care workforce analysis, enhance recruitment and retention strategies through streamlined accreditation and interprovincial mobility, and prioritize the wellness of health care workers by providing support systems and professional development opportunities that ensure a resilient and sustainable health care workforce

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### **Investing in Mental Health Parity**

With a high prevalence of mental health concerns pre-pandemic, our health systems continue to struggle to provide a range of timely mental health and substance use health (MHSUH) services. We know that access to evidence-based mental health services and substance use health services has been a longstanding challenge in Canada, and immediate action by all levels of government is needed to address this critical issue.

According to a 2023 Statistics Canada study, five million Canadians (18 per cent) aged 15 and older met the diagnostic criteria for a mood, anxiety, or substance use disorder in the previous 12 months<sup>4</sup>. Of these, more than one in three reported unmet or partially met health and mental health needs<sup>5</sup>. Canada has also seen escalating numbers of opioid-related deaths since national surveillance began in 2016. Between January 2016 and September 2023 there were over 42,000 apparent opioid toxicity deaths—nearly 6,000 in the first eight months of 2023<sup>6</sup>. The continued mental distress reported by Canadians is a stark reminder of the ongoing need for the

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada (2023). *Study: Quality of employment of health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230810/dq230810a-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada (September 22, 2023). *Mental Disorders in Canada, 2022*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023053-eng.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Health Canada. (March 27, 2024). *Opioid- and Stimulant-related Harms in Canada*.

<https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/graphs.html?ind=1&unit=0>

federal government to make meaningful and sustained investments in MHSUH services a priority and ensure that comprehensive services and supports are accessible to all.

An integrated approach is necessary to address the interconnected nature of mental health, substance use health, physical well-being and the social determinants of health. This integrated approach can be achieved by investing in multidisciplinary models of care that include a spectrum of trained (mental) health care professionals working together to ensure those in need receive the care they need, when they need it.

This requires a realignment of resources and of the way services are delivered, managed and organized to develop a comprehensive continuum of MHSUH services and supports to improve access and quality of care. It also requires the funding of a wide range of MHSUH services and supports, including prevention and promotion, early intervention, crisis support, peer support, counselling, therapy, recovery-oriented supports, and specialized treatments across the lifespan and in a spectrum of settings from population-based and community-based care to special hospitals.

Currently, there is no parity between how Canada funds mental health, substance use health, and physical health care. The *Canada Health Act*, notwithstanding its stated objectives to provide universal and comprehensive care to promote the physical and mental well-being of Canadians, addresses mainly physical health within its scope when defining “insured services”. HEAL remains disappointed that the long-promised Canada Mental Health Transfer, valued at \$4.6 billion over 5 years, as committed to during the 2021 federal election has not come to fruition, and has been jettisoned in favour of modestly funded, time-limited, bilateral federal agreements with the provinces and territories. The result has been that public coverage of MHSUH services effectively has “non-core status” and is left to be insured—or not—at the discretion of provinces and territories.

Enacting new federal legislation complementary to the *Canada Health Act* (such as the *Mental Health and Substance Use Health Parity for All Act* proposed by CAMIMH), would enshrine parity between MHSUH care and physical health care in Canada and provide a structure through which to redress this inequity. Currently, there is no funding parity between MHSUH care and physical health care in Canada. Parity means valuing MHSUH as much as physical health in order to close inequalities in mortality, morbidity or care delivery. In 2015 the public and private sectors together spent \$15.8 billion for mental health care, representing 7.2 per cent of Canada’s total health spending, well below G7 peers, and low considering mental illness represents 23 per cent of the total disease burden<sup>7</sup>.

The federal government has made important investments in mental health in the last several years, including \$5 billion over 10 years in the 2017 budget to the provinces and territories to improve access to mental health and addictions services for Canadians. The final four years of funding for mental health and addictions have been rolled into the 2023 *Working Together to Improve Health Care for Canadians* bilateral agreements. Under this approach, MHSUH parity

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<sup>7</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada (March 13, 2017). *Strengthening the Case for Investing – Background*. <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/strengthening-the-case-for-investing-background/>

is not assured given provinces and territories choose how they will disperse funds among the priority items. Both legislative reform and increased investment are critical to facilitate person- and family-centred access to the full breadth of MHSUH care and supports, available to all Canadians regardless of ability to pay.

**HEAL Recommendation:** That the federal government formally recognize that mental health and substance use health (MHSUH) care is of equal value to physical health care by enacting legislation to enshrine principles including comprehensiveness and accessibility for all; and that, in alignment with these principles, the federal government work in partnership with all levels of government to fund sustainable, evidence-based MHSUH services and supports to meet the growing demand for timely, patient- and family-centred care.

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### **Community-Based Care**

The Canadian health care system must evolve to support individuals comprehensively from infancy through adulthood and into end-of-life care. The global COVID-19 health crisis exposed significant gaps in our health care system for people of all ages and highlighted the increased need for a community-based care approach. Special attention must also be given to Indigenous, 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, marginalized and underserved Canadians, who have historically and continue to face systemic barriers and inequities in accessing quality health care. The community-based care approach emphasizes providing care where people live, work, and play, ensuring accessibility and continuity throughout their lives.

- **Integrating Care for All Ages**

Community-based care should extend across the lifespan, from pediatrics to geriatrics. The pandemic left a lasting impact on children's social systems and mental health, with isolation from friends, family, teachers, community supports and extracurricular activities proving detrimental to their development. Post-pandemic, many children face social and mental health concerns that affect their success in school, careers, and personal relationships.

To ensure children grow up healthy and supported, community-based care must prioritize comprehensive wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional health. Recent positive investments in programs such as school nutrition, dental care, and accessible daycare services can proactively improve health outcomes for future generations. More must be done to ensure our children live happy and healthy lives, and this action should start in our communities.

Seniors, the hardest-hit demographic during the pandemic, accounted for 90 per cent of COVID-19 deaths according to Canada's National Institute on Ageing (NIA)<sup>8</sup>. This underscores the need for better-trained health care workers and increased support for seniors' health, particularly

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<sup>8</sup> Canadian Institute for Health Information (2021). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Long-Term Care in Canada: Focus on the First 6 Months*. <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/impact-covid-19-long-term-care-canada-first-6-months-report-en.pdf>

through home and community care services. Long-term care and hospitals cannot be the only options; instead, enabling clinically stable patients to receive care at home, supported by professionals with core competencies in areas such as palliative care, care coordination, and clinical decision-making (to name a few), allows seniors and other frail persons to stay in familiar environments with their loved ones and surrounded by their network of caregivers.

- Collaborative and Team-Based Care

A key element of effective community-based care is inter-professional collaboration, ensuring health care providers work together seamlessly to meet patients' needs. Team-based care facilitates better communication among health care professionals, reducing the need for patients to repeat their medical history and ensuring cohesive treatment plans.

With more than 7.8 million Canadians providing approximately 20 hours of unpaid care each week<sup>9</sup>, this team-based model needs to ensure that family and unpaid caregivers are included as part of the extended team. Caregivers play a critical role to both support and provide care to anyone dealing with a chronic or serious illness. Investing in inter-professional collaboration and team-based care models actively engages patients and their caregivers as full participants in their care, ensuring care is person-centred and aligns with their preferences, lifestyle and level of support. This model also ensures access to the right practitioner at the right time resulting in improved patient satisfaction.

Increased funding would also encourage and support all health care professionals to function to the full extent of their education, certification, and licensure. Inter-professional teams can work seamlessly together, reducing duplication of services and streamlining treatment processes.

This approach allows communities to take advantage of the full extent of the health care professionals available to them in their area and provides patients with more comprehensive access to the care they need. By coordinating care, team-based approaches can go a long way in enhancing patient outcomes and satisfaction, with a more efficient use of resources.

- Leveraging Digital Solutions

Digital solutions, such as video conferences and other telehealth services, play a crucial role in enhancing accessibility, and person and family-centred care. Virtual care options allow patients to receive timely and appropriate care regardless of their location, whether in rural and remote areas or urban centres. This may include remote monitoring, remote consultations, chronic disease management, interoperability, centralized patient information, and bridging gaps to timely care to better provide for patients regardless of their location. It can also help reduce the burden on unpaid caregivers by, for example, reducing the time required for travel to in-person appointments and providing more timely access to information and support.

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<sup>9</sup> Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (November 2022). *Giving Care: An approach to a better caregiving landscape in Canada*. [https://canadiancaregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CCCE\\_Giving-Care.pdf](https://canadiancaregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CCCE_Giving-Care.pdf)

Through the integration of technology in remote community-based care, the Canadian health care system can provide more effective, efficient, and person-centred care. Incorporating many of these technological advances, the health care system is better able to provide the right care at the right time from the right practitioner, optimizing costs and outcomes.

- **Community-Centred Care Models**

There are successful models of community-based care that demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating health care services into daily life environments. This may include greater innovation in meeting patients in their communities – including rural, remote, Indigenous, and underserved communities – with health care options such as school-based health centres, community health centres, mobile health clinics, community paramedicine, and community wellness programs.

Person and family-centred care should include home-based and face-to-face interactions where possible, utilizing all available tools to facilitate care and referrals. By looking to other jurisdictions for best practices and learnings, the Canadian health care system can better adopt community-centred care models and promote a healthier, more engaged community. Ultimately, this approach ensures that care is truly embedded in the community, meeting patients where they are.

**HEAL Recommendation:** That the federal government, working in partnership with all levels of government, increase investments in community-based care approaches that support individuals comprehensively from infancy through adulthood and into end-of-life care, including greater investments in team-based care, digital solutions, and community-centred care models. These models are particularly valuable for Indigenous and marginalized Canadians, who often face systemic barriers to accessing traditional health care services. Community-based care can make meaningful differences in alleviating pressure on overloaded areas of our health care system.

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## **Conclusion**

HEAL commends ongoing actions and efforts that enshrine the federal government's role in health care across the country.

HEAL stands ready to support and work with the federal government in enhancing Canada's health care system. As a coalition of diverse health care professionals, we are a leading resource for profession specific research, strategy development, and implementation of policy recommendations to strengthen the Canadian health care system.

Together, we can address current challenges, learn from our history and lived experiences, and advance reforms to the health care system for the benefit of all Canadians.