



# Pediatric Mental Health

## Handle with Care



How will we fix what's ailing our health care system?

## Issue

Children and youth were profoundly impacted by pandemic disruptions. Many children who were struggling before the pandemic saw their physical and mental health worsen, and new data indicates that these issues linger.

- The pandemic created major economic and social stressors for children and their families.
- Improved access to child psychiatry, mental health and pediatric care is needed throughout the province.
- School-based programming can be an important support for non-medical needs, with wrap around services available where children spend so much time.
- Resourcing will continue to be an issue. Access to mental health therapists through the public health care system in both urban/non-urban settings was overwhelmed by the increased demand during peak pandemic and continues to lag demand according to physicians.
- Alberta physicians reported a spike in eating disorder admissions to emergency departments and long waitlists across eating disorder programs. Alberta data is not available but a study based on data from six pediatric care facilities across Canada revealed a 60% rise in eating disorders from pre-pandemic levels. Anecdotal reports suggest that this is similar in Alberta.
- Recognizing diversity and practicing inclusion is important. To contribute to wellness and health, children should be supported to develop their own identities in their own time and should be supported to do so by their parents and health care providers.
- Infrastructure investment is needed to support pediatric patients who are transitioning to adult care and who otherwise find themselves left alone to cope. This is especially true for the medically and/or psychiatrically complex pediatric patients.
- Adequate and appropriate treatment of pediatric mental health patients may help reduce recurrence later on in adulthood.
- Families trying to get mental health care for children or youth find the system extremely complex. Patient navigators are a possible strategy to help assist patients/families with wayfinding in the system and such support would make a big difference.
- There are ongoing efforts by government and AHS to help students with their mental health:
  - > AHS offers programming in schools and communities and has developed a mental health toolkit and other materials.
  - > Alberta is funding pilot projects to increase mental health supports for children.
  - > Budget 2023 includes \$117 million to expand services for children and youth, and \$1.5 million for the Canadian Research and Education for the Advancement of Child Health (CanREACH) program to help physicians build skills to assess and treat children with mental health and behavioural issues.

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES & PARTIES SHOULD THEY WIN THE PROVINCIAL ELECTION

- How will your government address the pediatric mental health crisis and ensure Alberta's children and youth get the care they need both in schools/communities and the health care system?
- How will your government assist parents and families to guide children through their journeys in the mental health care system?