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# PRESS RELEASE

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## Fund mental health treatment for Albertans

**February 10, 2021 – Edmonton, AB** – A local coalition of psychology agencies is calling on the provincial government to provide provincially funded psychological services for all Albertans.

The Expert Psychologists Interagency Clinical (EPIC) network of service providers lobbied the government in late 2019 with a petition advocating for accessible, provincially funded psychological services for all Albertans. The EPIC initiative stressed the importance of making expert mental health resources accessible to all Albertans and gathered support through an online petition entitled [Alberta Health Services Funding for Psychological Services](#). To date, **over 17,500 signatures have been collected** along with thousands of comments supporting the need for funded and accessible mental health care. In early 2020, EPIC had been invited to initial meetings with the UCP government, however progress was derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last month, EPIC representatives met with Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton Manning to discuss her push for provincially funded mental health care. Sweet has committed to table the EPIC network's petition to the Alberta Legislative Assembly, when the sitting in resumes in February 2021.

Through their petition, EPIC is asking the Government of Alberta to allow psychologists to bill Alberta Health directly for psychological interventions. Their premise is that psychological supports should function like good medical care. Albertans have funded access to self-selected family physicians for their physical health needs. It is equally essential for Albertans to have funded access to self-selected psychologists as an ongoing resource for their mental health needs.

EPIC founder and registered psychologist, Janet Ryan-Newell, said, "Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a range of mental health issues increasing at critical rates. Even before the pandemic, the medical model, mental health care system was significantly overextended. Now, as psychologists, we are increasingly concerned for the mental health of Albertans." The issues Ryan-Newell referred to include severe anxiety, depression, grief, loss, suicidality, substance use, family violence, and complex mental illness.

"Since August, we have experienced double-digit increases in the number of people who are coming to Cornerstone in search of low-fee counselling," said Sheila Stauffer, Executive Director of Cornerstone Counselling in Edmonton. "In speaking with colleagues in the not-for-profit and charitable

counselling sector across Alberta, we are finding our current funding sources are not sufficient to meet this rapidly escalating mental health crisis."

"We serve people from all over Alberta and are experiencing an 80% increase in the number of session hours we are conducting. We are also noticing people want to attend in-person sessions as opposed to online sessions. They are in dire need of human, in-person, contact," said Eileen Bona, Psychologist and Executive Director of Dreamcatcher Nature Assisted Therapy in Ardrossan.

Dr. Cory Hrushka from Insight Psychological said, "Similar to what we're experiencing here in Edmonton, psychologists in our Calgary office are finding an increase in the number of youths, aged 15 to 18, that need mental health supports. Parents are struggling to find affordable services in the community and are finding the wait lists with AHS to be frustrating and not timely enough."

The EPIC network's front-line experience, from over 60 private practice psychologists, supports the data collected through a nationwide monitoring survey on the mental health impacts of COVID-19 that was released in December by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in partnership with UBC researchers. The survey highlights the intensified feelings of stress and anxiety, causing alarming levels of despair, suicidal thoughts and hopelessness in the Canadian population - <https://cmha.ca/news/despair-and-suicidal-feelings-deepen-as-pandemic-wears-on>.

EPIC's petition identifies psychologists as the professionals with a primary concentration on behavioural and mental health and notes that Alberta is fortunate to have over 4,000 psychologists offering a range of specialities and expertise to meet the wide diversity of needs. To adequately address the escalating mental health issues, Albertans need to have financially supported access to both the private and public systems.

In addition to diversifying access to psychologists, EPIC is also advocating for diversity in the modality of care. EPIC agencies have found over the last eleven months, that when clients are permitted to choose between online and in-person services, they choose and benefit more from in-person sessions than virtual sessions. These findings are not surprising since 1) the physical human connection that is present in an in-person care session cannot be imitated online and 2) the nature and extent of care needed by everyone can be very different. Therefore, it must be emphasized that provincially funded mental health supports **should not** be limited to online mental health clinicians.

The EPIC Network agencies include Kells Counselling, Insight Psychological, Dreamcatcher Nature Assisted Therapy, and Cornerstone Counselling. EPIC is a grassroots group representing over 60 private psychologists in Alberta. They work together to promote the benefits of psychology in the Edmonton area and help all Albertans access psychological care.