



Mental Health Forum Addresses COVID-19 Impacts on Atlantic Youth

Online Atlantic Policy Forum brought together 125 people from diverse backgrounds to discuss action for improving infant, child and youth mental health. Participants and partner organizations are creating a policy brief that will turn discussions from ASI 2020 into concrete proposals for policy action in Atlantic Canada.

Youth mental health has been an increasing concern during the COVID-19 pandemic, and last week, 125 participants gathered at an online forum to address ways to influence policy to improve the lives of young Atlantic Canadians.

Increased isolation, economic hardship and lack of support systems have driven up signs of depression and anxiety in children and youth. From August 24 to 26, educators, policy makers, parents, community leaders, academics and youth leaders came together virtually to discuss risk factors and potential solutions for youth mental health. The policy forum, organized by the Atlantic Summer Institute on Healthy and Safe Communities, focused on investment in upstream policies for addressing mental health early in life, creating healthy and safe spaces for our children and teens.

The ASI 2020 Policy Forum featured speakers from diverse backgrounds, from MPs and Mayors to researchers, community organizers, and Indigenous leaders. These individuals came together with over a hundred participants from the public to collaboratively share information and brainstorm policy solutions to our mental health crisis. ASI 2020 was kicked off Monday night by keynote speaker Trish Hennessy from Think Upstream, a project of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, who shared an “upstream approach” to mental health. In contrast to traditional thinking about how to resolve a crisis once it has occurred, ‘upstream’ efforts involve investing wisely for future success, addressing the social and economic factors that can decrease mental wellness in youth. According to Hennessy, these factors include “income inequality, precarious and low-paying work, lack of access to high quality, affordable early learning and education opportunities, and the stress of living with housing and food insecurity”. These factors are compounded for people who are racialized, gender diverse, or facing physical and emotional challenges.

Over the course of the forum, participants heard from researchers and academics about the vital importance of early childhood and social and economic environments for future mental health. Connections were drawn between poverty, instability, and mental illness later in life and stressed the direct relationship between rising social and financial inequities and rising rates of mental health issues amongst children. The connection between societal factors and mental health provides convincing, evidence-based support for upstream investment, addressing the root causes of mental distress in policy development. Participants heard from political and community leaders about the path from idea to policy, and the importance of collaboration at all levels, from communities and municipalities to provincial and federal governments. The role of economics and financial systems in shaping healthy environments for our communities was also a key theme that was discussed by participants and speakers throughout the three day forum.

Roundtable discussions and workshops facilitated by community groups and leaders provided an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives and have their diverse experiences recognized. These lively discussions led participants to explore many different initiatives currently happening in Canadian communities, and helped them to imagine future steps to promote mental health.

ASI and partner organizations intend to collaborate on a policy brief that will turn discussions from ASI 2020 into concrete proposals for policy action in Atlantic Canada. This policy brief, prepared by A Way Home Canada, will be presented to the public, provincial Premiers, and the Federal government. It will include next steps and recommendations for upstream investment that will lead to healthier and safer Atlantic communities. In light of upcoming provincial elections in New Brunswick and Newfoundland, and municipal elections in Nova Scotia, it is vital to encourage elected officials across parties and provinces to prioritize the mental wellness of their citizens in their platforms. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health must be prioritized in order to maintain the flourishing and vibrant communities that we call home.

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