

## Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Alliance – Election 2014 questions

June 1, 2014,

### Responses from the Ontario NDP

- 1. The cost of mental illness and addiction is estimated to be \$39 billion in Ontario. Meanwhile, access to mental health and addiction services is generally very poor and varies widely across the province. Assuming this is unacceptable to your party, what specific measures would your government take to ensure that people with mental illness and addictions across Ontario get the care they need?***

The Ontario NDP is committed to addressing Ontario's crisis in mental health and addictions. We plan to build 50 new 24-hour family health clinics across the province which will be flexible to community specific needs. This will increase access for underserved Ontarians to a range of health services, including mental health professionals. A NDP government will also work with local communities and health providers to expand mental health-specific services.

Our healthcare plan involves making targeted investments to reduce the number of patients who are forced to access a different level of care than where they should be just because there isn't enough room elsewhere in the system. This will help those who need mental health beds to get the right kind of care faster. It will also improve the care of all patients, thereby reducing the risk of developing, aggravating, or worsening mental health conditions. It is also designed to slash wait times across the board. This will help Ontarians get the mental health care and services they need more quickly.

- 2. In 2011, the provincial government launched Open Minds, Healthy Minds, Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. Would your government support the continued implementation of this strategy? What would your party do to ensure continued progress in this area?***

The Ontario NDP remains firmly committed to provincial mental health strategies including the final report of the Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, *Navigating the Journey to Wellness: The Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Plan for Ontarians*. The report's 23 recommendations—including the creation of a single body responsible for the design, management and coordination of a mental health and addictions system— could transform the system so that it finally meets the needs of Ontarians. It is unfortunate that the well-researched and crucial recommendations of this Committee have been largely ignored. The Ontario NDP supports the Select Committee's final report and would act promptly on its recommendations.

**3. *Supports and services for people with mental illness and addiction often cross many different government ministries. How would your party ensure there is broad, government-wide leadership on mental health and addictions?***

One of the recommendations of the Select Committee's report is the creation of a single body responsible for overseeing the entire mental health and addictions system—and guaranteeing a core basket of services in all regions of Ontario. The Ontario NDP supports the Select Committee's final report and we would ensure the adoption of this recommendation.

We also know that mental health is a complex issue and therefore requires many people at the table to achieve progress. That's why our plan for Ontario involves solutions across the board – when people are better supported in one way, the more success they can have in other ways and the better the system can serve us all. We understand that income supports, employment and housing all impact mental health and wellbeing just as much as “traditional” healthcare and our plans for those programs are described below.

**4. *Reducing hospitalization (and re-hospitalization) of people with mental illness requires access to affordable housing with supports. How will your party improve access to supportive housing?***

Too many families are being squeezed by rising costs and worry about having a safe, clean place to live. The Ontario NDP has taken the lead in fighting for affordable housing and tenant protection solutions, including initiatives such as landlord licensing, inclusive zoning, and housing benefits. A NDP government will start by providing over \$400 million over five years as part of the extended investment in the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy. This will allow us to construct and renovate affordable housing units and provide other supports for families who need assistance. We will continue to work with the affordable housing sector to examine potential programs, such as an additional provincial affordable housing program. A NDP government will also enhance tenant protection by enforcing building standards and maintenance rules. We will provide \$2 million in additional annual funding to help municipalities enforce inspections to ensure landlords respect their commitments to tenants.

**5. *Is there anything else you would want Ontarians to know about your commitment to mental health and addictions services?***

Because we understand the social determinants of health, particularly in the context of mental health, we have worked hard to expand social assistance and affordable housing. A NDP government will raise the minimum wage to \$12 per hour by 2016 and index the minimum wage to inflation.

We are committed to social assistance reform that makes sense and delivers for all Ontarians. We have been pushing the government to increase the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program for years. In 2013, we were successful in our insistence that they create an earnings exemption that will allow recipients of OW and the ODSP to keep the first \$200 in employment earnings before the government begins clawing back their benefits. We will also implement one percent increase to ODSP.

The Ontario NDP recognizes that OW and ODSP still do not reflect the actual cost of living, including the cost of shelter, energy, and nutritious food, which is rising ever faster. Our goal is to address this issue and to stand up for middle class families. We will also continue to implement recommendations from the Review of Social Assistance that Ontarians agree are the right way forward.

We are also committing to stopping the poverty cycle in its tracks. We will do so with programs designed to make sure children get the right start and to help adults get back on their feet with safe, comfortable housing and good jobs.

We will increase the Ontario Child Benefit to \$1,310 in July. Following that increase, a NDP government will index the Ontario Child Benefit to inflation. As costs rise, parents will also see an increase in the benefit they receive. In this manner, a NDP government will ensure that the overall child care funding allocation increases by approximately \$20 million each year.

We understand that, increasingly, Ontarians are feeling the pressure of caring for ill or elderly relatives without adequate support from government or the community. We will therefore introduce for the first time in Ontario a caregiver tax credit. It will provide \$1,275 per year per dependent for families who are being stretched financially and emotionally by caring for ill or elderly relatives. It will be fully refundable and be available for all Ontarians who are primary caregivers. It's just one way we can help provide some relief to Ontarians who are caring for their loved ones.

The Ontario NDP also wants to help create more and better jobs so to help those who can work escape poverty. We are creating a job creation tax credit to create up to 170,000 jobs. We will also invest in re-training programs for workers over the age of 55. Implementing targeted measures to support vulnerable workers, students, new Canadians, unemployed Ontarians, and seniors is a crucial component of our platform. Since unemployment and under-employment are key risk factors for mental health issues, these solutions will alleviate poverty and prevent crises.

The Ontario NDP thanks your organization for your advocacy in bringing mental health issues to the forefront and reducing stigma. We look forward to building on this dialogue and creating real progress alongside your organization and other stakeholders.