

Advocates say mental health spending in Nova Scotia comes up short in new budget

By Danielle Edwards, [The Canadian Press](#)

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HALIFAX -- Nova Scotia must increase funding for mental health beyond what was included in last week's budget, according to mental health advocates in the province.

The budget for the 2021-22 fiscal year presented by Premier Iain Rankin's government included an extra \$20 million in spending for mental health services.

But Alec Stratford, executive director of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, says the percentage of funds dedicated for mental health in the overall health budget is lower than it was last year. Spending for mental health represents about 6.3 per cent of the health budget compared to about 6.7 per cent in fiscal 2020-21.

"I don't think it means a whole heck of a lot in the big picture of things," Stratford said in a recent interview, about the money dedicated for mental health.

Simon Sherry, psychology professor at Dalhousie University, said the province's lack of proportional funding toward mental health is creating a "pronounced inequity" between physical care and mental health care.

"It's so very clear that there's a massive burden of disease associated with mental health, but we're not making corresponding investments in reducing wait times and increasing availability of services," Sherry said in an interview Monday.

A report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information says that between 2009 and 2018, Nova Scotia's spending on mental health and addictions per capita increased by 12 per cent, the smallest rise in the country.

In comparison, fellow Atlantic provinces Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick increased spending during the same period by 87 per cent, 39 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively.

"The evidence is compelling but the willingness is lacking and government in Nova Scotia is abdicating its responsibility to protect some of our most vulnerable citizens," Sherry said.

Health orders related to the pandemic have also undermined the mental health of residents in the province, he added. "In the middle of all this, it's

further exposed an underfunded and overwhelmed mental health-care system," he said.

"We are not funding mental health care in proportion to the amount of distress and impairment and disability and death that mental illness creates."

To combat the issue of underfunding, Stratford said the college is advocating for a "paradigm shift" in how the province views mental health spending. Nova Scotia's mental health system is focused on efficiency, he said, adding that it doesn't offer much for those who may need longer-term support.

Stratford called for a "bio-psycho-social" approach. "Part of that means looking at a broader framework of what mental wellness is, including the social determinants of health and spending in the area of income support, housing, food security, racism ΓÇª" he said.

A new approach would also consider mental well-being as a "lifelong journey" that requires consistent support, he added.

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