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History of Student Advocacy on Alberta's Mental Health Funding

Prior to 2013, student mental health was not an issue that Alberta's provincial student organizations were actively advocating on when meeting with provincial representatives. At the institutional level, however, the Vice Presidents Student Life from the three members of CAUS at the time - the University of Alberta Students' Union (UASU), the University of Calgary Students' Union (UCSU), and the University of Lethbridge Students' Union (ULSU) - were working closely with their administrations to put forward joint proposals for funding student mental health supports on their campuses.

Collaboration between the Students' Unions (SUs) and the administrations at these three institutions resulted in an ask to government for additional mental health funding to go directly to the institutions, rather than to the SUs. While our SUs are often able to offer services to students more efficiently and at a cost far less than our institutions would be able to, we recognized that allocating any additional funding for student mental health supports directly to the institution would have the most impact, as our institutions were already delivering core mental health services. Our institutions were able to use this funding to bolster these existing services and hire additional counsellors, psychologists and/or psychiatrists, thus reducing wait times and increasing access for students. Additionally, the UASU, UCSU, and ULSU were already offering, and continue to offer, a wide variety of student programming, such as peer-to-peer counselling, stress less weeks, and stigma-reduction campaigns to address student mental health concerns.

At roughly the same time as these proposals were being developed internally between our SUs and their administrations, CAUS' sister organization, ASEC, was discussing with government what type of mental health supports the students they represent would be best served by. On November 12, 2012 *the Weal*, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's student newspaper, reported that "SAIT's own VP of External Affairs and ASEC chair Matthew Armstrong sat down with Alberta Health Minister Fred Horne earlier this semester to discuss exactly what could be done to ensure students have the proper resources available. Armstrong suggested a model similar to that of Ontario, where a recent mental health innovation fund has been created that sees \$15-million provided for the next three years. Armstrong said Horne was hesitant at first, but the SAIT VP is confident that something will eventually be drawn up by the provincial government based on the progression of the conversation."¹

ASEC primarily represents colleges and smaller institutions whose Students' Associations (SAs) are not always able to run mental health programming for students on their campuses due to lack of resources: staff, time, and/or funding. In order to address this need, ASEC asked the provincial government to provide them with a pool of funding that they would then distribute to their members based on an application system for various student-led initiatives to "combat stress and stigma, encourage mental,

¹ <http://theweal.com/2012/11/19/students-association-members-look-to-deal-with-mental-health/>

physical and financial well-being and act as a supplement to services already available on campuses.²"

On January 16, 2013 the Government of Alberta issued a press release stating that: "The University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge will each receive \$3 million in grant funding over three years to expand campus mental health services and develop models of care that can be used on campuses across Alberta. The Alberta Students Executive Council will receive \$1.5 million over three years to support all post-secondary students' associations in implementing mental health programs." Then ASEC Chair, Matt Armstrong, was quoted in the release as saying that the announced funding would "address gaps in service delivery, help students adopt healthy coping strategies, and create community- and student-led initiatives." Overall, students from both CAUS and ASEC were pleased to see the government taking this first step to directly address the mental wellbeing of students on campuses across Alberta.

At the time of the announcement, CAUS was a three-member organization uniting the University of Alberta Students' Union, the University of Calgary Students' Union, and the University of Lethbridge Students' Union. However, a year later in 2014 both the Students' Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU) and the Students' Association of MacEwan University (SAMU) joined with their undergraduate university colleagues and became members of CAUS. As both SAMRU and SAMU had previously been members of ASEC at that time they were eligible for mental health funding through what is now known as the Alberta Campus Mental Health (ACMHI) program. After joining CAUS, SAMRU and SAMU were no longer eligible for ACMHI funding and CAUS advocated for both Mount Royal University and MacEwan University to receive similar funding as the U of A, U of C, and U of L. An additional \$250,000 per year in mental health funding was provided to Mount Royal University and MacEwan University each year for three years for core mental wellness services.

In addition to the initial grant of \$1.5 million, ACMHI received an additional \$500,000 for their third year. This funding is being used to host a student wellness conference at the end of January 2016 and also provide grants to ASEC schools for student-led mental health initiatives.

The above-mentioned funding initiatives are set to run out on June 30, 2016. Students are anxiously awaiting the final report of the mental health review being led by Dr. David Swann and Minister Danielle Larivee which concluded in December 2015. CAUS also noted that \$10 million was set aside in budget 2015 to begin working on the recommendations put forward by the mental health review. Additionally, CAUS recognizes that the post-secondary mental health funding initiative alone has received \$12.5 million in funding over the last three years. While there is still much more work to be done when it comes to addressing mental wellbeing for students and our campus communities, our institutions are quickly approaching a point when they will have to decide whether they can afford to keep staff that have been hired with funding that is currently not guaranteed to continue.

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² <http://campuswellness.ca/about/>

Mental Health on Alberta Campuses

In Canada, it is believed that one in five people are affected by mental illness and one of the most vulnerable age ranges is 15-24.³ Many of these young adults are entering university within the age range of 18-24, placing them in a highly stressful environment. For many students this change includes living away from home and family support systems for the first time. To illustrate, on a campus of 40,000 students we can expect 8,000 students will suffer or will have suffered from mental health issues. In a classroom of 200 this would be close to 40 students. These numbers do not take into consideration how negative mental wellness affect students' peers and colleagues not suffering from mental illness, and what supports these other students need to ensure their mental health is maintained.

CAUS believes that post-secondary campuses across Alberta are one of the best places to target supports for this demographic of individuals most likely to experience the onset of mental health issues for the first time in their lives. Campuses are also excellent places to initiate broader cultural shifts such as reducing the stigma of seeking help for mental health issues and ultimately preventing these issues from becoming more costly to the individual and to our public health system. However, the ability to treat mental health issues on campus is limited due to fiscal restraints and the high ratio of students to counsellors. In order to provide a sustainable, meaningful system for students who need mental health support, CAUS proposes that the Government of Alberta renew mental health funding in 2016 and distribute funding to institutions on a per-student basis.

Examples of Improvements Made Using Mental Health Initiative Funding

Many important first steps to improve student mental health supports were made using funding from the Government of Alberta's 2013-2016 mental health funding initiative.

At the University of Calgary, for example, students saw a tangible increase in resources, information, and training due to the provincial investments made in 2013. Staff of the Wellness Centre, the health service provider at the University of Calgary, were given additional professional development opportunities for skill development to support students. The Wellness Centre was also able to expand their services to offer after-hours support. With the addition of two counsellors and two provisional psychologists, existing psychological services expanded by 50 percent. The counselling team was able to provide 44 additional direct client hours per week. Two staff members also completed the trainer certification for ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) and now offer two day training, three times a year, to the campus community.

In the Spring 2011, the University of Lethbridge had one full-time equivalent (FTE) counsellor for every 1,950 students while experiencing a 76% increase in booked counselling sessions between 2006 and 2011. After being given the mental health grant in 2013, U of L was able to hire professionals to help meet the high demand for mental health services on campus, including but not limited to: two additional counsellors, a physician specializing in mental health, two part-time administrative support staff, a mental health clinician, a dietitian, and a coordinator for student services on the

³ Statistics Canada (2013), Canadian Community Health Survey – Mental Health

University of Lethbridge Edmonton and Calgary campuses. Counselling services greatly benefited from two added staff members. Wait times were reduced from six weeks to three weeks and counsellors were able to offer evening hours. In addition, Edmonton and Calgary campus students were able to fully access counselling services. There were also 13 training programs brought to campus including a much needed peer support training program and bystander intervention. These programs were not limited to faculty and staff on campus, students were able to participate and benefit from their involvement as well. An example of these programs, the Mental Health First Aid training program, has been utilized by 271 people since 2013.

The Community Social Work Team created at the University of Alberta is another innovative and student-centred program developed using funding from the Government of Alberta. The first of its kind in North America, this innovative program is made up of a team of professional social workers that deliver essential training across campus for both students and staff. This includes educational workshops and presentations, facilitation of the QPR Suicide Prevention Training, and partnering with Alberta Health to deliver the Community Helpers training program to the campus community.

MacEwan University used the funding to hire two additional full-time registered psychologists, bringing the total compliment of professionals to 10. Altogether, MacEwan has six registered psychologists, three counsellors, and one social worker. However, the number of students accessing mental health resources has increased, so the impact on wait times has not changed significantly since before the initiative. Currently wait times are between three and four weeks for non-emergency cases, depending on the time of year.

CAUS' Vision for Post-Secondary Mental Health Funding

CAUS continues to be a strong advocate for mental health funding directed towards increasing and maintaining the existing services offered by our post-secondary institutions. In our opinion, service delivery is where our institutions are able to put government funding to excellent use. By increasing the funding available to student counselling centres we have increased students' access to mental health professionals.

As a general principle, CAUS believes that student associations have a role in stigma reduction and general outreach - to increase student awareness of mental health services and encourage students to seek that support - whereas institutions have a role in providing core services such as counsellors and psychologists. CAUS believes both aspects should be addressed in order to fully support the mental wellbeing of students on campus.

CAUS believes that all future campus mental health funding initiatives should be directed towards post-secondary institutions. While we recognize that the Alberta Campus Mental Health Initiative (ACMHI) has provided support for campaigns that have encouraged many students to seek the help they need, the success of any particular awareness campaign is limited when the core services are not available or accessible to the students who do decide to seek assistance. Thus, CAUS does not see great benefit in continuing programs such as ACMHI if the requisite supports are not available for students upon their decision to seek assistance. CAUS recommends that the

Government of Alberta recognize and prioritize the limited funding available for mental health on this basis.

However, should the government wish to continue the ACMHI program, CAUS believes it should be established as an independent, arms-length-from-government organization to which any SA or SU in Alberta would be able to submit an application for funding. While CAUS believes that there should most certainly be student representatives of the board of such an organization, we do not see a role for a single student advocacy organization to house a program that would be available to all SAs and SUs in Alberta.

Conclusion & Recommendations

While the Alberta Mental Health Review concluded in December 2015, CAUS has been informed that the process for government to review and approve the recommendations could take as little as a few weeks or as long as a few months. Unfortunately, our institutions are running out of time to decide whether or not they are able to renew the contracts for mental health professionals hired with funding that may not be continued. Taking immediate action to address this uncertainty would make a significant impact.

Looking at Alberta's brick and mortar universities, we know that the funding from the mental health initiative helped to increase the number of students willing and interested in seeking help for mental health issues, promoted the knowledge of available mental health resources on campuses, and decreased wait times by increasing the number of mental health professionals able to assist students. All of these have led to increased demand from students on our campus mental health resources. Due to this growth in demand the loss of the additional supports provided through government funding would actually leave post-secondary campuses in a worse situation than where they started.

CAUS remains optimistic that the government will continue to invest in Alberta's young people and will renew funding for the post-secondary mental health initiative. CAUS submits the following points as recommendations on the best way to continue funding mental health supports on Alberta campuses.

CAUS Recommends:

- Funding for student and campus mental health supports should be provided to post-secondary institutions directly and distributed based on an FLE weighted calculation.
- Funding allocated to institutions should be used to maintain and expand professional programming and hire mental health service delivery experts, such as counsellors and psychologists.
- Students' Associations and Students' Unions should play a central role in discussions with their respective institutional administrations on how student and campus mental health funding is used and should be included on the reporting of what impacts such funding has at the respective institution.

- Funding for mental health service delivery should be prioritized to ensure students across Alberta have adequate access to professional mental health service providers.
- Funding for provincially funded student-led mental health initiatives be discontinued and instead encourage the respective institutional administration to work with their Students' Association or Students' Union in addressing the need for student-led programming for mental health supports and anti-stigma campaigns.
- Should student-led programming initiatives like ACMHI be continued, ensure these programs are expanded to become independent, arms-length-from-government organizations open to all Students' Associations and Students' Unions in Alberta.