

*PRACTICE*

## Psychology and Mental Health Care Policy

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Canada remains the only G8 country that has not yet implemented a national mental health strategy. As described by the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care (2002), mental health services remain the “orphan child” of health care. Similarly, the Kirby Report, *Out of the Shadows at Last* (2006), has further described children’s mental health care as the, “orphan’s orphan” of health care services. To address these shortfalls, the National Mental Health Commission has been recently established to provide a federal strategy that may ultimately guide mental health care and programs. The Commission’s current draft framework *Toward Recovery & Well Being* ([www.mentalhealthcommission.ca](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca)) is an important step forward with respect to the mental health care of Canadians. This framework has important implications for the provision of psychological treatment and will be used to influence federal funding for programs as well as outlining priorities for mental health care treatment in Canada.

Psychology has much to offer public health policy due to psychologists’ unique scientist-practitioner skill-set and knowledge of best mental health care

practice. Although policy-related work may be difficult, the potential for meaningful impact on how mental health care will be delivered in the future is great. Through careful engagement and partnership with organizations, and familiarizing oneself with pertinent policy issues, psychologists can be well positioned to effect health and social change.

We now suggest some ideas of how psychologists can engage in policy-related work in order to effect real-world change through research and advocacy.

### *Conferences and Symposia*

Engaging those developing and implementing policy can be accomplished in a number of ways. One method is to present research findings at policy-related conferences or policy-specific symposia at professional meetings. The Canadian Association for Health Services and Policy Research (CAHSPR) ([www.cahspr.ca/](http://www.cahspr.ca/)) is the largest organization of its kind in Canada. Federal and provincial health bureaus also hold policy meetings and conferences but many of these are by invitation. If there is one that interests

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you, contact the agency to see if you can be invited (see for example, Health Canada at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)) Of course the Canadian Psychological Association convention is a prime place to present your research and policy ideas. It is important to tailor your submission and presentation to best suit your audience. By engaging policy decision makers through the presentation of research in audience-friendly format, you can enhance the likelihood that the message is received by all. Again, psychologists must use language that is easy to understand for all audiences.

### *Provincial Mental Health Policy*

Become familiar with your provincial mental health policies and their intersection with emerging federal policies. Does your province or your provincial psychology association have a policy document on health resources and psychology? You can encourage the associations that you participate in to examine policy or to take policy positions.

### *Stay Informed*

Learn about general public policies. The Clearinghouse for Canadian Public Policy Articles, Organizations and Authors ([www.policy.ca](http://www.policy.ca)) is a useful and broad introductory source. There are several Canadian independent policy organizations. Many are listed at [www.library.ualberta.ca/subject/business/thinktanks/](http://www.library.ualberta.ca/subject/business/thinktanks/) and these organizations will often have specific interests or orientations.

For example, the Fraser Institute ([www.fraserinstitute.org](http://www.fraserinstitute.org)) is usually viewed as representing a conservative perspective whereas the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives ([www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)) is seen as providing a more liberal view. As well, your provincial department or ministry of health website will also have policy documents that have been developed for your province.

### *Enlarge Your Perspective*

Develop a larger theoretical framework with attention to how your research and practice could potentially affect larger policy-related issues.

### *Program and Outcome Evaluation*

Participate in the development of outcome evaluation tools. Outcome evaluation is an area where psychologists can contribute to the advocacy of evidence-based treatment. By carefully assessing and measuring the effect of treatments or policies in your clinical or research setting, you can engage policy decision makers by demonstrating real-world consequences.

### *Demonstration Funding*

Apply for demonstration funding. One way to translate treatment or research to practice is through the development of smaller-scale projects that seek to demonstrate the efficacy of interventions that could potentially influence policy decision-makers. Many organizations (e.g. Canadian Cancer Society, Canadian Diabetes Association, Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre) have money available for research. By partnering with these groups and offering psychology's ability to conduct careful research, it may be possible to influence health policy in a greater way. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research has a specific program that is focused on research for policy. See the Partnerships for Health System Improvements website ([www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/34348.html](http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/34348.html)).

### *Relationships and Research*

Build long term relationships with key policy makers. Learn what they find important. Write policy oriented summaries for key research articles that you have produced or that you find particularly important. Share these summaries with the key decision makers you have met and offer further discussions of the implications of specific research. By helping policy makers become more familiar with research, they are placed in a better position to utilize this research.

### *Lobby*

Participate in lobby groups as part of psychology's role in social advocacy. Lobby groups such as the Canadian Mental Health Association can help engage key decision-makers in such a way that an individual cannot.

In conclusion, we have suggested a number of ways in which psychologists might engage in policy-related work, knowledge creation, and knowledge translation. Psychologists are uniquely positioned to effect social change by engaging decision-makers and stakeholders. Our training in research, clinical work, and the intersection of science and practice equip us with the necessary tools to be effective contributors to policy.

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