

A Systems Approach

to Substance Use Services in Canada



Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse
Centre canadien de lutte contre l'alcoolisme et les toxicomanies

Systems Approach Workbook

Background: **Developing A Systems Approach to Substance Use in Canada**

Healthcare costs in Canada are rising. The impact of alcohol and other drug use on the Canadian economy has been estimated at \$40 billion per year, with \$8.8 billion in direct healthcare costs alone. Against this backdrop, people within government, the healthcare system and community care services came to the conclusion that a full review of our approach to addressing the harms associated with substance use was needed.

In 2003, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Health Canada led a series of cross-Canada consultations to discuss the needs, priorities and changes required to reduce the health, social and economic impact of alcohol and other drugs on Canadians.

National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances

The result of the consultations was a national consensus-based roadmap for change and call to action that was summarized in the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada (2005). The Framework is founded on the notion of shared responsibility and accountability, where every stakeholder has a role and is committed to working on a collective response to one or more of 15 priority areas. Improving the accessibility and quality of treatment for those with substance use problems is one of these priorities.

National Treatment Strategy Working Group

Action on the treatment priority area was initiated and supported by British Columbia Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. The National Treatment Strategy (NTS) Working Group was formed in 2007; composed of representatives from across jurisdictions and sectors, it included people with clinical, policy, government, community, First Nations, Inuit, client and caregiver experience and expertise. The NTS Working Group members drew on background materials representing current knowledge and best practices, as well as their own areas of expertise to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based report.

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A Systems Approach to Substance Use in Canada: Recommendations for a National Treatment Strategy

The report produced by the NTS Working Group, *A Systems Approach to Substance Use in Canada: Recommendations for a National Treatment Strategy*, recognizes that treatment works—and more of it is needed. It outlines how Canada can strengthen its support for people with substance use problems through improved collaboration, communication and coordination between all sectors involved in addressing the harms associated with substance use.

The Challenge: A Lack of System-level Coordination

Substance use services and supports have developed in a context of complex jurisdictional boundaries, differing theoretical approaches and a lack of appreciation for individual diversity. The resulting fragmentation has produced a specialized system that is often difficult to access and navigate, and that does not always respond well to diverse needs. Services and supports are also historically located in the specialized system; however, only a small minority of those with substance use problems access this system. Canadians with substance use problems are more likely to access community-based or primary healthcare services.

The challenge is to improve the quality, accessibility and range of options to treat harmful substance use by improving system-level coordination, communication, and community-based and other non-specialized service capacity.

The Solution: Improving Treatment Systems in Canada

The Systems Approach report recommends action in six key areas:

1. Building Capacity across a Continuum of Services and Supports

This recommendation focuses on the use of a Tiered Model as a framework for developing a comprehensive continuum of services. The tiers represent varying levels of risks and harms associated with substance use, with an emphasis on building capacity in community-based and multisectoral services.

2. Knowledge Exchange

Enhanced knowledge exchange—in other words, closing the gap between what we know and what we do—is the key to implementing evidence-informed practice. Recommendations in this area focus on enhanced capacity and coordination for knowledge exchange activities across Canada.

3. Reducing Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma and discrimination are barriers faced both by people with substance use problems and by those working in the field. This area recommends linking partners and initiatives across Canada to develop comprehensive, integrated approaches to addressing stigma and discrimination.

4. Developing a Research Program

Recommendations in this area address the need for increased research capacity and coordination to identify and fill knowledge gaps. Capacity building should include community- and clinically-based partners outside traditional academic and scientific sources.

5. Measuring and Monitoring System Performance

Although all jurisdictions in Canada collect data in some form, the quality and consistency of that data varies considerably. This area recommends the development and collection of national treatment indicators to provide a national, system-level picture of substance use services and supports in Canada.

6. Moving the Strategy Forward

Leadership and coordination are needed to translate the recommendations in the Systems Approach report to concrete implementation. Evaluation is needed to ensure the actions being taken are, in fact, effective.