

COVID brings mental health into campaign forefront

The global pandemic has left many feeling isolated, disconnected and, in some cases, without the support networks they would normally have close at hand.

As the number of new cases of COVID-19 continues to rise, keeping that 'light at the end of the tunnel' just out of reach, residents following the 2021 Federal Election are looking to political leaders for answers on how a vote for them and their party will be a vote in favour of mental health supports.

In an election with very different visions for this country's future, one thing that has united leaders from major political parties is that addressing mental health is more important now than ever before.

But, while the theme has united leaders, their respective paths towards solutions diverge.

This week, The Auroran reached out to confirmed candidates in both Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill and Newmarket-Aurora on what they are hearing on the mental health front as they go door-to-door and how they plan to address the issues they are hearing from voters.

AURORA-OAK RIDGES-RICHMOND HILL

Incumbent Conservative nominee Leona Alleslev says residents have shared with her 'heartbreaking stories of the mental health and addiction challenges' they and their families have been facing.

'They have told me that the pandemic has made things worse and that the critical support they need to help them has been even more difficult to find,' says Ms. Alleslev. 'Conservatives know that more needs to be done. We will address this crisis head-on through our Canadian Mental Health Action Plan by immediately restoring health funding to the provinces, and increasing it by at least \$60B over the next 10 years, including dedicated funding for mental health treatment, to treat over 1,000,000 additional Canadians annually.'

'A Conservative government will provide tax incentives for employers to expand their extended health care insurance programs to increase mental health service coverage. Our plan will also create a national suicide prevention hotline and invest at least \$150M over the first three years to charities developing mental health programming. Additionally, a Conservative government will revise the federal substance abuse policy framework and invest \$325M over three years to create 1,000 residential treatment beds and 50 recovery community centres. With the Conservative Canada's Recovery Plan, together we will secure mental health for all Canadians.'

Residents have been 'very open' about their mental health struggles, says Liberal candidate Leah Taylor Roy, with one resident saying, 'I've lost two years of my life.'

'This is heartbreaking to hear, and it sums up what many of us, especially youth, are feeling,' she says. 'Our youth have been intensely affected by the impacts of this pandemic - they've lost time in school, time with their friends, and just time to enjoy being young. In a different way, many seniors have been suffering as well from the isolation of this pandemic.'

As such, Ms. Taylor Roy says a re-elected Liberal government will support 'better, more accessible mental health care for all Canadians' as mental health 'needs to be treated with the same urgency as any other illness.'

'We will deliver high-quality, free mental health services across Canada by providing funding through the Canada Mental Health Transfer. We will support students on campus by hiring 1,200 new counsellors and ensure all Canadians have access to mental health crisis and suicide prevention services through a national hotline. As many Canadians continue to work from home, with more

and more workplaces going permanently remote, the right to disconnect is urgent and can be implemented easily. The line between work and home has become increasingly blurred throughout the pandemic, and we will work with labour groups to ensure that line is very clear.?

NDP candidate Janice Hagan describes mental illness as "the biggest cause of personal disability" in the country, one which is hitting young people between the ages of 35 and 45 very hard.

"Yet, this disability often goes untreated and even undiagnosed as mental health is not covered by OHIP until it is far too serious," she says. "The NDP will build a more comprehensive public health care system that includes mental health specialists and prescription drugs. We will also bring in a guaranteed liveable income and expand employment programs for people with disabilities. We will end for-profit home care and long-term care so that the most vulnerable in our communities will have quality care based on standards not profit margins."

"Aurora, Oak Ridges and Richmond Hill are wealthy communities, but they also illustrate the growing gap between the very rich and the very poor in Canada. We may not have a lot of obvious homelessness and poverty, but couch surfing, a growing opioid crisis and chronic isolation are obvious problems that are threatening community health. I have heard of long waiting lines for addiction problems and little help for families dealing with sometimes violent or inconsolable family members who need more than a short visit to a care centre. Everyone should have access to mental health and crisis care they need."

NEWMARKET-AURORA

The past 18 months have been "obviously incredibly challenging," says incumbent Liberal candidate Tony Van Bynen and has only highlighted "just how important it is to take care of our own mental health."

"I've personally been advocating for better mental health care as a member of the Health Committee in Ottawa, so I am very proud that we're committing to billions of dollars in new funding for mental health," he says. "We'll also bring in a three-digit mental health line, similar to 911, to make sure that people who are in crisis are able to get the support they need immediate."

"I haven't necessarily had people sharing their own struggles [as I have gone door-to-door] but lots of folks have mentioned friends and family who have gone through difficult times with their mental health. This is something that everyone in our community is going to be touched with in one way or another, so it is important that we have supports in place for people to get the help they need and deserve."

From the perspective of NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly, mental health "just like dental care and prescription drug care" all fall under the banner of "health care."

"COVID took a tremendous toll on the mental health of Canadians, in particular our young people, and we believe mental health care should be provided at no cost for those who need it," she says. "An NDP government will bring in mental health care for uninsured Canadians and our pharmacare plan will mean free and accessible prescription medications for mental health. We will work with provinces and territories to create comprehensive access to mental health services across Canada. Our action and advocacy on the health portfolio demonstrates that we are the party that will deliver on these promises!"

"People are struggling with so many pressures and external factors that are seemingly outside of their control, which is exacerbating mental health challenges. Not knowing where they are going to move to or what they can afford, when they learn their landlord is selling the house is one [concern from residents] that I've heard many times over. Continual worry about the pandemic, particularly for those who are frontline workers either in health care or the service industry who don't have the luxury of working from home, presents ongoing stress, increased anxiety and, in many cases, depression. I spoke to a young woman just today who is consumed with worry that if we do go into a fourth wave and lockdown due to COVID she will not have earned enough in the last few months to qualify for benefits and she won't be able to maintain her housing. She said she wasn't sure that her mental health could handle another lockdown particularly with the worry of how this will impact her financially."

Conservative candidate Harold Kim meanwhile says mental health issues have been 'brewing for many years' and the virus has prompted 'a significant spike' in mental health cases that make it 'impossible for the Liberals to ignore.'

'The chronic erosion of federal transfers to the provinces for healthcare has also made this worse, putting mounting pressure on the provinces to cover the shortfalls,' he says, adding a Conservative government has made mental health one of the five pillars of its platform. 'We will be investing nearly \$60 billion over the next 10 years to health care, marking a 6 per cent increase in funding transfers. Our first priority on this front will be to work with the provinces who deliver health care programs to invest in mental health, with the goal of providing enough funding for an additional million Canadians to receive mental health treatments every year. We will be looking at every opportunity to provide desperate support for these individuals who are often faced with year-long wait times for help. We will be encouraging employers to add mental health coverage to employee benefit plans, providing \$150 million over three years for grants and non-profits delivering mental health programs and create a three-digit suicide prevention hotline.

'While Tony Van Bynen is Chair of the Standing Committee on Health and has raised concerns about the impact that COVID has had on mental health, after six years, the funding issue for individuals hasn't been touched. Canadians don't have the time to wait while the Liberals claim to care, wring their hands and do nothing.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter