



## Tabling of Documents

**Tony Akoak, MLA  
Gjoa Haven  
May 2019**

### *Letter from Noah Irvine on mental health and addictions*

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, In my member's statement I mentioned a letter that I received from Noah Irvine, a High School student from Guelph, Ontario, who wrote very powerfully and eloquently on the need to work together to address the growing mental health and addictions crisis across Canada.

I encourage my colleagues, if they have not already done so, to read this letter and to consider how we can work together to improve mental health and addictions services across our territory and, ultimately, across the country.

Thank you.



**Step up and do better!**  
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Tabled Document

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May 28/19

Mr Tony Akoak  
MLA for Gjoa Haven  
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Dear Mr Akoak,

My name is Noah Irvine, a high school student in Guelph, Ontario. I am writing to all Nunavut MLAs to raise an important issue that has personally affected myself and my family. Thirteen years ago, I lost my mother to suicide. I was five years old. She was just 24. Then in 2015, my father lost his battle with mental illness and addictions. He was 40.

These two losses, as tragic as they may be, inspired me to call upon politicians across Canada to do more for individuals like my mom and dad. They are not the only individuals to die in our mental health and addictions system. They are examples of those lost and suffering from our ineffective and dysfunctional system.

I write to you not because you are a member of a political party or hold a position in government. I write to you as an MLA who, like every other politician, represents constituents who suffer in Canada's mental health and addictions crisis. To find the answer to the crisis, party politics must be set aside.

I began to write letters to our elected representatives in February 2017, with a letter to all Members of Parliament. It was a call for the federal government to step up and start the desperately needed transformation of our mental health care system. Out of 338 MPs, only 40 responded. Many were form letters. Many did not attempt to address the crisis or engage in new, bold ideas which are necessary to combat this national public health emergency.

After six months, I went public with my story. Media across Ontario and Canada, along with international media, told my story and the troubling reality — our elected representatives are ignoring a national public health crisis. After my public outcry, I was welcomed to the Ontario Legislative Assembly where I advocated for the creation of a Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions. This proposed ministry would centralize mental health and addictions services in the province as it is desperately needed.

Between August and early October, I met with the Prime Minister's Office and the federal Minister of Health and spoke with the Prime Minister about the creation of a federal Mental Health and Addictions Secretariat. When speaking with politicians or reading provincial reports on the subject of mental health, there are two recurring themes. First, there's a lack of centralized and well-coordinated services at the



My campaign has two goals: first, creation of ministries of mental health and addictions at the federal, provincial and territorial levels; second, creation of a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addiction within the Prime Minister's Office to provide national leadership for a national crisis. I have written to all provinces from British Columbia to Newfoundland & Labrador and most of them show little interest in a ministry. (The exception is BC which has a ministry.) Many, however, show support for or interest in a secretariat. Some of their responses are shown later in this letter.

Many provinces have reports with recommendations for improving mental health and addictions (MH&A) care. They list common themes and concerns including: siloed services, difficulties navigating the system, issues with remote areas, the need to address the situation of indigenous groups, people falling through the gaps, children and young people need to be treated sooner, lack of services, uncoordinated services, and the list goes on. The reports are so similar, I have the impression that one report could be written and tailored to a specific province by simply inserting that province's name. It's clear provinces have more similarities than differences when it comes to mental health and addictions. Nunavut shares many of these concerns.

However, Nunavut concerns are magnified by a small population spread over 1.9 million square kilometres. It covers 20 per cent of Canada's total area but has only 0.10 per cent of the country's population. This places a tremendous burden on the availability and delivery of all services, including mental health and addictions care. The impacts on your government and Nunavummiut are great including: \$90 million for medical travel, people moving south permanently to get the care they need, a suicide rate that's 10 times the Canadian average, rapidly changing cultural and social situations; and chronic housing problems.

To deal with these and other challenges Nunavut and agencies have undertaken significant and creative including: the therapeutic justice pilot program; developing land camps for mental health treatment; a \$35-million community-based suicide prevention plan; distributing "After a Suicide" toolkit to families, high school students, and grieving relatives; and working with FaceBook to reach out people, especially youth.

To deal with the MH&A crisis, Nunavut is developing cultural and community-based approaches where history, culture, and the environment are viewed as essential to mental wellness. These elements are outside the mainstream medical model with which I'm familiar. An APTN video and article has given me some understanding, but I have much more to learn. (Here's a link to the APTN video:

<https://aptnnews.ca/2019/04/02/how-to-tackle-nunavut-suicide-respect-the-input-from-youth-say-advocates/>  
<https://aptnnews.ca/2019/04/02/how-to-tackle-nunavut-suicide-respect-the-input-from-youth-say-advocates/>

I'm advocating that we can no longer walk alone within our own jurisdictions to deal with this national crisis. We as a nation must work together. Every major city, province, territory, First Nations, Metis and Inuit groups — and the federal government — have a responsibility to work together to prevent the crisis of mental health and addictions from spiralling out of control. That's why I advocate for a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions in the Prime Minister's office to provide national leadership in a national crisis.

Everyone I've written to or spoken with has said all levels of government need to work together. Support for the creation of a Secretariat for Mental Health and Addictions is growing.

*Our government is interested in the concept of a federal Addiction and Mental Health Secretariat. Raising the profile of substance use and mental health issues and better coordinating the federal government response would benefit both Canadians managing substance use and mental health issues, as well as provincial and local governments. I encourage you to continue bringing attention to these issues and advocating for change across Canada, at all levels of government.*

Yukon Premier Sandy Silver wrote:

*We also support further federal work on mental health and addictions, which could potentially include a Secretariat of Mental Health and Addictions as you propose. HSS (Yukon Department of Health and Social Services) and the Government of Yukon are open to discussing such a Secretariat if it is identified as a key initiative by the Prime Minister's Office.*

Yukon Minister of Health Pauline Frost wrote:

*You rightly point out that mental health and addictions are among the most pressing health challenges facing Canadians today.*

Health Minister Glen Abernathy of the Northwest Territories wrote:

*Your call for us to do better is exactly on point. We can do better, and we must work to do better... As stated in your letter, this responsibility belongs to all of us. We all have a role to play in the health and wellness of our communities, territories, Provinces, and pursue better health and wellness as a whole.*

Former Federal Minister of Justice Jody Wilson-Raybould wrote:

*The issue of mental health and suicide is incredibly complex, and it is imperative for us to work together to tackle it: as a country and across all levels of government. As an Indigenous person, this rings especially true.*

Federal Minister of Defence Harjit Sajjan wrote:

*Mental health is a serious issue, and it must be addressed collaboratively by all levels of government.*

Saskatoon Mayor Chris Clark wrote:

*The reality in which we currently find ourselves, however, is that the problems of the modern world will not be solved by one government or one group acting in isolation. Rather, what we need are partnerships and collaborative efforts among levels of government to address these complex, thorny, yet important issues.*

As can be seen, in the statements above, everyone acknowledges that we must do better. From federal cabinet ministers to premiers, health ministers and mayors, we all understand that we must do better for this nation.



My mom and dad should not have died because our country has an ineffective mental health and addictions system. It is up to you and every MLA, MPP, MNA and MP to work together. Put aside partisan politics which will only divide us on an issue which needs and deserves unity. Only then can we finally create the medicare system which meets the physical and mental needs Canadians.

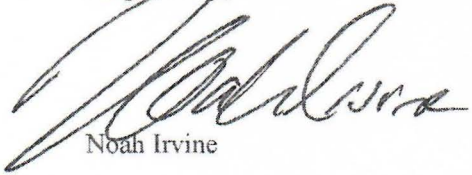
It is up to you to finally lay the groundwork for national unity, for my mom and dad and the thousands of other Canadians and Nunavummiut who need and deserve a functioning mental health and addictions system.

I thank you for your commitment to our nation's health care system.

It is time to step up and do better as a nation,

I look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Noah Irvine', written in a cursive style.

Noah Irvine