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THE  
URBAN  
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LE  
PROJET  
URBAIN

# COVID-19, MENTAL HEALTH AND THE ROLE OF CITIES

## URBAN PROJECT ROUNDTABLES SUMMARY AND ROADMAP

Presented by FCM

## About the Urban Project

The Urban Project is a national platform convened by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) for city leadership to meet and strengthen relationships with government, civil society, and the private sector to address pressing urban challenges and identify common solutions.

Launched in 2018, the Urban Project examines urban issues through the lens of cross-cutting themes of city finance, governance, intergovernmental relations, and municipal autonomy. The events bring decision makers together to actively co-create solutions to urgent urban problems at a pan-Canadian level.

## Methodology

This summary details discussions and findings from a half-day roundtable on COVID-19, mental health and the role of cities, priorities shared by cities in advance of the roundtable, and a curated guide of resources that were shared by participants or researched following the roundtable that align with the objectives shared by participants.

## Acknowledgments

FCM is grateful for the support and contributions of its partners and the many sector experts who contributed directly to the research and helped facilitate the roundtable discussions, particularly former Mayor of the City of Calgary Naheed Nenshi, Dr. Kwame McKenzie, Karen Gosbee, Karen Young, Jerilyn Dressler, Joy Bowen-Eyre and the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance at the University of Toronto.

## Partners

This event was made possible by our generous partners:

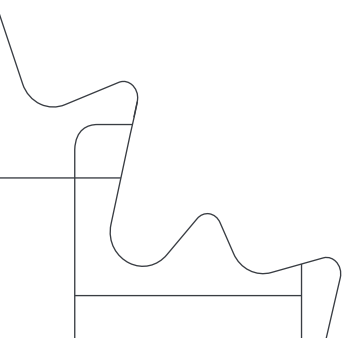


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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2018, former Mayor Nenshi and the City of Calgary have worked closely with a wide range of community partners on a strategy to address long-standing mental health and addictions challenges, collaboratively developing a sustainable, community-led approach: [Calgary's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy](#). These efforts and the recently released strategy reflect the incredible challenges and opportunities facing many other cities across Canada.

In April 2021, the Urban Project, a national platform convened by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, held a half-day roundtable on the theme “COVID-19, Mental Health and the Role of Cities,” bringing mayors and senior city staff together with key government, stakeholder, and academic leaders to explore the challenges and opportunities facing cities. The roundtable drew on the City of Calgary’s strategy as a case study to spur discussion, explore critical tactical questions for all cities in breakout sessions, and conclude with concrete actions required for cities to work more effectively with other orders of government.

This report contains an overview of the roundtable discussions and mental health and community well-being roadmap for municipalities.

## 2. ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

The Urban Project, a national platform convened by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, held a half-day roundtable in April 2021 on the theme “COVID-19, Mental Health and the Role of Cities”, bringing mayors and senior city staff together with key government, stakeholder and academic leaders to explore the challenges and opportunities facing cities.

Former Mayor Naheed Nenshi and the City of Calgary hosted the discussions, using the city’s recently-approved [Mental Health and Addictions Strategy](#) as a foundation for sharing learnings and discussing new and emerging opportunities.

[Dr. Kwame McKenzie](#), CEO of the Wellesley Institute and a leading voice on the social causes of mental illness and the development of effective, equitable social policy and health systems, moderated plenary discussions before and after breakout sessions focused on key tactical and strategic questions, including a focus on policy solutions and working with other orders of government.

Community leaders intimately involved in the design and execution of Calgary’s strategy facilitated break-out sessions on strategies and tactics associated with their respective areas of expertise and the strategy’s three pillars: Being Well; Getting Help; and Staying Safe.

Policy solutions and the need for a coordinated, national approach were at the heart of discussions, accompanied by innovative and inspiring local solutions shared between cities to consider in their own region, including tangible opportunities to work with community partners and other orders of government to resolve long-standing gaps.

### THEMES

A number of key themes emerged across the breakout and plenary discussions, highlighting ways in which cities have played a central role supporting positive mental health outcomes across Canada. These discussions also identified opportunities for all orders of government to work together alongside community leaders and mental health organizations to improve the ultimate provision of mental health services, targeting Canadians most in need.

1. Many municipal programs and services support improved mental health outcomes—directly and indirectly
2. Person-centered solutions are critical, including 24/7 support
3. Communications and awareness building are important aspects of city-led efforts
4. Intergovernmental roles and partnerships need to be re-visited and funded accordingly

#### Many municipal programs and services support improved mental health outcomes

While many cities do not have jurisdiction for mental health itself, they do play a key role in programs and amenities that can promote better outcomes. Investments in green spaces and the public realm provide safe space for people to gather, supporting their well-being and the environment, and cities can also bring amenities to neighbourhoods that have been overlooked, including mobile food markets, libraries and other events.

More and better access to green space, libraries and affordable recreation options play a significant role to improve social inclusion and mental health, and to promote less sedentary lifestyles (e.g., Calgary’s Vivo). Connecting mental health with tangible outlets make a big difference.

## Communications and awareness building

While governments, civil society organizations and businesses have moved the needle considerably on building awareness about the reality of mental health and supports available, challenges remain.

Reducing stigma, providing information about supports, and continuing to highlight opportunities for orders of government to work together were all mentioned as critical messages and information to share, using every tool available.

Mayors have a unique platform to convene, raise awareness and share resources, and to bring empathy to discussions. Speaking about mental health with diverse communities helps emphasize that mental health does not discriminate, and cities need to partner more with community-led organizations to share culturally-relevant information, as well as through radio and TV stations that engage local residents in more languages.

## Person-centered solutions are critical, including 24/7 support

Calgary's strategy to meet residents where they live and work, and the "one front door" approach undertaken by many cities and organizations, focus resources in a way that puts people at the centre of planning decisions.

Cities across Canada have re-evaluated and restructured crisis response to better serve the individual, and re-organized entire 911 centres to blend into a single centre with AI to help organize and allocate resources, deploying mental health workers in integrated teams ([Edmonton's Community Safety and Well-being Taskforce](#)).

Central to a successful mental health strategy is its availability at all times, particularly through targeted supportive housing policies that make a critical difference between someone maintaining a space in a home or not. As a fundamental requirement for positive mental health outcomes, housing programs play a central role in addressing this interconnected challenge in communities across Canada. Federal programs like Reaching Home and the Rapid Housing Initiative were highlighted as an appropriate delivery model, and an opportunity to expand supportive housing that supports populations with complex care needs.

## Intergovernmental roles and partnerships need to be re-visited and funded accordingly

Participants during the roundtable discussions repeatedly returned to the importance of intergovernmental collaboration, and the need to revisit existing roles to enable cities to help improve outcomes for all Canadians.

These discussions included policy solutions that modified, expanded or accelerated existing delivery models, while also exploring new approaches beyond existing mandates:

- **Invest in learnings from pandemic and successful work in mental health:** Now is a critical time for cities, mental health organizations and other orders of government to focus resources on scaling up successful community-led pilots, and work to address critical interconnected challenges. Commit to investing in research to leverage clear evidence and data to demonstrate efficacy that can be scaled for other communities.

- **Conditional spending for provinces:** Advocate for provincial health transfer dollars to come with conditional spending on mental health through community organizations and municipalities (“With receipts”, as some mayors put it). Provinces need to provide the appropriate funding and support, demonstrated through transparent reporting. Proposed approaches could include working closely with community organizations (e.g., United Way, CMHA, etc.), academics, researchers, clinicians, etc. to monitor efficacy and remove concerns about political decisions during implementation.
- **Establish an intergovernmental forum for mental health:** Commit to tri-level policy discussions to ensure mental health care is a core component of Canada’s universal health care system, with a particular focus on the gaps and needs coming out of the pandemic (but ideally transition into a longer-term forum).
- **Develop and implement a national strategy on mental health:** A commitment from the federal government (with resources) to develop a clear, integrated strategy that addresses interconnected issues like housing, homelessness and substance use, and increases the transparency of investments in mental health and related services so that all involved are resourced and organized appropriately (especially municipalities, community groups and other local organizations).

### 3. ROADMAP

Building on discussions at the roundtable, FCM has developed a Roadmap of mental health and community well-being resources to support municipalities in developing their own mental health strategies and initiatives.

The Roadmap can be found here: <https://fcm.ca/mental-health>