

Under this general order of reference, the committee held a meeting on April 21, 2021 to receive an update from the Minister of Health, the Honourable Patty Hajdu (the Minister), on the implementation of the Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (the Framework). During this meeting, the Minister of Health and officials from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) discussed the Framework and answered questions on:

- research and data collection efforts at the federal level;
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the Framework;
- the recently proposed budget allocations to address posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and
- the scope and breadth of the Framework.

The committee appreciates and would like to acknowledge the continued interest of Senator Housakos. On 5 November 2020, Senator Housakos moved the following motion, which ultimately inspired the committee in this study:

That the Senate call upon the Government of Canada, in accordance with the *Federal Framework on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Act*, which requires that a federal framework on post-traumatic stress disorder be laid before Parliament by December 21, 2019, to provide to the Senate a report on the implementation of such a framework.

## **Overview**

PHAC released the *Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support*<sup>1</sup> in February 2020. The requirement to establish a framework on PTSD was legislated by the *Federal Framework on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Act* (the Act), which received Royal Assent in June 2018.<sup>2</sup> The Act required that the federal framework be informed by a national conference, which was convened by the Minister of Health in April 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, [Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support](#), January 2020. Please note: While the spelling in the *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Act* has a hyphen (i.e., post-traumatic), the spelling in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) does not. The Framework uses the DSM spelling (i.e., posttraumatic), except when referencing the Act specifically.

<sup>2</sup> Parliament of Canada, LEGISInfo, [Bill C-211: An Act respecting a federal framework on post-traumatic stress disorder](#), 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, (S.C. 2018, c. 13); and [Federal Framework on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Act](#), (S.C. 2018, c. 13).

The Framework, published following these consultations, states that “PTSD is a mental disorder that may occur after a traumatic event where there is exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” and notes that it can affect “any person regardless of age, culture, occupation, sex, or gender.”<sup>3</sup>

The Framework “establishes the Government of Canada’s vision, guiding principles, and actions to address occupation-related PTSD.”<sup>4</sup> It outlines three priority areas to be addressed (as outlined in the Act), in addition to a fourth priority area identified during consultations:

- improved tracking of the rate of PTSD and its associated economic and social costs;
- the promotion of guidelines and sharing of best practices related to the diagnosis, treatment and management of PTSD;
- the creation and distribution of educational materials related to PTSD to increase national awareness and enhance diagnosis, treatment and management; and
- strengthened collaboration and linkages among partners and stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

Following the passage of the Act, the PTSD Secretariat was established at PHAC. It was responsible for leading consultations and developing the Framework, and is now responsible for the implementation of the Framework.<sup>6</sup>

### **Summary of Evidence**

The Framework was released just before the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. The pandemic has had an impact on the prevalence and understanding of PTSD in Canada, and on the implementation of the Framework. The Minister stated that it remains critical that the federal government continue to examine and address PTSD, as it deeply affects the individual in question, their families, their colleagues and their communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, [Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support](#), January 2020, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, [Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support](#), January 2020, pp. 1 and 17.

<sup>5</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, [Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support](#), January 2020, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, [Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support](#), January 2020, p. 25.

## A. Research and Data

Witnesses noted that disaggregated data is necessary to understand the different impacts of trauma on different groups of people, which in turn improves the design and effectiveness of PTSD interventions and supports.<sup>7</sup> The committee learned about a number of federal initiatives designed to collect data on PTSD, for instance:

- The [Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health](#), developed by PHAC and Statistics Canada, collects data to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of Canadians, including with respect to behaviours and symptoms associated with PTSD.<sup>8</sup>
- The [Survey on Mental Health and Stressful Events](#), developed by PHAC and Statistics Canada, collects data from Canadians to understand how stressful events can impact mental health.<sup>9</sup>

The Minister noted that a challenge in collecting PTSD-related data for the federal government is that it relies on provincial and territorial partners for the collection of timely and disaggregated data.<sup>10</sup>

The committee was informed that while there have been recent investments in PTSD research, there remain gaps in the understanding of this condition.<sup>11</sup> The committee heard that the research currently being done will help advise health policy development, support interventions and develop community-based best practices.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, health research points to the importance of prevention and early intervention to address PTSD. The Minister and officials from the PHAC and CIHR described some ongoing federal research initiatives:

- The [COVID-19 and Mental Health Initiative](#), led by CIHR, provides funding to support research on mental health and substance use during COVID-19, and focuses on the rapid mobilization of this new knowledge during the pandemic.
- The [National Research Consortium for Post-Traumatic Stress Injuries among Public Safety Personnel](#), managed by CIHR and the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT), is a national research consortium focused on

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<sup>7</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>8</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>9</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>10</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>11</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Iain Stewart, President, Public Health Agency of Canada).

<sup>12</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Dr. Michael Strong, President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research).

PTSD and other mental health related concerns<sup>13</sup> for public safety personnel.<sup>14</sup> The CIPSRT also provides an online screening tool to help identify symptoms of mood disorders, anxiety disorders, or PTSD. CIPRST is additionally responsible for offering an Internet-based cognitive behaviour therapy course, known as the [Public Safety Personnel Wellbeing Course](#).

## **B. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The committee heard that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on PTSD in the Canadian population that has yet to be fully researched and understood.<sup>15</sup> An initial survey conducted from September to December 2020, led by PHAC and Statistics Canada, indicated that:

- 6% of Canadians screened positive for probable PTSD, although the event(s) that triggered the current symptoms may not be related to the pandemic;
- the prevalence of PTSD was twice as high among women than among men (8% vs 4%); and
- the prevalence of PTSD was particularly high among women aged 18 to 34 years, at 12%, and front-line workers (such as first responders, nurses and doctors) at 10%.

Witnesses noted that the pandemic has had a direct impact on the implementation of the Framework, as federal, provincial and territorial health organizations were busy responding to the crisis.<sup>16</sup> The Minister highlighted the importance of continuing to address PTSD during the pandemic, stating: “if PTSD was a challenge before, we have a new wave of people who might potentially be impacted by PTSD.”<sup>17</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has also provided the impetus to explore the delivery of PTSD services using new technology. The [Wellness Together Canada](#) portal, created by the Government of Canada in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, provides online support for those seeking information and resources for mental health and substance use to any Canadian.<sup>18</sup> The Minister acknowledged that although not all Canadians are able to easily

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<sup>13</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Iain Stewart, President, Public Health Agency of Canada).

<sup>14</sup> According to Public Safety Canada, “public safety personnel” includes “tri-services (police – including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, firefighters and paramedics), correctional employees, border services personnel, operational and intelligence personnel, search and rescue personnel, Indigenous emergency managers, and dispatch personnel.” See: Public Safety Canada, [Supporting Canada’s Public Safety Personnel: An Action Plan on Post-Traumatic Stress Injuries](#), 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Dr. Michael Strong, President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research).

<sup>16</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>17</sup> Senate, [Debates](#), 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>18</sup> Wellness Together Canada, [About](#).

access the portal, it provides an opportunity for people with PTSD and other mental health challenges to seek private and cost-free support. She observed that digital counselling can offer a degree of freedom “to ask for help in a way that’s non-threatening and where no one has to know that [one] reached out.”<sup>19</sup>

### **C. Investments Proposed in Budget 2021:**

Along with the Wellness Together Canada portal, the Minister of Health discussed other mental health investments proposed in Budget 2021, *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth and Resilience*. These investments include:<sup>20</sup>

- \$45 million over two years, starting in 2021-2022, to Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for the purpose of developing national mental health service standards;<sup>21</sup>
- \$50 million over two years, starting in 2021-2022, to Health Canada to support a specific PTSD stream of mental health programming, targeted towards populations at a higher risk of experiencing COVID-19 trauma;<sup>22</sup>
- \$62 million in 2021-2022 to Health Canada in order to continue to support the Wellness Together Canada portal; and
- \$100 million over three years, starting in 2021-2022, to the Public Health Agency of Canada to support “innovative” mental health interventions for populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19.<sup>23</sup>

These measures are focused on the mental health and wellbeing of all Canadians, not just the occupation-related PTSD addressed by the Framework. This support reflects the Framework’s acknowledgement that “people affected by non-occupation-related PTSD ... will be considered in the implementation of federal actions.”<sup>24</sup>

### **D. The Scope and Breadth of the Framework:**

The Framework addresses specific occupations at risk of acquiring PTSD, those being: Canadian Armed Forces serving members and veterans; public safety personnel, including

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<sup>19</sup> Senate, *Debates*, 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).

<sup>20</sup> Department of Finance Canada, *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, Budget 2021, chapter 1.4, “Supporting Mental Health.”

<sup>21</sup> Department of Finance Canada, *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, Budget 2021, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Finance Canada, *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, Budget 2021, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Department of Finance Canada, *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience*, Budget 2021, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, *Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support*, January 2020, p. 15.

first responders; health care providers; jurors; journalists; Indigenous people who work in high-stress occupations; and non-Indigenous frontline workers serving Indigenous communities. The Framework acknowledges that “research and evidence about PTSD continues to evolve and it is possible that there are additional groups or occupations at higher risk.”<sup>25</sup>

The committee was informed that “while the Framework is focused on occupation-related trauma, application to other populations is also going to be considered in the implementation of the federal actions.”<sup>26</sup> The Minister agreed that the current applicability of the Framework to specific occupations is not rigid and could be modified, as necessary, stating that she was, “open to including any occupational groups that are experiencing trauma.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The committee acknowledges that there has been progress made in the development of the Framework, that this work is in its early days and, as such, it is too soon to conduct an evaluation of the Framework.

### **Observation**

Your committee is aware that the development of the Framework is in its early stages and suggests that a further update be provided to the committee at a later date.

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<sup>25</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, *Federal Framework on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Recognition, Collaboration and Support*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Senate, *Debates*, 21 April 2021 (Iain Stewart, President, Public Health Agency of Canada).

<sup>27</sup> Senate, *Debates*, 21 April 2021 (Hon. Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health, Health Canada).