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## COMMUNIQUÉ

# Psychiatrists urge government to address worsening mental health problems among inmates

*Crime agenda must include better access to vital services: Association*

**Attention: News, Health, Medical and Lifestyle Editors**

**Ottawa, ON, December 7, 2011**—The Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA) released a position statement today that calls on the federal government to address a growing crisis in Canada's correctional facilities: the lack of access to mental health services for the thousands of Canadians with mental illness who languish in our country's jails. Individuals with mental illness are over-represented in our prisons and the government's approach to criminal justice policy means the problem will only get worse unless urgent action is taken now.

"The number of people with mental illness in our correctional facilities makes for a crisis that needs urgent attention," said Dr. Gary Chaimowitz, CPA Board member and a forensic psychiatrist. "The burden of stigma and discrimination faced by people with serious mental illness is accentuated in the criminal justice system. Inmates must have access to mental health services if they are to successfully reintegrate into society upon their release."

People with mental illness are not well-equipped to function within correctional settings. Untreated, they are often placed in segregation cells for extended periods of time. Even when psychiatric treatment is provided, fear of being seen as coercive can limit staff from encouraging the taking of medication. Suicide and homicide rates are significantly elevated in correctional populations and schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and depression are substantially more prevalent among offenders.

The current situation is the result of poorly planned deinstitutionalization. Hospital bed closures have been too rapid and too extensive. Community resources have been underfunded and limited. The result has been a fragmented healthcare system where no one has taken responsibility for the care of one of the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Many people suffering from serious mental illnesses end up incarcerated in part due to the lack of resources to treat them in the community, with the result that correctional facilities have become de facto psychiatric institutions. Access to care for many only occurs after they have been criminalized.

"By the end of this year, the federal government will pass legislation that will dramatically increase the number of incarcerated individuals in Canada. Just like current prison populations, these people will experience mental illnesses at disproportionately high rates," continued Dr. Chaimowitz. "If the government does not include a robust mental health strategy with its aggressive stance on justice policy, the mental health crisis in our prisons will worsen. It's time to stop using prisons as a parallel healthcare system for people with mental illness."

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Link to position statement, *The Treatment of Mental Illness in Correctional Settings*:  
<http://publications.cpa-apc.org/media.php?mid=1249>

*The Canadian Psychiatric Association is the national voice for Canada's 4,100 psychiatrists and more than 600 psychiatric residents. Founded in 1951, the CPA is dedicated to promoting an environment that fosters excellence in the provision of clinical care, education and research.*

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