***STATEMENT***

**Canadian Mental Health Association on Reconciliation and mental health**

**Toronto, ON June 21, 2021**: The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is deeply troubled by the findings of the remains of 215 children in unmarked and undocumented graves at a residential school in Kamloops, BC. We extend our deepest condolences to those who are grieving and for whom this news reawakens or compounds pain and trauma.

We acknowledge that as the largest and one of the oldest providers of community mental health services in Canada, CMHA must take responsibility and the steps needed to address the harmful ways in which our mental health system has upheld racist and colonial practices. We call on our health care system and decision-makers to heed the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to support Indigenous communities’ calls to action on reconciliation, and particularly those in support of Indigenous mental health, healing, and well-being.

Canada’s Indigenous peoples have long known that many children died at the government and church-run residential schools that they were forced to attend. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has stated, residential schools, a product of Canada’s colonial policies, endangered the health and well-being of the children who attended them; the physical, psychological and spiritual violence, neglect and harm from the forced separation of families has caused pain that has been passed from generation to generation. The tragedy in Kamloops reflects the long history of racism, violence and cultural genocide towards Indigenous peoples that did not end with the closure of residential schools. It continues to this day. Every day, Indigenous people live the very real impacts of systemic racism and colonialism, which affect their mental health and well-being.

Residential schooling denied many Indigenous children and their families the experiences of positive parenting, worthy community leaders, and a positive sense of identity and self-worth, which have structured and contributed to the systemic discrimination faced by Indigenous communities today.[[1]](#endnote-2) Intergenerational trauma is felt within communities in the disproportionately high rates of suicide, which impact Indigenous peoples at a rate three times higher than non-Indigenous Canadians.[[2]](#endnote-3) Communities continue to contend with the grief and trauma of the loss of the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, pain which is compounded by government failures to take meaningful action to address this systemic violence and bring closure, justice and accountability for mourning families who still do not know what happened to their stolen sisters. Indigenous children continue to be overrepresented in Canada’s child welfare system despite the known mental health impacts of separating children from their families. Furthermore, the lack of access to clean water, health and mental health care, employment, education and safe housing are part of the daily psychological stresses and human rights violations experienced by many Indigenous communities in Canada.

CMHA fully supports the calls to action that the TRC published in its substantial 2015 report calling on the Government of Canada to advance its commitment to reconciliation.

To promote the well-being and mental health of Canada’s Indigenous peoples, the TRC recommended that the Government of Canada, and those in the health sector:

* establish measurable goals, in consultation with Indigenous communities, to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and to publish annual progress reports and assess long-term trends, (with specific mental health indicators);
* provide sustainable funding for existing and new Indigenous healing centres to address the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual harms caused by residential schools;
* recognize the value of Indigenous healing practices and use them in the treatment of Indigenous patients;
* increase the number of Indigenous professionals working in the health-care field, ensure the retention of Indigenous health-care providers in Indigenous communities, and provide cultural competency training for all healthcare professionals;[[3]](#endnote-4)
* take action on the calls to work with Indigenous communities to identify, document, maintain, commemorate, and protect residential school cemeteries, to provide the TRC with all records of the deaths of Indigenous children in residential schools, establish a National Residential School Student Death Register, and to respond to families’ wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies, markers, or reburials where requested.

In addition, the TRC report includes many other important calls to action in the areas of child welfare, land rights, education, language and cultural rights, justice and access to information about missing children and burials, all of which collectively contribute to healing and reconciliation and which impact and support the mental health and well-being of Canada’s Indigenous peoples.

There is much work to do to achieve these goals. CMHA has its own history of upholding racist and colonial practices that have had deep and lasting negative impacts on Indigenous people in Canada. The Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene, out of which CMHA and our modern mental health system developed, was rooted in colonial, racist and ableist health policies and failed to uphold the human rights of Indigenous children and their communities. We deeply regret this past and the harm it has caused Canada’s Indigenous peoples and know that there is still much work left to do to decolonize and apply an anti-oppression lens to our practices and policies within the mental health system today.

Across the CMHA federation, we will build on our existing work and set new standards that will support the recommendations of the TRC. Many CMHA branches, regions, and divisions across Canada have been engaging in meaningful partnerships with Indigenous organizations and leaders in the development and implementation of cultural programs and services, including land-based healing, supporting Indigenous-led mental health promotion within communities, valuing Indigenous healing practices and ways of working rooted in the principles of cultural safety and self-determination, and offering Indigenous cultural awareness training for staff members. There is still much work that we must do to ensure that we are supporting and advancing the goal of reconciliation.

In addition to our own commitment to advance reconciliation, CMHA calls on the Government of Canada to take immediate steps to work in partnership with Indigenous communities to act on the TRC’s recommendations.

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1. TRC, 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/99-011-X2019001> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. <http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)