

*Addressing the deficit in grief support:
A national response to
pandemic-related grief*

**Submission to the
Pre-budget Consultations for the
2021-22 Federal Budget**

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Canadian Grief Alliance

The Canadian Grief Alliance

The Canadian Grief Alliance (CGA) is a coalition of more than 150 leading health and grief-related organizations across Canada (please see list below) that came together in May 2020 to propose an approach to support grieving Canadians in anticipation of the surge of complex grief from Covid-19-related and affected deaths. The CGA was invited to present to the Standing Committee on Health on January 29, 2021 about the urgent need for a Canadian Grief Strategy. The CGA has had a number of meetings with Health Canada however to date there has been no comprehensive response to the needs of grieving Canadians.

The CGA respectfully submits the following recommendations for addressing the deficit in grief supports: A National Response to Pandemic-related Grief to the Budget 2021 Pre-Budget Consultations.

Recommendations - Brief Overview:

Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada invest \$100 million over three years to sustain and expand existing community-based grief services across the country with special focus on underserved populations.

Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada undertake a national public awareness campaign to increase Canadians' understanding of grief and provide education and strategies to help Canadians grieving in isolation to cope.

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada invest in a national consultation and \$10 million in the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council to help Canada to better understand and respond to pandemic-related and affected grief. That a portion of the research funding be specifically earmarked for research related to the grief experienced by Indigenous Peoples.

A Pandemic of Grief

The pandemic has brought to the forefront the urgent need to respond to and support grieving Canadians. While grief is the natural human response to significant loss, because of COVID-19, individuals, families and communities across the country have not been able to grieve deaths from all causes — both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 — in the way we are accustomed. Since the pandemic's start, grieving Canadians have been robbed of final goodbyes, tormented by reports of poor conditions in some facilities, unable to undertake traditional grief rituals, and separated from the critical support of family, friends and community. This severing of the personal connection that is critical to people coping with grief, is negatively impacting individuals, families, communities, the economy and society as a whole.

Tragically, over 21,000 people have died in Canada from Covid-19 and it is estimated that nearly 270,000 Canadians have died from other causes since the pandemic's start (based on Statistics Canada death rate for 2019). Recent research from Pennsylvania State University tells us that each death directly impacts nine people, meaning that more than 2.6 million Canadians and counting are currently grieving in isolation, with insufficient support. This number does not account for the wider impact of grief on workplaces, schools, businesses, and communities as a whole. Communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including racialized and Indigenous communities, are also being disproportionately impacted by grief.

Grief is Falling Through the Cracks

While the Government of Canada has announced significant pandemic-related investments in mental health, grief falls outside the mandate of the Canadian Mental Health Commission and mental health associations. Traditional mental health interventions such as those aimed at individuals with depression and anxiety don't work for the bereaved and can do more harm. Commonly, mental health interventions for depression and anxiety seek to change people's thinking in order to help them cope. Grief experts who are part of the Canadian Grief Alliance know that for grief, it's not about changing thinking, but about being with people in their deep pain, providing psycho-education, and expert guidance and support. Not only does grief not respond at all to prompts to change one's thoughts, such messages only further alienate and isolate the bereaved. This is why current mental health spending is not addressing the needs of grieving Canadians.

To date, there has been neither an acknowledgment of unsupported grief as an additional looming mental health crisis by the Government of Canada, nor recognition of the impact that failing to act will have on our society and the economy.

Pre-pandemic, grief services across the country were already fragmented and under-resourced. Nearly a year into the pandemic, these services are completely overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of grief, unable to meet skyrocketing demand. In many provinces and territories, publicly funded grief support is either minimally available with months-long waiting lists or entirely absent. The limited, free grief services that are available are offered by not-for-profit organizations that are struggling with sharp declines in charitable donations. Job losses and financial insecurity are creating a significant barrier to accessing private grief counselling. The level of distress and complexity of grief created by the pandemic have dramatically increased the need for immediate access to publicly-funded services.

Without sufficient grief services, the risks for mental health issues to develop for grieving Canadians has increased. Canadians grieving all deaths are at elevated risk of unresolved, complicated and/or prolonged grief. Research tells us that when grief is complicated — if circumstances prevent us from having the supports to grieve, it can transform into depression or anxiety, dependence or addiction, and the risk of suicide.

Grieving Canadians need access to the specialized services and support that can address their specific needs and experiences, and organizations offering these services across the country need assistance to meet the growing demand and complexity of cases.

A Canadian Grief Strategy

Delays in the federal government's response to the pandemic of grief have hampered the ability of bereavement organizations to respond to the growing needs and complexity of grief, and have marginalized the needs of the grieving. Recognizing the importance of bereavement care, encouraging people to access help when needed, increasing awareness of services, improving grief literacy, and removing the stigma associated with seeking support will improve access to timely support and prevent mental health risks. A federal response to the ever-growing needs of grieving Canadians is urgently needed.

Investing in grief now will help to mitigate significant health, mental health, social and economic impacts on society in the medium and long-term. Ensuring grieving Canadians have access to the support and services they need will help them return to work, contribute to economic and societal productivity, and reduce healthcare costs.

Specifically, the CGA is calling on the federal government to immediately implement a three-part, emergency-based response as the first steps of a Canadian Grief Strategy.

Recommendation 1: Increase access to grief services for Canadians now

Invest \$100 million over three years in community-based, grief and bereavement programs to support innovation, best/leading edge practices, capacity building initiatives, and identification and scale and spread of innovative programming. The fund will be administered by the Government of Canada, similar to the recent call by the Public Health Agency of Canada for community-based funding for distress centres. Immediate investment will enable a time-limited, three-year response to pandemic-related and affected grief, providing interventions to reduce downstream costs and multi-year funding to address the grief fallout from the pandemic's first, second, and likely third wave. It will also help mitigate the long-term implications of grieving in a time of public health restrictions. The investment will:

- Sustain and expand services to ensure that existing grief services are adequately resourced and therefore more accessible.
- Develop tailored grief services and resources to meet unmet needs of underserved and disproportionately impacted populations, including racialized communities encompassing Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, children and people living in rural and remote communities.
- Curate, develop and make available a suite of grief services for people working in healthcare for their grief-related work trauma at no cost.
- Curate novel practices adopted by health facilities to create connection between patients and families separated by visitor and travel restrictions or other barriers.

These initiatives will:

- Mitigate the adverse outcomes of unsupported or poorly supported grief, including clinical depression and suicide ideation.
- Provide accessible grief resources and services to support healthcare providers and contribute to their retention in the workforce.
- Reduce significant downstream costs to the healthcare system and the economy that will result if the lack of grief services is not addressed.

Recommendation 2: A National Public Awareness Campaign

A national public awareness campaign rooted in the principles of public health is imperative. Such a campaign will improve Canadians' understanding of grief, including how COVID-19 has changed how we grieve, coping strategies, and ways to support others who are grieving.

Taking a public health approach, the campaign would include both universal and targeted messages. A universal campaign will inform and educate the public on grief and strategies to help Canadians grieving in isolation to cope, including where to find resources, and signs that indicate more help may be needed. Targeted campaigns led by and for racialized and Indigenous communities, and aligned to their unique histories, needs, and experiences, are essential. In addition to increasing Canadians' grief literacy, and thereby assisting communities across Canada to better support grievers, a national public awareness campaign would also acknowledge our collective grief as a country.

Recommendation 3: Research & Consultation to Better Understand and Respond to Pandemic-Related and Affected Grief

Canadians have never experienced this depth and breadth of grief and loss before.

The CGA proposes a rapid, national consultation in the immediate term that would allow us to better understand the needs of grieving Canadians and communities. As the CGA is connected to over 150 leading health and grief-related organizations serving diverse communities across the country, it would be possible to complete such a consultation within two months.

Over the medium to longer term, the CGA calls for dedicated research funding — an investment of \$10 million in the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and Social Sciences Humanities Research Council — to improve Canada's understanding and response to pandemic-related and affected grief. Two million dollars would be earmarked for research on the grief experienced by Indigenous Peoples.

The Canadian Grief Alliance

The CGA began as a group of 36 national leaders in grief and bereavement and has grown to more than 150 leading health and grief-related organizations requesting that the Government of Canada #MakeGriefAPriority. The CGA is convened by The Canadian Virtual Hospice, a charitable organization with a track record for delivering innovative programming to support more than 2.4 million visitors annually.

Organizations supporting the Canadian Grief Alliance

National

Canadian Medical Association
Canadian Nurses Association
Canadian Psychiatric Association
Canadian Association of Social Workers
Canadian Association for Spiritual Care
Canadian Society of Palliative Care Physicians
Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology
Canadian Alliance for Grieving Children and Youth
The Enchanté Network
Young Adult Cancer Canada
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada
Canadian Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Network
All Nations Hope Network
Dying with Dignity Canada
Canadian Association for Marriage & Family Therapy
End of Life Doula Association of Canada
The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada
Canada Bereavement Registry
Canadian Integrative Network for Death Education and Alternatives
Schizophrenia Society of Canada
Melanoma Network of Canada
Canadian Health Advocates Inc.
Canadian Medical Hall of Fame

Alberta

Alberta Hospice Palliative Care Association
Covenant Health Palliative Institute
Caregivers Alberta
Hospice Calgary
Red Deer Hospice
Hospice Society of Camrose and District
Children's Grief Centre
Healthy Directions

Transitions Music Therapy
Oliver's Funeral Home

British Columbia

BC Hospice Palliative Care Association
BC Centre for Palliative Care
Family Caregivers of BC
Island Health
Vancouver Island Health Authority
BC Bereavement Helpline
Camp Kerry
Kilala Lelum (Urban Indigenous Health & Healing Cooperative)
Comox Valley Hospice Society
Abbotsford Hospice Society
Vancouver Hospice Society
Delta Hospice Society
Hospice Society of the Columbia Valley
Prince Rupert and District Hospice Society
Victoria Hospice Society
Peace Arch Hospice Society
Burnaby Hospice Society
Crossroads Hospice Society
100 Mile District Hospice Palliative Care Society
Sea to Sky Hospice Society
Desert Valley Hospice Society
West End Seniors' Network
Moving Forward Family Services
Life and Death Matters
Honour End of Life Care
Pacific Well-Being

Manitoba

Palliative Manitoba
Rainbow Resource Centre
Two-Spirited People of Manitoba Inc.
Cancer Care Navigation Services - Northern Regional Health Authority
Rock Lake Palliative Care
Peguis Home & Community Care
Robert Smith School

New Brunswick

NB COPES Child and Family Grief Center

Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador Palliative Care Association

Nova Scotia

NS Hospice Palliative Care Association
Doctors Nova Scotia
Caregivers Nova Scotia
Hospice Halifax
Colchester East Hants Hospice Society
Good Grief Halifax

Ontario

Hospice Palliative Care Ontario
Ontario Association of Social Workers
Global Institute for Psychosocial, Palliative and End-of-Life Care, University of Toronto
RNAO Palliative Care Nurses Interest Group
Centre for Education and Research on Aging & Health, Lakehead University
de Souza Institute
Hope House Community Hospice
Dundas County Hospice
Hospice Outreach Programs of Elgin
Hospice Muskoka
McNally House Hospice
Madawaska Valley Hospice Palliative Care
Hazel Burns Hospice
Hospice Wellington
Dr Bob Kemp Hospice and Bereavement Services
Heart House Hospice
St. Joseph's Hospice Sarnia Lambton
St Joseph's Hospice London
Hospice Northwest
Roger Neilson House
Evergreen Hospice
Hospice Peterborough
Matthews House Hospice
Doane House Hospice
Kensington Health
Near North Palliative Care Network
Bereavement Ontario Network
Bereaved Families of Ontario - South Central Region
Bereaved Families of Ontario – Ottawa
Bereaved Families of Ontario – Kingston

Bereaved Families of Ontario - Midwestern Region
Healing Broken Hearts
Good Grief! Bereavement Healing Services
Gilda's Club of Greater Toronto
The Hummingbird Centre for Hope
Grief Recovery Ontario
Dr. Jay Children's Grief Centre
Children and Youth Grief Network
The Lighthouse Program for Grieving Children
Seasons Centre for Grieving Children
Jewish Family and Child Service of Greater Toronto
Victorian Order of Nurses - Oxford
Unity Health Toronto
Selah Resources
Hulse, Playfair & McGarry

Prince Edward Island

Hospice PEI

Quebec

Association québécoise de soins palliatifs
McGill Council on Palliative Care
Maison Michel Sarrazin
Réseau Québécois de recherche en soins palliatifs et de fin de vie
Regroupement des Infirmiers-Infirmières Ressources en don d'organes et de tissus du Québec
Palli-aide accompagnement en soins palliatifs Saguenay inc.
Parents Orphelins, l'Association des parents qui vivent un deuil périnatal
Albatros Montréal
Groupe des Aidants du Sud-Ouest Myra's Kids Foundation
West Island Cancer Wellness Center
Hope & Cope
ORA Loss & Living Program, Ste. Genevieve United Church
Unitarian Church of Montreal
ADATH Congregation
Connexions Resource Centre

Saskatchewan

Prairie Hospice Society
Morning Star Lodge, University of Saskatchewan
Augustana Lutheran Church
The Good Foundation Inc.

Territories

Hospice Yukon

and 18 private entities.