



A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas

Report of the Pan American
Health Organization High-Level
Commission on Mental Health
and COVID-19

Executive summary

PAHO



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A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas: Report of the Pan American Health Organization High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19. Executive summary

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Executive summary

Overview

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Region of the Americas extend far beyond the nearly 3 million lives lost to the disease. Economies in the Region have been devastated, generating increases in unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Health, education, and social services have also been severely disrupted. In response to these circumstances, mental health conditions have surged, while mental health services have struggled to meet the new, increased, and urgent demand.

Prior to the pandemic, poor mental health, structural limitations and barriers for accessing quality mental health and wellness services, and lack of funding were already major and growing contributors to overall ill-health in the Region – with the Americas being the only World Health Organization (WHO) Region where suicide rates have been increasing. In 2020, median government funding for mental health as a proportion of total health spending was a mere 3%, with nearly half of these funds allocated to psychiatric hospitals, which can be associated with poorer treatment outcomes and human rights violations, in particular with reference to long-term psychiatric hospitalization. A historical lack of prioritization and investment in mental health has resulted in weak mental health systems and poor service coverage and quality. The care needs of most people in the Region living with mental health and substance use conditions have remained unmet, especially those living in conditions of vulnerability, including historically discriminated populations such as Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

Mental health conditions have surged, while mental health services have struggled to meet the new, increased, and urgent demand.

The pandemic has sparked increased discourse on mental health, highlighting the extent of the crisis and putting systemic failings in mental health services under fresh scrutiny. Governments of the Region are under pressure to make sound policy choices to strengthen mental health within the broader agenda of post-pandemic recovery.

Recognizing that policymakers needed clear guidance on the immediate priorities, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) convened the High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19. The Commission, led by Her Excellency Epsy Campbell Barr, former Vice President of Costa Rica, and Ambassador Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States, includes 17 members representing governments, health organizations, academia, civil society, and people with lived experience from across the Region. During the past year, the Commission worked to analyze the effects of the pandemic – including innovative good-practice solutions – against the background of the pre-pandemic state of mental health.

The Commissioners identified priority areas in mental health for the Americas and consulted key stakeholders and experts to develop appropriate recommendations.

The result of their expert assessment is A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas (NAMHA).

A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas

NAMHA is a package of priority mental health policy and strategy actions that are crafted for incorporation into countries' post-pandemic recovery strategies. It explicitly builds on the underlying and cross-cutting principles of universal health coverage, human rights, equity and nondiscrimination, empowerment of people with mental health conditions and their families, and harnessing the benefits of multisectoral action, where different sectors and actors pool financial resources, knowledge, and skills.

NAMHA has therefore been prepared to advance the national social and development agenda of high-level authorities in the Americas, namely Heads of State and Government. NAMHA will also serve as an operational and guidance tool for leaders of government departments including health, education, finance, social welfare, development, justice, employment, and labor, as well as for local government legislators and policymakers at all levels of government.

While focused on actions in the immediate term, NAMHA aligns with current global and regional mental health and development objectives, including the WHO Comprehensive Mental Health

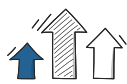
NAMHA presents approaches to address the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in the short term, while laying robust foundations for the longer term.

Action Plan 2013–2030, the PAHO Policy for Improving Mental Health, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It presents a framework based on evidence and experience that can be tailored to local situations, while addressing barriers and challenges. With this contextual adaptation, all countries, irrespective of resource constraints, can implement NAMHA to improve the mental health of their populations.

NAMHA outlines 10 recommendations with corresponding action points, accompanied by case examples from the Americas which highlight successful models to guide implementation. It is important to note that the recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive; rather, they prioritize the areas of action deemed to be the most urgent for the Region. NAMHA presents evidence-based approaches to address the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in the short term, while laying robust foundations for the longer term – in order to ensure optimal improvements in mental health care in the Region of the Americas.

Summary of Recommendations



1.

Elevate mental health at the national and supranational levels – specifies the foundational ways to establish mental health as a national development priority, include mental health in universal health coverage, and develop strategic partnerships and alliances to advance and advocate for mental health at the national level and beyond.



2.

Integrate mental health into all policies – promotes the integration of mental health into all areas of health as well as across sectors and in emergency and disaster responses.



3.

Increase the quantity and improve the quality of financing for mental health – outlines how to mobilize increased financing for mental health and allocate it more efficiently and equitably.



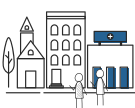
4.

Ensure the human rights of people living with mental health conditions – advocates for strengthening human rights for mental health through legislation and policy, transitioning services from psychiatric institutions to community-based care, and capacity building in human rights across sectors.



5.

Promote and protect mental health across the life course – highlights important environments and strategies for promoting mental health and preventing mental conditions at key life stages including childhood and adolescence, adulthood and older age.



6.

Improve and expand community-based mental health services and care – delineates actions to improve service coverage and quality by integrating mental health into primary health care, making services culturally competent, harnessing digital interventions, building capacity in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and empowering service users and their families.



7.

Strengthen suicide prevention – provides concrete guidance on evidence-based strategies to prevent suicide and its risk factors through the development of national suicide prevention strategies; public policy on means reduction and alcohol use; capacity building to respond to self-harm and suicide.



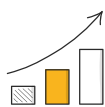
8.

Adopt a gender transformative approach to mental health – lays out actions to reduce gender inequalities and address gender-based violence and harmful masculinities, key threats to mental health.



9.

Address racism and racial discrimination as a key determinant of mental health – emphasizes the need to combat systemic racism targeting Indigenous peoples, people of African descent, and other ethnic groups by working with these communities to understand racism and its potential solutions, establishing national action plans against racism and racial discrimination, strengthening policy and legislation, and creating anti-racist environments.



10.

Improve mental health data and research – proposes actions to improve the availability and quality of mental health data through the expansion of mental health data collection, data disaggregation, strengthened monitoring and evaluation, and research in priority areas of mental health.

Members of the Commission

The Commission is composed of 17 diverse representatives of government, health organizations, academia, civil society, and people with lived experience from across the Region of the Americas, with the Chair being Her Excellency Epsy Campbell Barr, former Vice President of Costa Rica, and Co-Chair, Ambassador Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States.

Chair: Epsy Campbell Barr, Former Vice President of Costa Rica

Co-Chair: Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General, Organization of American States

Rubén Alvarado Muñoz, Full Professor, Department of Public Health, School of Medicine, Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile

Mary Bartram, Director, Mental Health and Substance Use, Mental Health Commission of Canada

Paul Bolton, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Coordinator, United States Agency for International Development

Pamela Collins, Director of the University of Washington Consortium for Global Mental Health, University of Washington, United States

Paulina Del Rio, President and Co-Founder of Fundación José Ignacio, Chile

Shirley J. Holloway, President, Board of Directors, National Alliance on Mental Illness, United States

Katija Khan, President, Caribbean Alliance of National Psychological Associations, Trinidad and Tobago

María Elena Medina-Mora, Director of the Faculty of Psychology, National Autonomous University of Mexico

Ana Cristina Mendoza, Psychologist, Guatemala

Paulo Rossi Menezes, Professor of Preventative Medicine, University of São Paulo, Brazil

Carmen Montón Giménez, Permanent Observer of Spain to the Organization of American States

Alejandra Mora Mora, Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission of Women, Organization of American States

Shekhar Saxena, Professor of the Practice of Global Mental Health, Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, United States

Juan Pablo Uribe, Global Director, Health, Nutrition & Population and the Global Financing Facility, World Bank Group

Sahar Vasquez, Co-Founder, Mind Health Connect, Belize



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Working session with the Mental Health Commission of Colombia, in Bogotá, 1 December 2022. During their work, the High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19 met with experts, health managers, and people with lived experience to learn first-hand about the challenges and solutions to improve mental health in the Region of the Americas.

Unmet mental health needs in the Region of the Americas are a leading source of morbidity and mortality which result in tremendous health, social, and economic consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the mental health crisis in the Region, necessitating urgent action at the highest levels of government and across sectors to build back better mental health now and for the future.

This executive summary of the landmark report is the result of the PAHO High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19. It provides an analysis of the mental health situation in the Region followed by a series of recommendations and corresponding actions to support countries in the Americas to prioritize and advance mental health using human rights- and equity-based approaches.

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