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News release

PAHO Establishes High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19

Commissioners will prepare recommendations to accelerate action on mental health in the Region, following the devastating effects of the pandemic



Washington, DC, 6 May 2022 (PAHO) – Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), today launched the High-level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19. The commission will prepare guidelines and recommendations to reduce the impact on mental health caused by the pandemic, and the related suffering in the population of the Region.

The commission's work will focus on five key areas: recovering from the pandemic and promoting mental health as a priority; the mental health needs of vulnerable populations; integrating mental health into universal health coverage; financing; and

promoting the prevention of mental health conditions.

"We must seize the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to address long-standing weaknesses in mental health services and strengthen them for the future," said Dr. Etienne, thanking the commissioners for their work and commitment. "Now is the time to build better mental health in the Americas," she emphasized.

The High-level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19 is chaired by Epsy Campbell Barr, Vice President of Costa Rica, and co-chaired by Néstor Méndez, Assistant Director General of the Organization of American States (OAS). It is also made up of leaders of health organizations, civil society, academics, and people with direct experience in the subject.

The Commission Chair said that the mental health and well-being of millions, especially women, have been "severely affected" by the pandemic, confinements, school closures, telecommuting and care for family members. Campbell Barr called for "urgently addressing mental health" and "taking steps to prevent and respond to domestic violence, including mental health services for survivors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects, and many are expected to be long-term. A scientific dossier published by the WHO reported that the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25% in the first year of the pandemic.

A PAHO analysis also noted that one-third of people who suffered from COVID-19 in the Region were diagnosed with a neurological or mental disorder, while another study conducted with the support from PAHO (COVID-19 **HE**alth **ca**Re **w**Ork**E**rs **S**tudy--HEROES) showed that, in 2020, between 14.7% and 22% of health personnel in the Region presented symptoms of depression.

Calling the work of the new Commission "timely, relevant and urgent," Méndez of the OAS noted that "a comprehensive plan of action for the recovery of COVID-19 must include the prioritization of mental health with a human rights perspective and taking into account the particular situation of women." He also indicated that this is "an opportunity to bring about a cultural shift that can move us away from stigmatization and lead us to more inclusive and open conversations to build better mental health systems again."

The countries of the Americas have made significant efforts to meet growing mental health needs during the pandemic. However, the historically low priority given to the issue—with insufficient funding and under skilled human resources—has hampered the ability to respond adequately.

The commissioners will prepare a report with key evidence-based recommendations to improve mental health in the Americas and to transform mental health systems and services following the COVID-19 pandemic. The report is expected to be completed in the last quarter of 2022.

Note for the media:

The commission consists of Katija Khan, president-elect of the Caribbean Alliance of National Psychological Associations; Shekhar Saxena, professor of the practice of global mental health at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health; Paulina del Río, president and co-founder of the José Ignacio Foundation in Chile; Juan Pablo Uribe, global director for health, nutrition and population at the World Bank's Global Financing Facility; and María Elena Medina-Mora, director of the Faculty of Psychology, National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Also on the Commission are Shirley J. Holloway, president of the Board of Directors of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of the United States; Sahar Vasquez, co-founder of Mind Health Connect, Belize; Paul Bolton, coordinator of mental health and psychosocial support at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); Ana Cristina Mendoza, psychologist from Guatemala; Paulo Rossi Menezes, principal investigator at the University of São Paulo; Pamela Collins, director of the Global Mental Health Program at the University of Washington; Rubén Alvarado Muñoz, associate professor at the School of Public Health, University of Chile; and Mary Bartram, director of mental health and substance use at the Mental Health Commission of Canada

Links

The COVID-19 HEalth caRe wOrkErs Study (HEROES). Regional Report from the Americas (in Spanish)

<https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/55563>

Strengthening Mental Health Responses to COVID-19 in the Americas: A Health Policy Analysis and Recommendations (PAHO)

<https://www.paho.org/en/node/84883>

Mental Health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact (WHO)

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Mental_health-2022.1

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.