

Madam Mayor and members of the General Issues Committee, my name is Rachel Chaplow.

I ask you to start off by thinking of a date that you can remember that holds great significance in your mind. For most people, it's usually a wedding, the birth of your first child or your last shift at the office before your retirement. I too have a date. For myself, my date would be June 3, 2020. I woke up, texted my fiancé, Jake asking why he went to work because I thought he was supposed to have the day off. I got out of bed, made myself a bowl of cereal and walked back to the bedroom - only to watch the serial ball, slow motion to the rug when I look to the corner of the room and discovered my fiancé unresponsive on the floor in our bedroom and I immediately called 911 and immediately begin administering CPR and the paramedics arrived. Tragically - despite multiple attempts to revive him - at 10:25AM, the paramedics informed me that all vital signs were absent and there was nothing they could do. Jake was one of approximately 4,660 Canadians who passed away from an opioid related overdose in 2020 but I refuse to let him become another statistic. His name was Jacob James Fedorneac. He was 26 years old, was a loving father of two beautiful children, a skilled tile installer, devoted partner and he struggled with mental illness and polysubstance-use disorder. I stand before you today, as your constituent, to not only share my story, but express my grave concern about the proposed budget cuts to specialized mental health and addiction services in the results they will have on those who depend on these services in Hamilton.

Statistics show that mental illness and addiction are serious and growing problems in not only Hamilton but Canada-wide. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, one in five Canadians will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime. The World Health Organization states that mental disorders are the leading cause of disability worldwide.

Moreover, the opioid crisis in Canada is evidence of the dire need for specialized mental health and addiction services. In 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada reported that 4,460 people died from opioid-related overdoses, a staggering increase of 40% from the previous year.

The proposed budget cuts will have a devastating impact on those struggling with mental illness and addiction. Without access to specialized services, individuals will not receive the support and treatment they need to recover. This will only lead to a larger, more uncontrollable epidemic of loss and suffering.

Furthermore, the lack of resources will place a significant burden on our healthcare system, emergency services, and the criminal justice system. It is a false economy to cut funding for mental health and addiction services as it will result in increased costs in other areas.

I implore you to reconsider the proposed budget cuts to specialized mental health and addiction services in Hamilton, ON. Investing in these services is an investment in our community and in the lives of those who are struggling with mental illness and addiction. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to this growing problem. It's harrowing to realize that my fiancé's death in 2020 was a tragedy that could have been prevented with better access to care and support.

If you've never had to experience the agonizing, gut-wrenching and exhausting grief that sits with you for years after losing a loved one to mental illness or substance use disorder or the "what if's" or secondary losses - I pray you never do. I urge you to please rethink making cuts to these vital services when it is quite apparent that the situation regarding mental illness and substance use disorders has only gotten worse in Hamilton. By cutting funding to these vital services, the horrific stranglehold that mental illness and substance-use disorders have over their victims and their families will continue to get worse. Neither mental illness nor substance-use disorders discriminate and unfortunately, some people - myself included - are genetically preconditioned to mental illness or substance use disorders. The reality of it is - we cannot reduce funding to these services because there will always be a need for it.

I would like to thank the chair for giving me an opportunity to share my story today. That being said, my story is just one example of the tragic outcome that will continue for many families if we continue to cut funding to services that are already very limited. In memory of my fiancé, Jacob Fedorneac, and the countless others who have lost their battle to mental illness, drug poisonings or substance use disorders - I urge you to reconsider the proposed budget cuts and provide the necessary resources for specialized mental health and addiction services in Hamilton, ON.

Thank you.