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**JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ONTARIO RELEASES NEW REPORT OUTLINING PLAN FOR
DECRIMINALIZING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ONTARIO**

TORONTO - Ontario is fighting a losing battle – one that it cannot afford – to punish people for their mental health issues, claims a new report from the John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO). The report, entitled, *Unlocking Change: Decriminalizing Mental Health Issues in Ontario*, asserts that the province must stop relying on the justice system as a key responder to individuals who have mental health issues, and provides recommendations aimed at shifting Ontario toward prevention.

In recent decades, the criminal justice system has become a warehouse for people whose mental health issues have gone untreated or undetected in the community. The absence of meaningful prevention and community-based mental health services has resulted in a large and growing proportion of people falling through the cracks, only to get caught the widening net of the justice system. In short, when the healthcare system fails to treat mental illness, the criminal justice system punishes the symptoms.

Unlocking Change chronicles some of the main challenges facing people with mental health issues who become justice-involved, including court-ordered bail conditions banning drug or alcohol use, difficulties accessing medication and psychiatric care while incarcerated, homelessness, shortages of clinical care and residential treatment options, among others.

“For years, the criminal justice system has responded to those with mental health issues with little success. This is because the justice system is the wrong place for people with mental health issues,” states Jacqueline Tasca, Policy Analyst at the Centre of Research, Policy & Program Development at JHSO. “Common practices in our courts and jails often (inadvertently) further criminalize those with mental health issues. Our legal and correctional systems are designed for punishment and accountability, not therapeutic intervention.”

The prevalence of mental illness among correctional populations is two to three times higher than in the community. Inside jails, people with mental health issues are often vulnerable in the general prisoner population. Prisoners who are presenting with the most severe symptoms of mental illness are frequently isolated in segregation, which worsens mental health issues.

The Report further highlights that once people with mental health issues acquire a police record, they are often doubled stigmatized and face compounded barriers to successful reintegration and recovery. Social services, housing and supports in the community are often denied to those with past justice involvement. These barriers translate into a vicious cycle of re-involvement with the justice system.

Unlocking Change articulates a pressing need for a paradigm shift in Ontario toward - and investment in - proactive, preventative and inclusive approaches to mental health. A prevention-based approach would aim to help Ontarians with mental health issues *before* they become at risk – of homelessness, crisis, unemployment or conflict with the law. The justice system should not be seen as a viable access point for treatment.

Unlocking Change lays out a comprehensive series of recommendations aimed at decriminalizing mental health issues in Ontario, and shifting the current response to those who are justice-involved and who struggle with mental health issues. Recommendations emphasize prevention and early intervention through the provision of meaningful mental health care and social services, call for changes to current police, court and correctional practices, and underline the importance of de-stigmatization and public education.

Until we recognize that we must treat all mental health issues as health issues, we will continue down the costly path of criminalizing mental illness, addiction, developmental disabilities and trauma. “Ontario must commit to building a healthcare and social service system that ensures that Ontarians get the support that they need to live healthy and stable lives, in a proactive manner – before things deteriorate to the point where they find themselves in trouble or end up in jail,” Tasca states.

To read John Howard Society of Ontario’s Report, *Unlocking Change: Decriminalizing Mental Health Issues in Ontario*, please visit www.johnhoward.on.ca

The Centre of Research, Policy & Program Development at the John Howard Society of Ontario engages in non-partisan research, policy analysis, public education and program evaluation in the social and criminal justice sector.

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