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TOO MANY ONTARIANS WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS STILL RECEIVING JAIL TIME INSTEAD OF CARE: JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

JHSO LAUNCHES NEW INTERACTIVE WEBSITE TO HELP TRANSLATE FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF COVID-19 INTO LASTING CHANGE

TORONTO, ON – February 2, 2021 – The John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) is launching a new report and interactive website entitled [*Broken Record: The Continued Criminalization of Mental Health Issues*](#) to highlight that, despite the increased attention paid to mental health issues spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, people with mental health needs are still too often confronted with handcuffs and jail time rather than treatment in Ontario.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has shone an unprecedented spotlight on both the prevalence of mental health issues and their negative impacts on people’s well-being,” said Jacqueline Tasca, Director of Partnerships and Strategic Initiatives. “Despite this, we sadly still see a punitive approach to dealing with its impacts, particularly for people from racialized and marginalized communities. As a result, there are simply too many Ontarians with mental health issues receiving jail time instead of the care they need. JHSO’s new report and interactive website seeks to address that by translating this heightened awareness into immediate action and lasting change.”

The new website is an eye-opening and heart-rending digital media experience created by JHSO as a follow up to its comprehensive 2015 report, *Unlocking Change: Decriminalizing Mental Health Issues in Ontario*. With vivid imagery and bold design, the *Broken Record* interactive site guides users through the story of how people with mental health struggles end up in Ontario’s criminal justice system and the destructive consequences that result for these individuals, their families, taxpayers, and all of society. While the site drives home the costs and heartbreak of this broken system, its message and purpose are ultimately hopeful. Common-sense policy changes JHSO urges include:

- A purpose-built mental health crisis response service, staffed by health care professionals, not police, and greater integration of mental health workers into police response in the rare cases when a crisis call rises to the level of requiring police presence;
- Exploring the adoption of a charge screening model where prosecutor approval of all criminal charges is required, so only cases in the public interest move forward;
- Timely screening of all jail and prison inmates on arrival for mental health care needs;
- Ministry of Health, through Ontario Health, assuming greater responsibility for health care in correctional institutions;
- Discharge planning that starts at the point of admission to corrections, and sets up all incarcerated people for success on release;
- Investment in dedicated supportive housing for people with histories of justice involvement across all municipalities.

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Broken Record updates and amplifies the policy proposals previously outlined by JHSO on the criminalization of mental illness in Ontario. The development of the site brings renewed focus and urgency to this crucial but neglected element of the criminal justice reform agenda – an agenda that gained broader consensus than ever before throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health issues and racialized communities are both hugely overrepresented in the criminal justice system. It is increasingly recognized that a punitive approach to social ills is a costly, wasteful and inhumane answer. And police, prosecutors, corrections and criminal records are inherently mismatched to the task of responding to mental health issues. In fact, these interactions with the criminal justice system are typically harmful to those with mental health needs. Arrest and incarceration must not be seen as a gateway to treatment.

“JHSO urges government to seize this moment and enact policy changes today that will stop Ontario’s habit of punishing people for health issues that are no fault of their own,” said JHSO’s Jacqueline Tasca. “Instead we want investment in Ontarians’ capacity for resilience and health with policies that decriminalize, destigmatize and effectively treat mental health issues.”

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About John Howard Society of Ontario

For more than 90 years, we’ve worked to keep the humanity in justice. Today we continue to build a safer Ontario by supporting the people and communities affected by the criminal justice system. Our 19 local offices deliver more than 80 evidence-based programs and services focused on prevention, intervention and reintegration across the province. These range from helping youth develop the life skills that will let them achieve their full potential, to helping families navigate issues of criminal justice, to providing job training for those leaving incarceration so they can contribute to their community in a meaningful way. To learn more, please visit johnhoward.on.ca.

JHSO wants to acknowledge the significant work of **Helios Design Lab**. Their extraordinary creative talent brought the story of *Broken Record* to life in a most inspired way.

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