



Wendy-Ann Clarke &lt;wendyannclarkeijb@gmail.com&gt;

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## Interview Request: Toronto Star/Investigative Journalism Bureau

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**Media** <media@sac-isc.gc.ca>

Fri, Jul 5, 2024 at 9:06 PM

To: "Cribb, Robert" &lt;rcribb@thestar.ca&gt;

Cc: Wendy-Ann Clarke &lt;wendyannclarkeijb@gmail.com&gt;, "Bruser, David" &lt;DBruser@thestar.ca&gt;

Hello Robert,

Thank you for your patience. Please see the below media response to your questions, which you can attribute to me as your spokesperson Indigenous Services Canada.

Can you please advise us as to when your story will be published?

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Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)'s NIHB Program is one of the many services that support eligible First Nations and Inuit with a range of health and mental health benefits.

For immediate help, Canada is supporting culturally appropriate help lines, including the Hope for Wellness Helpline, that offers 24/7 support and crisis intervention in English and French, and in Cree, Ojibway (Anishinaabemowin) and Inuktitut upon request.

The NIHB Program provides coverage of services similar to a health insurance provider, including mental health counselling coverage. Eligible First Nations and Inuit can get mental health counselling services from any eligible licensed health provider of their choosing and get reimbursed through NIHB Program coverage. The NIHB Program also maintains a list of provincially/territorially licensed providers that have enrolled with NIHB to bill the program directly, so eligible clients don't have to pay upfront. NIHB clients can choose an eligible provider that is not on this list and still get reimbursed, just like with any other private health insurance.

Under the NIHB Program, providers must meet the criteria outlined in the NIHB Guide to mental health counselling benefits, including being registered in good standing with a Provincial/Territorial legislated regulatory body. In Canada, provincial/territorial legislated regulatory bodies are responsible for the licensing and regulating of health professionals. We invite anyone who has concerns regarding the competence of a health provider to file a complaint with the relevant provincial/territorial regulatory body.

ISC makes decisions about enrolling eligible providers for direct billing privileges only, as regulation of licensed health professionals fall under provincial jurisdiction. To ensure there are a sufficient number of providers within certain areas, on a case-by-case and time-limited basis, providers who are not typically eligible for NIHB *may* also be enrolled at the discretion of ISC. However, providers are still required to be certified by a non-legislated entity that functions as a self-regulatory body.

The NIHB-enrolled provider list is constantly evolving, and the status of providers is checked on a quarterly basis against records provided by regulatory bodies. Providers who have lost their license or have been suspended from practice will be delisted. A health provider may be added back on the list only if reinstated by a provincial/territorial regulatory body. Note that in one of the case examples submitted, the provider is an eligible licensed/regulated provider in a different jurisdiction and had been incorrectly listed under Ontario in a previous iteration of the list. This was subsequently corrected and reflected in the most recent quarterly provider list. However, if you have identified

concerns with other specific providers, ISC would appreciate these being brought to the department's attention for review, validation and appropriate action, if needed.

The NIHB Program encourages mental health providers to provide information on their areas of specialization, cultural competency training and/or experience working with First Nation and Inuit clients as part of their enrollment with NIHB (however, the submission of this information is voluntary and some providers may choose not to include it). Before initiating counselling, clients may also contact providers if they would like more information on the provider's experience, expertise, and therapeutic approach, to determine if the provider is a good fit for them.

**Ensuring First Nations and Inuit clients receive adequate care and health services is of utmost importance. We are committed to our continued work together with First Nations and Inuit partners to engage on client perspectives and challenges, with the goal of continually improving client access to benefits, including mental health counselling.**

#### **Regarding Wait times:**

The demand for the NIHB Program is growing, which means more people are getting the care and services they need. ensure clients do not face wait times to access mental health benefits the following measures have been implemented:

- To ensure timely access to counselling, eligible clients do not require prior approval for the first two hours of mental health counselling coverage through an eligible provider of their choosing.
- **Every calendar year, NIHB clients are eligible for coverage of up to 22 hours of mental health counselling performed by an NIHB-eligible provider. Additional hours may be covered on an exception basis. Requests are typically adjudicated within five business days.**
- ISC does not assign clients to providers, and clients do not require a referral before starting counselling.

Mental health counselling providers who are enrolled with the NIHB Program can submit claims and approval requests online through a secure web account. Processed claims are paid every two weeks.

#### **Regarding Clinics not enrolled with the NIHB Program:**

The Department is unable to comment on the clinics contacted by the reporter. **Private practices determine whether to enroll for direct billing/to accept assignment with any specific health insurance plan.** Depending on where a practice is located, a provider may opt not to enroll with the NIHB Program. As of March 2023, there were 1,468 mental health counselling providers enrolled with and actively billing the NIHB Program in Ontario. **The NIHB Program remains open to receiving feedback from clients and providers and strives to continually improve the Program.**

#### **NIHB Provider billing concerns:**

**We aim to offer reimbursements in a timely matter. Processed claims are paid every two weeks. We are ready to work with any provider that has concerns regarding billing and have set up specific lines for different health providers to help address any concerns enrolled providers may have.** Any enrolled provider with a concern regarding claims payment delays should contact the Express Scripts NIHB provider call centre at 1-888-511-4666. Pharmacy providers with concerns about client access to prescription medications to treat addictions should contact the Drug Exception Centre at 1-800-580-0950. For methadone and buprenorphine/naloxone (such as Suboxone), no prior approval is required at the pharmacy level for starting clients on treatment for opioid use disorder.

#### **Reports of abuse/billing patterns of concern:**

As part of the NIHB program's risk management activities, ISC has mandated its claims processor to maintain a set of pre-payment and post-payment processes, including claim verification activities. This function incorporates the review of claims against records to confirm compliance with the terms and conditions of the NIHB program. **If under any circumstances it is found that a provider has inappropriately billed the program, claim payments will be recovered; either by direct payment from the provider or withheld from future provider claim statements.**

#### **Physician services/Comments from Family physician and mental health advocate**

Physician services are insured health services and are not covered by the NIHB Program. Physicians should contact their local provincial or territorial health Ministry with any billing concerns.

We are unable to comment on the statement from the family physician/mental health advocate. Any individual with concerns can [contact us](#) directly to share their insights. The NIHB Program is always open to receiving feedback in a spirit of continual improvement for our clients.

#### **Client Reimbursement concerns:**

When claiming expenses, having coverage under more than one plan allows clients to use both plans. When an NIHB-eligible client is covered by another plan, claims must be submitted to the other plan first. The other plan will typically provide an explanation of benefits (EOB) form that must be sent with the claim to Express Scripts Canada.

If a client no longer has other coverage, they can update their information for one or more benefit areas by contacting the NIHB Call Centre at Express Scripts Canada (ESC) at 1-888-441-4777. There is no requirement to document that it has been cancelled.

Merci/Thank-you,

**Jennifer Cooper** (elle/she/her)

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**From:** Cribb, Robert <[rcribb@thestar.ca](mailto:rcribb@thestar.ca)>

**Sent:** Wednesday, July 3, 2024 6:27 PM

**To:** Media <[media@sac-isc.gc.ca](mailto:media@sac-isc.gc.ca)>

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