

Why compassion needs to be the new normal in public policy

By [KATHLEEN FINLAY](#) DECEMBER 16, 2021

The repeated failure of policy-makers to address known risks to residents of long-term care homes and deal with the root causes of an epidemic of opioid overdoses, are symptoms of a systemic collapse in the duty of governments to protect the most vulnerable. These are landmarks in institutional betrayal.



In her economic and fiscal update on Dec. 14, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland announced \$742-million in one-time payments for seniors who saw their guaranteed income supplement payments clawed back this year after receiving pandemic supports. That sudden reversal is one more indication that compassion is becoming the new normal, writes Kathleen Finlay. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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The coronavirus pandemic is a harsh teacher. One of its more gripping lessons has been what happens when we forget about the powerless and the voiceless. Another is that political leaders and decision-makers are beginning to understand—some more quickly than others—that they are expected to see their jobs, and their deliverables to the public and employees, through a more compassionate lens. This week's sudden

reversal by the federal government in finally restoring the guaranteed income supplement (GIS) benefits it had taken from 90,000 low-income seniors is one more indication that compassion is becoming the new normal. This year low income seniors who received pandemic support through the Canada emergency response benefit saw their GIS payments clawed back, but Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's recent fiscal update offered \$742-million in one-time payments to address that gap. The decision came only after howls of outrage and impassioned demands that the government rediscover its compassion guardrails to avoid making decisions that carry the virus of serious emotional and physical harm.

The repeated failure of policy-makers to address known risks to residents of long-term care homes, and, at the other end of the age spectrum, to deal with the root causes of an epidemic of opioid overdoses, are also symptoms of a systemic collapse in the duty of governments to protect the most vulnerable. These are landmarks in institutional betrayal. They are far from isolated.

Femicides in Canada soared in the first six months of 2021. First Nations remain besieged by suicides among their youngest populations. Racialized communities, people struggling to deal with mental illness, essential workers, and those living at the lowest income levels disproportionately felt the heavy hand of the pandemic, made all the worse by government's long-evident fairness amnesia when it comes to these groups. The arrival of the more infectious Omicron variant has many wondering if they will see a replay of these same harm-producing disparities and, more telling, if governments will do anything about them.

The pandemic has also prompted some soul-searching about what is important in life in the everyday workplace. Canada may not yet be facing a "great resignation wave" as reported in the U.S. But there are signs that a desire to be closer to their families and avoid long commutes just to sit in a cubicle for eight hours every day is fueling the move by office workers across Canada to make working from home a more regular

occurrence. Ontario's new right to disconnect law is another response to the demand to build more compassion into the workplace.

From universities to giant fulfillment centres and across the Canadian military and RCMP, organizations are grappling with how to respond to the rising demand for a more caring business model that puts compassion front and centre. Some companies and public institutions are even looking at creating the position of chief compassion officer, which is something I have long advocated.

When I use the word compassion, I don't mean the typical "we're with you" and "you're not alone" bromides some politicians are quick to invoke. The compassion I'm calling for is action-oriented and begins to heal suffering. I call that kinetic compassion.

Some organizations are awakening to it. When a giant U.S. university became aware of the barriers victims of sexual harassment often face in finding a new job, they created a path that helps victims re-build their careers and heal through a combination of trauma-informed support and on-site mentorship. The move was widely applauded by students and faculty who had been looking for a stronger signal that the university took sexual misconduct seriously.

Top leaders have a huge job ahead if they are going to successfully retool their compassion infrastructure. The challenge to the RCMP and Canadian military, for instance, which continue to struggle with the fall-out from endemic sexual violence and related scandals, requires nothing less than a shift from what has widely been viewed as a culture of institutional betrayal to one I describe as a culture of institutional compassion. It is a transition that will take entirely new thinking—and not all of it will come from inside.

Combating the molecular threat of the coronavirus did not happen by accident. It took bold leadership and innovative thinking. The pandemic has also produced the

expectation of a kinder, more caring, re-make in our personal interactions and in our public institutions. The survival of many in society depends as much on that as it does eradicating COVID itself.

This places new challenges on politicians and those who lead governments who must find a better way of turning caring platitudes into actual policies that are conceived and delivered through an uncompromised compassionate lens.

Kathleen Finlay is a mental health advocate and founder of [Zero Harm Now](#), which advises organizations on the creation of healthy compassion practices.

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