

Standing Committee on Finance (FINA)

Pre-budget consultations 2012

Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada

Responses

1. Economic Recovery and Growth

Given the current climate of federal and global fiscal restraint, what specific federal measures do you feel are needed for a sustained economic recovery and enhanced economic growth in Canada?

Multiple sclerosis – or MS – is an often progressive and disabling disease of the brain and spinal cord. Canada has one of the highest rates of MS in the world. MS is a costly disease. The Canadian Institute for Health Information estimated the total costs associated with MS in 2000-2001 were almost \$1 billion. This includes direct costs of health care expenses, and indirect costs of lost productivity and premature death. It is clear that MS has a significant impact on the Canadian economy, and while there has been great progress in research and treatments, there is as yet no cure. It will be important, as the Canadian population ages, to mitigate continuing increases in health care spending. The MS Society believes this can be done through investing in research and innovation. The Government of Canada can be a world leader in health research by continuing to fund the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and collaborating with Canada's expert community to find a cure for MS. In addition, the MS Society applauds the federal government for continuing to make CIHR's Strategy for Patient Oriented Research a priority. SPOR should be a major source of expertise and knowledge to help all levels of government spend their health care dollars more wisely and more efficiently.

2. Job Creation

As Canadian companies face pressures resulting from such factors as uncertainty about the U.S. economic recovery, a sovereign debt crisis in Europe, and competition from a number of developed and developing countries, what specific federal actions do you believe should be taken to promote job creation in Canada, including that which occurs as a result of enhanced internal and international trade?

NA

3. Demographic Change

What specific federal measures do you think should be implemented to help the country address the consequences of, and challenges associated with, the aging of the Canadian population and of skills shortages?

People with disabilities and chronic conditions are an untapped resource for the work force, and it will be increasingly important to utilize all Canadians willing to work, as the Canadian work force ages. To ensure people with disabilities are able to continue or return to work, the MS Society of Canada recommends the Committee look at how people with disabilities can help fill anticipated labour and skills shortages. Within the disability community are people living with episodic disabilities, such as MS. These are disabilities that are marked by unpredictable and fluctuating periods of wellness and disability. People with episodic disabilities want to take their places in the work force and would be able to do so in greater numbers if there were a small policy change to Employment Insurance. Specifically, the Committee and the Government of Canada should make Employment Insurance sickness benefits more flexible to allow people with disabilities – especially episodic disabilities like MS – to work part-time and receive partial benefits. By allowing people to receive benefits for 150 half days instead of 75

days (i.e., 15 weeks), individuals with episodic disabilities would be able to maintain a strong attachment to their jobs. The Canadian work force, therefore, would retain the important skills and experience they provide. Helping people with disabilities stay employed is especially important because of Canada's ever increasing knowledge-based economy, which relies more on knowledge and critical thinking, and less on physical endurance and strength. Making EI sickness benefits more flexible will not only increase productivity, but it will ensure people with disabilities have an adequate income even when they have to take time off work. Employers would pay a lower salary during the benefit period but still retain the services of an experienced employee. Allowing partial benefits would also help address the lack of understanding that employers have of disabilities that come and go. Government support for partial benefits and part-time work could go a long way to help foster a supportive work place for people with episodic disabilities.

4. Productivity

With labour market challenges arising in part as a result of the aging of Canada's population and an ongoing focus on the actions needed for competitiveness, what specific federal initiatives are needed in order to increase productivity in Canada?

While the Canadian and world economies are in a period of instability, it is important to look ahead to the not too distant future, when Canada will be faced with labour shortages because of an aging population and slowed immigration rates. Planning for employment and productivity are extremely important for the overall Canadian economy especially as the population ages. Like the Government of Canada, the MS Society is focused on strengthening the work force, specifically, by promoting productivity through the inclusion of, and support for, people with disabilities - a largely untapped labour source. The MS Society is pleased the minister of Human Resources and Skills Develop has just created a special panel to identify private sector successes and best practices as well as barriers relating to the employment of people with disabilities. By being pro-active, the Government of Canada can help people with disabilities and chronic diseases remain and re-enter the work force, thereby increasing productivity. As described above, by allowing partial EI sickness benefits, the work force will benefit from the skills and expertise of people living with disabilities by allowing them to work part time they need. Often, people living with MS and other episodic disabilities acquire the disability after they have completed post-secondary education and have gained valuable job experience. The MS Society sees this as a "win-win-win" situation for all those involved: employers retain skilled workers; people with disabilities retain their jobs and continue to pay taxes to the government. It should be noted that making EI sickness benefits more flexible may result in more claims. However, this would be offset by the increased number of people who will be able to pay into the tax system.

5. Other Challenges

With some Canadian individuals, businesses and communities facing particular challenges at this time, in your view, who is facing the most challenges, what are the challenges that are being faced and what specific federal actions are needed to address these challenges?

People with disabilities and chronic diseases are the most vulnerable Canadians. Having a chronic disease or disability often means a life of poverty. For example, MS has a significant economic impact on the health care system because of increased doctor visits, longer stays in hospital, and the need for often costly medications. In addition, MS has a profound impact on the ability of individuals to earn a living. Many people are diagnosed with MS between the ages of 15 and 40, just when they are finishing school, starting careers and beginning families. As the disease progresses, it takes a toll on a person's ability to stay in the work force full-time, and it also affects caregivers – often family members, who have to take time off work to help care for their loved ones. To help address these challenges, the MS Society of Canada suggests that federal action be taken to provide income support to people with

disabilities and their caregivers. EI sickness benefits should be made more flexible by allowing 150 half days of benefits coupled with part-time work. Other federal actions needed are to make the disability tax credit, caregiver tax credit and family caregiver tax credit refundable. This would help address the income needs of low-income Canadians with disabilities as well as caregivers, who relieve pressure on the health care system. In many cases, people with disabilities are unable to benefit from these non-refundable tax credits because they have low incomes, or cannot transfer the credits. The MS Society thanks the Committee for considering the suggestions made in this submission and hopes the government will see the value of assisting people with disabilities so they too can contribute to the Canadian labour force and economy.