

**Canadian Association of Social Workers' Pre-Budget Submission
to the Standing Committee on Finance:**

Supporting Social Workers for Better Social Outcomes

2019 Pre-Budget Consultation



Founded in 1926 the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national association voice for the social work profession.

CASW has adopted a pro-active approach to issues pertinent to social policy/social work. It produces and distributes timely information for its members, and special projects are initiated and sponsored. With its concern for social justice and its continued role in social advocacy, CASW is recognized and called upon both nationally and internationally for its social policy expertise.

The mission of CASW is to promote the profession of social work in Canada and advance social justice. CASW is active in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

Introduction

CASW is encouraged by the leadership role that the current Federal Government has demonstrated in the goal of improving health and social conditions for Canadians. To this end, CASW continues to emphasize the importance of investing in the social determinants of health. The Federal Government's commitments to children, women, Indigenous communities, affordable housing, and addressing poverty align with CASW's vision of a more equitable Canada. To this end, CASW applauds the Federal Government for the leadership role that they have taken and looks forward to holding this government accountable to the implementation of these important promises.

Even with important pieces in place such as the National Housing Strategy, the Canada Child Benefit and the newly released anti-poverty strategy, Canada remains in crisis: the number of children – and particularly indigenous children – in care is a national emergency. There are many barriers to addressing this crisis, one of them being the lack of a national picture of best practices in child protection or standards across the country.

Additionally, mental health and the opioid crisis also remain huge issues for Canadians, and many communities, especially in rural and remote contexts, have difficulty attracting and retaining mental health professional such as social workers.

Concurrently, as shown by the results of our recent major research paper, **Understanding Social Work and Child Welfare: Canadian Survey and Interviews with Child Welfare Experts**, social workers across Canada are overworked and inundated in high caseloads that make it difficult for them to provide one-on-one services to families while meeting administrative requirements.

CASW is hopeful that the Federal Government will continue to lead the way towards a more equitable Canada by adopting and implementing the recommendations below:

- 1) Fund, through Employment and Social Development Canada, a *Child Welfare Caseload Study* to ascertain nation-wide data and begin developing national standards;
- 2) Implement loan forgiveness for social workers that practice in rural and remote communities to increase equitable care, decrease wait times and attract and retain social workers in these communities and;
- 3) Adopt a *Social Care Act for Canada* to guide social investments and increase government accountability and measure return on investment.

CASW'S Recommendations:

1) Fund a nation-wide *Child Welfare Caseload Study*

When social workers are prevented from remaining in their positions or developing relationships with communities, children and families suffer – resulting, in turn, in more kids in care and more families in crisis. CASW recently completed a major research project assessing the state of social workers in child welfare and discovered the following issues which directly cause many of the issues experienced across Canada:

- excessive workload and caseloads are a key factor in social workers leaving child welfare positions;
- organizations have inadequate mental health and wellness resources to respond to staff vicarious trauma;
- there is a troubling lack of adequate data and information to guide policy and planning and;
- Increased administrative requirements that create added burden on social work practice.

The intended role of social workers in child welfare practice is to develop relationships with communities to support families to remain intact. In the current climate, with huge caseloads requiring overwhelming administrative burden, this one-on-one aspect of social work is often pushed to the wayside. Families needing supportive interventions are then only seen once a negative incident has taken place, causing another child to be taken into care.

We also know that child welfare practice has the most success in keeping families together when the community has a healthy, long-term relationship with a worker. Currently, high caseloads are causing frequent burnout, meaning many social workers leave the field of child welfare, creating a 'turn-style- effect in many communities that ruptures family relationships with professionals, discouraging them from seeking assistance upstream.

Currently, there are no national standards governing caseloads in child welfare practice. Tools for how to measure appropriate caseload size and complexity vary from region to region. Practices, and successes, vary as well. There has been no large scale study to help child welfare organizations, both on and off reserve, determine a healthy and appropriate caseload for their workers.

We recommend that the Government of Canada fund such an initiative through Employment and Social Development Canada.

2) *Loan forgiveness* for social workers practicing in rural and remote communities

Given the discrepancy between the availability of health and mental health services in urban and rural areas and the resulting wait times, CASW advocates for the inclusion of social workers under the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness Program, which currently includes other professions such as Nursing.

A 2012 report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) on rural and remote care in Canada showed that, of 11 countries, Canadians waited the longest for health care. Since then, conditions have continued to deteriorate, with the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) identifying particularly egregious wait times and directly correlated harms.

In light of Canada's particular context, in which Indigenous communities are often located in rural or remote areas, already underserved populations are made even more vulnerable.

Social workers are highly trained professionals who are capable of offering many of the same therapeutic services as psychologists and mental health nurses, but at a significantly lower cost. Furthermore, in a small community that can only support one mental health practitioner, a social worker provides great value - with their broad skill sets, they can provide various types of care, such as case work, assessment, therapeutic counselling, and referrals to other community supports. Concurrently, many communities have great difficulty attracting mental health professionals.

CASW proposes that providing an incentive, through student loan forgiveness for social workers, would greatly support the recruitment of social workers to serve practice in rural and remote locations.

This ask directly aligns with the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour's Mandate Letter which stipulates the following:

- "Work with provinces and territories to make post-secondary education more affordable for students from low- and middle-income families."
- "Work with the Ministers of Status of Women and Innovation, Science and Economic Development to take steps that will enable us to make meaningful progress on reducing the wage gap between men and women"
- "Work with the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development to promote economic development and create jobs for Indigenous Peoples."

CASW's recommendation would address all the above aspects of the Mandate Letter. Many young social workers, including Indigenous social workers, wish to return to their rural/remote communities but cannot afford to do so. Additionally, as the profession is predominantly composed of women, loan forgiveness for social workers would facilitate many young women establishing their careers in a community of their choosing, and help reduce the high burden of educational costs.

3) Adopt a *Social Care Act for Canada* to guide social investments

This federal government has, rightfully, placed a high importance on data, science, and innovation. CASW argues that without accountability to the Canada Social Transfer – including the requirement to report on use and outcomes – Canada is woefully without the proper data to facilitate best practices and innovation in the social sector.

CASW proposes the adoption of a *Social Care Act for Canada* with principles similar to those of the *Canada Health Act* to help guide the Canada Social Transfer (CST) and other social investments, making possible a national strategy with shared performance indicators. The *Social Care Act* is necessary to produce the conditions for federal leadership that would be required for the successful implementation of a universal BIG.

Ten Principles of a proposed Social Care Act for Canada

1. Public administration
2. Comprehensiveness
3. Universality
4. Portability
5. Accessibility
6. Fairness
7. Effectiveness
8. Accountability and Transparency
9. Rights and Responsibility
10. Comparability

Such an *Act* would help guide the provinces and territories in developing policies that best fit their unique needs, while assisting the Federal Government better understand where dollars are being spent – and, in turn, where more targeted investment might be needed. This would help not only to foster dialogue around shared issues, best practices, and evidence-based programs, but also aid in producing comparable outcomes across Canada. Without federal leadership guiding social transfers and investments, dialogue on progressive social policy stagnates.

For example, while CASW greatly appreciates the new Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the program is weakened by the lack of a mechanism to protect recipients from claw backs at the provincial level. Instead of relying on an unspoken commitment to protect recipients of this benefit from claw backs, Canadians should celebrate our restored compassion driven policy ethos and make these decisions official with a *Social Care Act*.

The proposed *Social Care Act for Canada* can be read in full on CASW's website, www.casw-acts.ca .