

CITIZENS FOR
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COVID-19 Responses & Recovery: Building a Better Canada

Submission to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social
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Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) is a faith-based policy organization that believes federal policy can and must serve the public good. Our research, policy analysis, education, and advocacy work are grounded in an understanding of the sacredness of creation and the dignity of all people. From this perspective, the central role of government is to promote the well-being of citizens and residents, and the flourishing of the Earth.

We appreciate the ambition and responsiveness demonstrated by the federal government in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe this moment is showing what is possible when our government resolves to take action and prioritize people's health and well-being.

We are also seeing the critical imperative of addressing social and environmental determinants of health, of understanding and tracking how different groups are disproportionately affected, and of the need for preventative as well as responsive measures.

CPJ commends the federal government on the ways it has acted quickly to launch, extend, and modify policies and programs to meet the needs of people in Canada, especially those initially left outside of these emergency supports. We applaud your open communication with the not-for-profit and charitable sector and that special funding has been made available to increase the sector's capacity to meet the immediate needs of individuals and communities.

We ask now for your continued commitment and openness to the voices of civil society as we make recommendations for how we, as a country, must rebuild in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While charitable acts and giving are certainly important, they can no longer be relied on as stand-ins for truly just policies that uphold people's rights.

For decades, CPJ has called for structural changes to our socio-economic and environmental policies and systems to build the strong foundation we need to promote and protect the health and well-being of all people living in Canada, as well as that of our environment and ecosystems. COVID-19 has simply made more obvious what we already knew about the precarity and inequity of our existing systems. Millions were already living in poverty and one in eight families were unable to put food on the table. Climate change was already affecting northern infrastructure, and low-lying communities faced elevated risks of flooding. The lack of affordable housing stock was already trapping women and children in abusive homes, and barring newcomers to Canada from successful economic integration. Inadequate funding and disputes between levels of government left many Indigenous communities without the healthcare they need. These are but a few examples.

The evidence-based recommendations outlined below have been developed in consultation with a number of partner organizations working on poverty, climate change, refugee rights, Indigenous rights, and social and economic rights including housing, health, accessibility, and food security. Not only do they call for ambitious action to address poverty, the climate emergency, and inequality in Canada, they also call for changes to our tax policies that can help fund these investments, paired with subsequent savings to our spending on health care and the correctional system, for example.

Our recommendations are aligned with the **Principles of a Just Recovery**,¹ developed in collaboration with a broad coalition of over 200 organizations from various sectors and regions across the country. We have used these six Principles to frame our recommendations.

¹ Available in full at <https://justrecoveryforall.ca/> or <https://relancejuste.ca/>

1. PUT PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FIRST, NO EXCEPTIONS

Although health is a human right, we know that physical and mental health outcomes for people in Canada vary greatly depending on socio-economic status, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, housing, immigration status, employment status, and geographic location (particularly for those living on reserve or in remote, northern communities). Disaggregated data is needed to investigate these trends and to assess the efficacy of policies and programs in a way that leads to effective and accessible solutions.

We commend the federal government for their data-driven commitment thus far to developing a national pharmacare program, and wish to see this process expanded and expedited. We expect federal leadership, as well as partnership from the provinces and territories, and believe conditions for federal transfers should outline minimum criteria for health care services and spending.

CPJ recommendations:

- Address the issues of non-potable water and substandard, overcrowded housing in Indigenous communities by implementing equitable distribution of human and material resources. Address existing mental and physical health problems, and foster resiliency in culturally appropriate ways. All processes involving or related to Indigenous Peoples must be developed with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities themselves; cultural training should be required of all non-Indigenous health care providers working in or with Indigenous communities.
- Adopt a public single-payer pharmacare system that is universal, comprehensive, and accessible, with portable coverage for residents who move within Canada.
- Expand the public health care system to include critical dental care, optical care, and physiotherapy.
- Comply with all rulings by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ordering the federal government to immediately cease discriminatory funding of First Nations child and family services, as per the [Spirit Bear Plan](#). Fully and properly implement [Jordan's Principle](#).
- Respect the right to health of migrants and refugees, including the provision of essential medicine, prevention, and treatment, regardless of status.
- Leverage the untapped resource of foreign trained doctors and nurses to ease the strained health system by streamlining the recognition of foreign credentials. Many previously ignored health professionals are now, temporarily, doing front-line work to combat COVID-19. The federal government should automatically grant physicians who have been given temporary licenses during the pandemic permission to practice fully afterwards.
- Bring long-term care into the public system and regulate it under the Canada Health Act. This work (often done by immigrants) is essential but under-recognized. COVID-19 has demonstrated the value of long-term care workers and the need to improve wages and working conditions.

2. STRENGTHEN THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET AND PROVIDE RELIEF DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE

Building on the imperative of prioritizing the health and well-being of all people, and recognizing the social and environmental determinants of health, the following recommendations emphasize preventative measures to improve and protect public health and build resiliency.

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated existing inequality in Canada and our overdependence on the charitable sector to fill the gaps in our systems. Chronic, generational poverty that disproportionately affects certain communities marks a clear distinction between “falling on hard times” or “making poor choices” and systemic inequity and oppression. Unfortunately, the people hardest hit by this pandemic will be left even further behind in recovery efforts unless we do what it takes to build an economy and social safety net that support the rights, well-being, and equal participation of all people.

CPJ recommendations:

- Apply an intersectional gender-based analysis (GBA+) to the development, implementation, and evaluations of all policy and budgetary decisions. Budget for, and develop, a regular practice of using disaggregated data and the input of people with lived experience of poverty, marginalization, and structural oppression to inform targeted decision-making and investments.
- Eliminate core housing need by investing in social housing repairs and the development of new housing stock, including supportive housing. Commit to ending homelessness as part of Canada’s international human rights obligations and reassess the definition of “chronic homelessness” to capture the experiences of children and families, including women fleeing violence, immigrants and refugees and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, many of whom live with overcrowding and hidden homelessness.
- Implement measures to curtail the impacts of financialization of rental housing markets by limiting the ability of large capital funds (including Real Estate Income Trusts – REITs) to purchase “distressed” rental housing assets.
- Ensure access to childcare, recognizing its essential nature as part of economic recovery. A universal, flexible, publicly-funded system offers an economic boost both by providing decent work for early child care educators and by enabling parents, especially mothers, to return to work. Continue efforts to develop national standards and investments for public, subsidized childcare across the country.
- Universalize access to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and ensure that all who are unemployed or underemployed have access, regardless of their immigration status or how much income they have made in the past year, including workers who do not have work visas or valid SINs and those who are engaged in precarious, home-based, and casual work. Top up Employment Insurance (EI) to the same rate as the CERB for those who receive lower EI benefits and guarantee that this benefit not be clawed back from provincial and territorial social assistance recipients as a condition of the Canada Social Transfer.
- Implement a basic income guarantee for 18-64-year-olds, based on family income, of \$22,000/year (\$31,113 for a couple), gradually reducing as other income increases.² This benefit could be delivered through the tax system like the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and Seniors Benefits. It could also address the higher costs of living for certain groups of people or those living in specific geographic regions through supplemental benefit programs provided by various levels of government without clawbacks.
- Make the federal disability tax credit refundable at its present maximum amount so that, like the GST, the credit goes to people who qualify, even if their income is so low they do not owe income tax.
- Facilitate access to benefits for children in low-income and newcomer families by: (a) enabling information sharing between government agencies as it pertains to caregivers’ access to the CCB,

² For full details on this model of basic income, including proposed costing and financing, please see the Policy Options report of the Basic Income Canada Network at https://www.basicincomecanada.org/policy_options

birth certificates, and other benefits and services; (b) expand the circle of people able to attest to residency to include charities so that impoverished families with children too young for school can meet the requirements to access federal benefits; (c) set delivery standards so all children have equal access to federally funded support no matter where they live; and, (d) amend the Income Tax Act by repealing s.122.6e that ties eligibility for the CCB to the immigration status of the applicant parent, ensuring that refugee claimants and other currently excluded parents who pay into the tax system are able to receive the CCB.

- Make benefits universally accessible. Lack of identification, SIN, immigration or citizenship status, a Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) account, or a fixed address should not bar anyone from accessing federal financial benefits, including anyone engaged in precarious, casual or home-based work.
- Endeavour to promote tax filing by removing barriers, and explore alternative methods of delivering benefits to people outside the tax system, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples, undocumented migrants/migrant workers without a valid SIN, women fleeing violence, unbanked or underbanked households and people experiencing homelessness. Work with trusted non-profits to leverage new technology and incorporate best practices (gleaned from other jurisdictions) for benefit registration, distribution, and poverty elimination with systems such as prepaid reloadable credit cards and mobile or digital transfers.

3. PRIORITIZE THE NEEDS OF WORKERS AND COMMUNITIES

Governments have had to decide what services and workers are deemed “essential” during the COVID-19 crisis. In doing so, we have exposed a cruel irony that many of the workers we need the most are in the most precarious positions in terms of wages, labour standards, immigration status, and access to benefits. Meanwhile, we see corporations, executives, and shareholders continuing to accrue wealth and widen the gap in wealth inequality in Canada. Our labour standards and tax system must work in tandem to ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth and well-being. We must also ensure that the industries and jobs in which we are investing are consistent with our transition to a net-zero carbon economy.

While these recommendations mainly focus on directing resources to workers and communities over corporations, we cannot overstate the importance of ensuring that our economy also benefits those outside the workforce. The contributions of people engaged in unpaid care work and volunteerism, as well as the value of people who cannot work or volunteer but are still indispensable to their communities must not be forgotten or overlooked.

CPJ recommendations:

- Improve equity and outcomes for workers and other community members who have traditionally been exploited (e.g. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, especially Two Spirit people, women, and girls; racialized people; refugees and other immigrants; women; LGBTQQIA+ people; and people living with disabilities).
- Recognize the essential nature of immigration in addressing labour shortages, rebuilding the economy and assisting in paying off our national debt.
- Provide direct income support³ for workers (regardless of immigration status) who are currently employed in carbon-intensive industries and those who support workers and communities heavily reliant on carbon-intensive industries. Invest in economic planning that will grow and

³ This benefit could be offered while the infrastructure is being developed for a basic income, and could be transitioned to a top-up as needed once a basic income is in place.

support a resilient, diversified, green economy.

- Protect the integrity of the COVID-19 wage subsidy program by implementing a significant corporate tax on any and all profits above 7.5% generated by corporations while receiving the COVID-19 wage subsidy.
- Prohibit corporate stock buybacks, executive bonuses, golden parachutes,⁴ and shareholder dividend payouts for at least one year for corporations receiving COVID-19 relief funding.
- Limit the amount that corporations can deduct for compensation to any single executive or employee to \$1 million annually. This should be broad-based and cover not just salaries, but also the value of stock options, other forms of compensation, and performance-based pay.
- Demonstrate leadership in advocating for, and implementing, fundamental reform of the international corporate tax system, including a minimum corporate tax rate, such that Multi National Enterprises pay their fair share of tax to each country in which they operate.
- Increase funding to the CRA for investigation, audits, enforcement, and prosecution of offshore, corporate, and high-income tax evasion, and apply larger fines for individuals and corporations that promote and facilitate international tax evasion schemes.

4. BUILD RESILIENCE TO PREVENT FUTURE CRISES

CPJ's call for a just transition to a net-zero carbon economy, the eradication of poverty, and the full welcome of refugees in Canada predates the COVID-19 crisis, but as we move from crisis to recovery, governments, citizens, and [civil society](#) are showing an increased openness to ambitious structural change. Recovery plans from COVID-19 must not exacerbate existing or impending crises.

Our recommendations thus far serve mainly to address, prevent, and build resilience against socio-economic and health crises. Below we outline recommendations to ensure our recovery plans build resiliency against climate change specifically.

CPJ recommendations:

- End all subsidies to the fossil fuel industry and reinvest the money saved in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and skills development for workers currently employed in the oil and gas sector.
- Develop a [National Decarbonization Strategy](#) that emphasizes quality jobs and GHG emissions reductions in consultation with the provinces and territories, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, and others currently marginalized from the existing economy.
- Include a [Strategic Training Fund](#) as a key component of decarbonization plans to support workforce diversification by funding post-secondary training programs for populations historically marginalized from low-carbon growth industries like energy efficiency, technology, health care, and renewable energy.
- Provide a [Just Transition Transfer](#) to provinces and territories to support workers and communities most directly impacted by the move away from fossil fuels.
- Pursue public ownership of Canada's renewable energy sector (not equity in oil and gas), drawing from current and former fossil fuel workers for workforce development.

⁴ An agreement between a company and an employee (usually upper executives) specifying that the employee will receive significant benefits (e.g. severance pay, cash bonuses, stock options) if employment is terminated.

- Offer urgently needed funding to support energy and water conservation, public transportation, regenerative agriculture, and other areas of mitigation and adaptation to global warming.
- Strengthen the federal carbon pricing backstop by eliminating the preferences for large emitters and converting the cap and trade mechanism into a transparent carbon tax with border adjustments, so that tariffs are applied to imports from countries that aren't taking sufficient action on climate change and rebates are provided to Canadian exporters to those countries.
- Implement a Climate Accountability Act that includes: long-term emissions reduction targets paired with clear Ministerial oversight and responsibility; regular planning and reporting that includes legislated time-bound obligations; five-year carbon budgets with corresponding regular impact reports; and, the establishment of an authoritative, independent expert climate advisory panel.

5. BUILD SOLIDARITY AND EQUITY ACROSS COMMUNITIES, GENERATIONS, AND BORDERS

A just recovery and a fair and sustainable future for Canada require that we address the intersecting systems of oppression and inequity that continue to withhold individuals' and communities' rights and prevent their full participation in society. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor is both unjust and detrimental to the well-being of all members of society – including the wealthy.⁵ Corrective measures are needed as we rebuild.

CPJ continues to call on the federal government to honour its international human rights obligations and commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals through both domestic and foreign policy decisions and investments. It is imperative that people and communities are made aware of their rights and have access to mechanisms by which they can claim these rights or identify systemic barriers to be investigated and remedied by governments and other institutions.

CPJ recommendations:

- Apply an intersectional GBA+ analysis to all policy and funding decisions, including the budget. Collect disaggregated data by race, gender and other socio-demographic identities and use this to inform and direct policy and budgetary decisions.
- Increase the top federal marginal income tax rate on incomes over \$750,000 from 33% to 37%, generating about \$1 billion annually.⁶
- Allocate funds to provide compensation, infrastructure, technology, and other support needed to empower remote and otherwise marginalized or underrepresented groups to participate fully in decision-making processes. Avoid sacrificing democratic principles in the name of expediency, by including a broad range of civil society representatives in decision-making about how these large investments in our future will be made.
- Expedite the establishment of a strong, well-led, well-resourced, and effective National Housing Advocate and Housing Committee to allow communities to report systemic violations of the right to housing.
- Empower and resource the Poverty Advisory Committee to make public recommendations to governments based on their consultations with communities across the country, and that the government be required to respond publicly within 90 days.

⁵ See the work of Pickett & Wilkinson in *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* via <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/spirit-level>

⁶ Canadians for Tax Fairness, *Platform for Tax Fairness* (2019), https://www.taxfairness.ca/sites/default/files/resource/c4tf_draft_federal_election_2019_platform_proposals_.pdf

- Protect asylum seekers by rescinding or renegotiating the Safe Third Country Agreement, recognizing that refugee protection in the U.S. falls below international legal obligations.
- Encourage the social and economic integration of racialized communities by addressing the systemic barriers they face in having foreign credentials and education recognized in Canada.
- Build international capacity, particularly among Global South countries, to stop the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses by providing development aid consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Reduce forced migration by providing development aid to Global South countries to improve governance, development, and capacity to provide health care and services to their citizens.

6. UPHOLD INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

A just recovery must uphold Indigenous Rights and include the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples, in line with the standard of free, prior, and informed consent. Indigenous Peoples require sustained resources and investments that stimulate Indigenous economies, create healthy communities, and protect the lands and waters. Indigenous laws, values, customs, and traditions must be recognized and upheld, including the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in all jurisdictions.

CPJ recommendations:

- Honour the rights of Indigenous peoples: upholding the principle of free, prior, and informed consent, and the broader framework of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. All processes involving or related to Indigenous Peoples must be developed with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities themselves, and cultural training should be required of all non-Indigenous professionals and government employees involved in working with and among these communities.
- Partner with Indigenous communities to ensure equal access to comprehensive, culturally appropriate health care and services, including full implementation of [Jordan's Principle](#) and all of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.
- Include a culturally-competent and Indigenous-led approach that addresses the unique needs of Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people, including urban Indigenous populations, in planning COVID-19 recovery measures and a just transition to a net-zero carbon economy.
- Accelerate the co-development of the three distinctions-based Indigenous housing strategies and commit to a fourth complementary Indigenous Housing Strategy to effectively address the needs of urban and rural Indigenous Peoples. Make the expansion of the availability of safe and adequate housing for Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples, co-developed with Indigenous communities and organizations using a distinctions-based framework an immediate priority.
- Support Indigenous food sovereignty where First Nations, Metis, and Inuit determine their own place-based food systems, advancing policies that will best support resilient futures

We offer these recommendations with our earnest desire to support your efforts to protect and promote the health and well-being of all people in Canada, and to sustain the liveability of the planet. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss them in greater detail, explore options for implementation and assessment, and put you in contact with those with lived experience and other forms of expertise in the issues raised. We thank you in advance for your consideration and service.

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) is a national, progressive organization of members who are inspired by faith to act for justice in Canadian public policy. CPJ promotes social and environmental justice in Canadian public policy, focusing on poverty in Canada, climate justice, and refugee rights.

Our 1,700 individual members come from a wide variety of faith communities and participate in CPJ's work through campaigns, dialogue, and financial support. We also receive financial support from over 100 congregations (representing 25,000 individuals) and several Catholic religious orders. CPJ is an affiliate member of the Canadian Council of Churches (representing 85% of Canadian Christians).

In addition to our 1,700 members across the country, CPJ works in close collaboration with many other advocacy groups and service providers, including Campaign 2000, the National Right to Housing Network, Canada Without Poverty, Food Secure Canada, the Canadian Poverty Institute, the Canadian Council of Churches, and Canadians for Tax Fairness. CPJ is a member of Climate Action Network-Canada, the Green Economy Network, and For the Love of Creation – a faith-based climate justice initiative. We are also contributing members of the Alternative Federal Budget coalition.

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