



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

Our Children. Canada's Future.

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations
in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

That the Government of Canada direct \$300 million to provinces and territories to facilitate timely access to children's health services.

Recommendation 2:

That the Government of Canada invest \$8 million annually to the creation and operation of a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth to advocate for and advance policy in the best interests of children.

Recommendation 3:

That the Government of Canada invest \$30 million dedicated to Maternal & Child Health research.

About Us

Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association representing all sixteen children's hospitals in Canada, as well as other health service delivery organizations that serve children and youth, including community hospitals, rehabilitation hospitals, children's treatment centres, regional health authorities, palliative care, respite, and home care agencies.

Pediatric Chairs of Canada represents the Department Heads of Pediatrics within Canada's 17 medical schools.

Introduction

While children and youth have been among those least likely to fall seriously ill because of COVID-19, Canada's eight million kids have arguably been amongst those hardest hit by the public health crisis. The governments' response to the pandemic is having profound impacts on the physical and mental health of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens — an impact that could very well last a lifetime.

As Canada embarks on the road to recovery, we believe that children must be a central focus to ensure a sustainable recovery and avoid long-term social and economic hardship for all Canadians. From a health perspective, putting children first means prioritizing their access to health services across the continuum of care so that our kids do not suffer long term consequences, the result of delayed assessments, diagnoses or interventions. It means investing in the child health research enterprise to ensure that Canada continues to lead in the development of life changing and life-saving therapies. It means establishing an independent office for a federal Children's Commissioner, acknowledging that children deserve a champion who will work to protect their rights.

Many Canadians believe our country is one of the best in which to raise a child. The facts suggest otherwise. In 2018, UNICEF reported that the health and wellbeing of Canadian children ranked 25th of 41 OECD countries. Not only do we stand stubbornly in the middle of the pack, Canada's position continues to fall. Countries who invest in their children, reap a tremendous long-term payoff. The next several weeks and months will be defining times for all Canadians, including our children and youth. The time has come for Canada to invest in the future. An investment in children's health is an investment in the health of Canada as a nation.

Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada direct \$300 million to provinces and territories to facilitate timely access to children's health services.

It is well established that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many existing gaps in the delivery of health services to Canadians, including vulnerable children and youth. The sudden closure of many hospital and community-based services mid-March created a degree of urgency to establish and implement innovative and sometimes virtual solutions that we have not previously seen in this country.

Nevertheless, five months later, many children in this country do not yet have access to timely physical and mental health services, in hospital or in their community. This delay – while an inconvenience in the short term, now threatens the long-term health outcomes for Canada's kids.

Current estimates suggest that addressing the growing backlog of elective services with new safety protocols in place could take between 12 and 24 months. Children and their families cannot afford to wait months or years for these essential health services, including surgical procedures, outpatient therapies, and home care. A recent Abacus Data public opinion survey demonstrates that a majority of Canadians believe children should wait no longer than one to two months for these time-sensitive healthcare services.

Beyond delays for hospital-based procedures, many children and youth also continue to experience barriers to access for essential community services including speech language pathology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and social work. Many families now fear irremediable loss of function as a result. They are also observing significant behavioural challenges, particularly in children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Families of medically fragile children are struggling to decide whether to continue homecare and respite services. Many have cancelled nursing services because of concerns around the increased risk of infection, while others do not have the space to accommodate homecare or respite workers when one or more family members are forced to work from home. Racialized children, low-income children, and those with multiple diagnoses face the greatest risk of poor health outcomes due to the current lack of support.

In order to meet the urgent need for timely access to children's health services across the continuum of care, Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada call on the federal government to provide provinces and territories with \$300 million dollars to:

- enable children's hospitals and other children's healthcare providers to address the backlog of essential health services. An investment of \$104M will facilitate the procurement of personal protective equipment for patients, their families and healthcare professionals, ramp up staffing levels to deliver services after hours to address backlog, enhance COVID testing and contact tracing in healthcare facilities, cover extraordinary cleaning of surgical suites and hospital facilities.
- scale up availability of front line child and youth mental health services to reduce wait times for counselling and therapies. Children's hospitals estimate \$102M is needed to meet anticipated demand related to COVID.
- support the equitable and accelerated roll out of virtual care services, where appropriate to serve children and youth closer to home today and into the future. Children's Healthcare Canada members estimate an investment of \$94M is required across the continuum of care to fully implement and evaluate delivery of health services virtually to children and youth;

Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada invest \$8 million annually to the creation and operation of a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth to advocate for and advance policy in the best interests of children.

Investing in kids is not only a moral imperative, but an economic one. While Canada's wealth has been steadily rising, the overall level of child and youth well-being hasn't budged in more than a decade. A 2018 UNICEF report confirms that Canada lags behind several other wealthy countries as it relates to the health and wellbeing of children and youth. In one of the world's wealthiest societies, we still have to measure how well Canada is meeting basic needs like nutrition and clean drinking water because we are not fulfilling these human rights for every child. In 2018, Children First Canada's Raising Canada Report put an annual price tag on the cost of inaction: Child Abuse - \$23 billion, Childhood Obesity - \$22 billion, and Bullying - \$48 billion.

International experience tells us that an independent, national Commissioner for Children and Youth can advance the health and well-being of a nation's children, fulfilling a central recommendation of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Children. In the Canadian context, a Commissioner for Children and Youth would also address many areas of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action.

The Commissioner would:

- Ensure that legislation, policies and investments pertaining to children and youth achieve measurably better outcomes while reducing unintended consequences and costs;
- Facilitate meaningful engagement with children and youth, families, NGOs, and other stakeholders to advise the federal government on issues affecting children and youth;
- Act as a resource for the development of federal legislation and other decisions affecting children and youth;
- Collaborate with federal, provincial, and territorial policy makers, government agencies, parliamentary bodies, and others to ensure that children's best interests are being respected; and,
- Be independent with clearly defined powers and duties, in accordance with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Paris Principles for Independent Human Rights Institutions.

In order to effect meaningful change, an annual budget of \$8 million is required. This is comparable to the annual budget of other Offices of Parliament with similar form and function and amounts to only \$1 per Canadian child.

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada invest \$30 million dedicated to Maternal & Child Health research.

Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada commend the federal government for acknowledging the crucial role played by the broader health research community to address and mitigate the impact of COVID 19 on Canadians, in particular children and youth. The link between a nation's economic health and the health of its citizens is well established. It is further recognized that health research plays an important role in our collective ability to attain good health and minimize the impact of public health threats such as COVID 19. Children's health research in Canada has historically achieved significant success, positively contributing to children's health and disease outcomes internationally, over the past decade.

Over the past six months, Canada's children's health research institutes swiftly pivoted their focus to better understand COVID-19 and its related impact on children and youth. This urgent and necessary diversion has delayed or deferred advancements related to pre-existing critical lifesaving and life-changing research priorities. Even in the context of COVID, we know that children continue to be born prematurely, have rare diseases and remain at risk for life threatening and/or chronic diseases.

Unfortunately, and ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturn now pose a significant threat to the viability of the child health research community. Research institutes across this country – but especially children’s health research institutes who rely substantively on charitable funders, are bracing for a looming financial crisis. A survey of Canadian children’s health research institutes suggests they forecast to lose \$30 million dollars in funding this fiscal year due to contractions in the economy and related loss in philanthropic donations.

The Canadian child health research community urgently calls on the Government of Canada to ensure the viability of the research community and related life changing work for children is not lost.

Conclusion

The Government of Canada has called COVID-19 the crisis of our generation. The economic and health impacts of this pandemic will be felt for years to come – and for children and youth, most likely a lifetime.

Measures to reopen the economy must not come at the expense of children’s health. Children must have timely access to health services across the continuum of care. Investments to address the backlog of surgical and other essential procedures as the result of public health measures related to COVID 19 are urgently required. At the same time, Canada needs to scale up availability of front-line mental health services for children and youth recognizing the extraordinary impact this pandemic has had on kids. Investments in technology and infrastructure must continue, to ensure healthcare providers, children, youth, and their families have access to virtual healthcare services to minimize disruptions in care which could have life changing effects. The children’s health research community, threatened by economic contractions related to the pandemic, requires urgent federal support to sustain laboratory and bedside research.

Finally, recognizing that good governance for children and youth is sound economic policy, the time has come for the government to introduce a federal Children’s Commissioner.

Canada’s children do not have the luxury of waiting for this pandemic to pass. Their needs are urgent, they are measurable, and they are well within scope to address at the federal level. Indeed, investing in our children is not only a moral imperative, it is an economic one too.