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CASW Pre-Budget Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance

Social Care for Canada: Flattening the curve of inequality

2021 Pre-Budget Consultation

August 4, 2020



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).



CASW welcomes the opportunity to participate in the 2021 pre-budget submissions and is deeply encouraged by the leadership role that the Government of Canada has demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We are hopeful that this government will take the opportunity presented by the unprecedented and challenging time to set a bold course for the future.

RECCOMENDATIONS

that the federal government:

1. Move swiftly to implement a Universal Basic Income Guarantee to ensure Canadians receive the support required during and post COVID-19;
2. Implement student loan forgiveness for social workers that practice in rural and remote communities to increase equitable care, decrease wait times, attract, and retain social workers in these communities;
3. Adopt a [*Social Care Act for Canada*](#) to guide social investments and increase government accountability and measure return on investment and;
4. Introduce a Mental Health Parity Act that affirms that mental health is valued equally to physical health. A Mental Health Parity Act will help ensure that communities' and workplaces' policies, programs, and benefits attend equally to mental and physical health.

CASW recognizes that the above recommendations represent broad, structural changes with a significant up-front cost of investment. However, when health and social needs are met, socially and fiscally costly downstream interventions are prevented in every system, including health and mental health, corrections, substance use, child welfare, and more. Research demonstrates that up front investments in health and social care create exponential long-term savings.

CASW is encouraged by the leadership role that the current Federal Government has demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The swift implementation of emergency measures has given way to a new normal in the provision of a social safety net, and this is an opportunity for Canada to create a new action plan, one rooted in Reconciliation, human rights, and a more equitable country for all.

CASW strongly urges the government to use this window of time to make bold structural change – the next big step in flattening the curve of inequality in Canada - and implement a Universal Basic Income Guarantee (uBIG).

With essential policy pieces in place to begin addressing the well-being of all Canadians across the country, the social work profession knows Canada remains in crisis, indeed exacerbated by the global pandemic. CASW calls on the Government of Canada to acknowledge the expertise of social workers: their front-line experience with health and mental health, crime and victimization and inequality more broadly gives them the perspective to effectively bring equity and justice for all those who call Canada home.

Recommendations:

1) *Universal Basic Income Guarantee*

In unprecedented times, the Government of Canada has acted promptly to put in place far-reaching measures intended to support the safety and security of all Canadians, including the professions working to serve those immediately made vulnerable by this crisis. Although the government has taken significant steps toward mitigating the physical, psychological, and economic concerns of the nation, more must be done to ensure that all people in Canada are supported and protected through this time of grave uncertainty.

Even though the new emergency financial support programs for large and small business, non-profits and charities, as well for people that have directly lost their jobs due to COVID-19, may provide a platform for many, a uBIG floor is required to meet the needs of unemployed Canadians that fall through the cracks of ongoing, and future, public health, environmental and social crises.

This recommendation directly aligns with the recent report released by the Senate Committee on National Finance titled: *COVID-19: Relief in times of crisis*, which recommends the federal government consider adopting a guaranteed basic income:

- Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada, with provinces, territories, and Indigenous governments, give full, fair and priority consideration to a basic income guarantee.

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.

Considering Canada's context, in which Indigenous communities are often located in rural or remote areas, already underserved populations are made even more vulnerable, exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Social workers are highly trained professionals who can offer 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 casework, assessment, therapeutic counselling, and referrals to other community supports. Concurrently, many communities have great difficulty attracting mental health professionals. The value of the social work profession in the mental health sector was finally acknowledged

when the government included social workers as mental health professionals covered under the public health service plan of Canada. This is a step in the right direction for both mental health parity, and a just recovery. However, the government must go further in ensuring these services are available to all.

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 and help Canada in achieving Mental Health Parity.

This recommendation directly aligns with the recent calls for increased mental health and wellness supports from the government, as well as the need to support already underserved populations in rural and remote communities.

CASW's recommendation would address all the above aspects of the Mandate Letter:

- 'Further strengthen the Canada Student Loans and Grants system.'
- 'Undertake initiatives to improve the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities and specifically target barriers to full participation in the labour force, including addressing discrimination and stigma, raising public awareness and working with employers and businesses in a coordinated way.'
- 'With the support of the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, enhance the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy and the Canada Summer Jobs program.'

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, and ensure all Canadians have access to a social worker and the care they provide.

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

This federal government has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by continuing to place high importance on data, science, and innovation. CASW argues however, that without accountability to the Canada Social Transfer – including the requirement to report on use and outcomes – Canada is woefully unprepared without the proper data to facilitate best practices and innovation in the social sector, and ensure the allocation of funding reaches the demographics it is intended for.

In this regard, CASW proposes the adoption of a [*Social Care Act for Canada*](#) with principles like 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.

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 and social services intended for those most historically and currently ignored, as well as social workers working tirelessly to support them.

4) A Mental Health Parity Act:

The biggest challenge facing Canadians experiencing mental illness and mental health issues is timely access to care. Canadians deserve timely access to the right combination of evidence-based services, treatments and supports, when and where they need them.

Arguably, when it comes to accessing mental health services across Canada, the Canada Health Act is not being upheld. The capacity to deliver timely access is hampered by fragmented and poorly coordinated services and supports. The mental health system is in urgent need of improved integration, and people with lived experience and their families and caregivers must be involved in the design and evaluation of these systems.

CASW urges the government to respond to the mental health needs of all Canadians by:

- Ensuring equitable access to mental health care and services to address problematic substance use, and ensure accountability through the creation of a Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing;
- Utilizing a Public Health Approach by embedding mental health services into the universal public health system through the initiation of integrated and collaborative systems of care. Provide grants to publicly funded health care and social service programs to enable them to hire additional registered providers;

- Engaging the provinces and territories in thinking through the system change that will deliver effective mental health care to more Canadians by enhancing the capacity of mental health resource on: primary care teams, augmenting fee-for-service models through private/extended health care insurance;
- Increasing federal funding for mental health.

In conclusion, with your leadership, Canada has a chance to come out of this global pandemic not only intact but thriving. Bold investments in people and communities will lead to a happier, healthier population and, in turn, exponential future savings in all our public systems and supports.