



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

**By Organizations for Health Action (HEAL)**

**August 7, 2020**

## **SUMMARY: 2020 Federal Budget Recommendations**

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** That the federal government, working with provinces and territories, increase investments in community, home and residential care to meet the needs of our aging population, to ensure that all individuals receive the necessary care and services, in the appropriate setting, at the right time and by the right provider.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** That the federal government provide greater financial assistance through benefits, tax credits, and job protection for caregivers to ensure they are not penalized financially for stepping into a caregiver role, including those caregivers in long-term care.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That the federal government provide support for seniors and marginalized vulnerable populations to maximize their use of digital technologies such as virtual care and wellness programs.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That the federal government, working in partnership with the provinces, territories and others, fund sustainable, evidence-based mental health services to meet the growing demand for timely access to care, and formally recognize Mental Health Parity in legislation.

## Organizations for Health Action (HEAL)

Organizations for Health Action, known as [HEAL](#), is a coalition of 40 national health organizations dedicated to improving the health of Canadians and the quality of care they receive. Our members are professional associations of regulated health care providers and organizations of health charities that provide a range of health care services across Canada.

Created in 1991, HEAL now represents more than 650,000 providers (and consumers) of health care. A complete list HEAL members is available [here](#).

## Healthcare needs in the context of COVID-19 and Canada's economic recovery

Over the past two years, HEAL members have come together to focus their efforts on advocating around two major areas of concern related to Canadian healthcare: seniors care and mental health. Although our 40 coalition members represent a wide range of health sectors across Canada, all agree that these areas continue to be of particular concern for our healthcare systems, and impacts their respective professions and their patients on some significant level.

Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased HEAL's concerns related to seniors care and mental health, as recent events have exacerbated existing gaps and limitations related to these areas.

Unfortunately, HEAL believes that as the pandemic progresses, the impact on Canadians' mental health will become more evident and pose even more of a strain on our current system. As well, further studies and investigations related to what happened in long term care homes during the first wave are sure to continue to identify critical systemic issues.

Our society's ability to care for seniors in a dignified and adequate manner, in addition to the availability of proper mental health supports, arguably affect almost all Canadians personally and profoundly. It has a direct impact on our country's productivity and economic prosperity.

**HEAL firmly believes that failure to significantly and urgently improve our healthcare systems when it comes to mental health and seniors care will unquestionably hinder our ability to see through any sort of economic recovery across Canada.**

## HEAL's COVID-19 Task Force

As soon as the pandemic hit Canada, HEAL mobilized quickly to survey its members on current and emerging issues related to the impact of COVID-19 on frontline care, and shared this insight immediately with government officials.

HEAL has also set up a COVID-19 Task Force which has been meeting weekly since late March. Its mandate is to facilitate coherent and timely information exchange and action by healthcare workers, administrators, and FPT authorities, to help contain and mitigate the crisis. The information is then conveyed directly to the Minister of Health's office.

We were pleased to see how this efficient collaboration with various officials led to important, real time changes to the frontlines of healthcare during the pandemic.

HEAL looks forward to continuing to leverage its wide range of healthcare expertise to assist the federal government and its partners with its ongoing pandemic response.

## HEAL's Federal Budget Recommendations

### 1. Investing in care for seniors

The pandemic has tragically exposed the weaknesses and inadequate health supports available to Canada's aging population, particularly for residents of long-term care facilities. Canada's National Institute on Ageing (NIA) reports that almost 80% of all the deaths in Canada since the beginning of the outbreak have been in long-term care settings<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, COVID-19 reinforced the challenge of maintaining infection control procedures in close congregate care settings such as nursing homes; and the impact to both workers and the seniors who resided there. Isolation, neglect, dehydration, malnutrition, and potentially preventable deaths were some of the negative impacts of unmanaged COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care settings.

The pandemic highlighted that home and community care and services are essential for the safety of Canadian seniors. It also underscored the need to ensure all health care professionals are properly trained to provide earlier, more effective and more compassionate care. Allowing seniors to remain longer safely at home would enable hospitals to discharge clinically stable patients to a safer care setting. It would provide alternatives to long-term care facilities for frail seniors and vulnerable populations who are especially impacted by COVID-19.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** That the federal government, working with provinces and territories, **increase investments in community, home and residential care to meet the needs of our aging population**, to ensure that all individuals receive the necessary care and services, in the appropriate setting, at the right time and by the right provider.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute on Ageing. (2020). NIA Long Term Care COVID-19 Tracker: Canadian Summary. Retrieved from <https://lrc-covid19-tracker.ca/>

## **2. Investing in caregiver supports**

Nearly half (46%) of Canadians aged 15 and older, or 13 million Canadians, have provided care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability, or aging needs<sup>2</sup>. Age-related needs are the single most common problem requiring help from caregivers (28%)<sup>3</sup>. Caregivers contribute more than \$25 billion in unpaid labour to our health care system<sup>4</sup>.

To better support Canadian seniors and their caregivers, we need to create a pan-Canadian Caregiver Strategy that is backed by national caregiver legislation that defines and strengthens the rights and recognition of caregivers in the health and social care system.

For example, the expansion of the family caregiving benefit for adults to 35 weeks and making the benefit refundable would help address the needs of low-income caregivers. Other suggested measures include the adoption of career-friendly workplace standards through corporate tax incentives and the creation of direct caregiver support organizations, such as those that exist in some provinces.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** That the federal government **provide greater financial assistance through benefits, tax credits, and job protection for caregivers** to ensure they are not penalized financially for stepping into a caregiver role, including those caregivers in long-term care.

## **3. Investing in technological tool access and education**

Some segments of our population, like older adults and marginalized populations, have failed to realize the full promise of new technologies. As all levels of governments transition towards a digital delivery of their services, there will continue to be new applications of technology that many Canadians will have difficulty accessing.

For example, seniors will benefit from a greater opportunity for access to primary care through virtual health consultations. Digital applications tailored to specific health needs also have the potential of improving their wellbeing, including such tools as the new COVID-19 Alert app available in Ontario, apps that can sensor data to track falls, or apps that provide reminders for tasks to manage chronic conditions.

Without access to affordable and/ or reliable Internet, and the provision of learning opportunities on how to transition to digital tools, important services and programs will not be accessible to all older adults and marginalized vulnerable populations. It should be noted that seniors and Indigenous people make up a large percentage of rural and remote communities.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** HEAL recommends that the federal government **provide support for seniors and marginalized vulnerable populations to maximize their use of digital technologies**

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2012). Portrait of Caregivers, 2021: Highlights. Retrieved from; (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/2013001/hl-fs-eng.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hollander M, et al. (2009) *Who Cares and How Much? The imputed economic contribution to the Canadian healthcare system of middle-aged and older unpaid caregivers providing care to the elderly.*

such as virtual care and wellness programs.

#### **4. Investing in a mental health parity approach**

While we continue to stay at home and practice physical distancing, we recognize that isolation, job loss and security, and worry for ourselves and loved ones are taking a significant toll on Canadians.

Prolonged isolation and physical distancing can lead to increased depression, anxiety, suicidal crises, domestic crises, and violence. HEAL is concerned about the long-term mental health impact of the pandemic on the general population, as well as on Canadians with severe physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive or sensory impairments who have been disproportionately affected.

A recent survey of Canadian employees by the Conference Board of Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada detail these concerns underlying the decline in our collective mental health.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a study by Deloitte estimates a 54% to 163% increase in the number of visits to a doctor for mental health issues.<sup>6</sup>

Even before the pandemic, Canadians were overwhelmingly in favour of increased mental health supports; 94% of Canadians believe that provincial and territorial governments' health plans should cover mental health care (2019).<sup>7</sup> In fact, 89% of Canadians support increasing funding for mental health care professionals such as psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, dietitians, nurses and counsellors.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, 55% of Canadians reported being dissatisfied with wait times for publicly-funded mental health practitioners, and 20% said they had to seek and pay for private mental health services due to long wait times or lack of publicly-funded mental health services.<sup>9</sup>

Canadians do not currently have parity in the mental and physical health services they receive from governments. To meet the mental health needs of Canadians, governments need to move from provider-based to patient and service-based health systems. Governments need to fund evidence-based care that is delivered by the health-care provider or team trained and licensed to deliver it.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That the federal government, working in partnership with the provinces, territories and others, fund sustainable, evidence-based mental health services to meet the growing demand for timely access to care, and formally recognize **Mental Health Parity** in legislation.

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<sup>5</sup> *COVID-19 Impact on Mental Health and How Employees are Coping*. Conference Board of Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada. June 23, 2020. Page 17.

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Press. Potential explosion in mental illness could last years after pandemic: study. Deloitte Canada. August 5, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Abacus survey. June, 2019. The question asked was "should mental health care be covered by provincial or territorial health insurance plans?"

<sup>8</sup> Nanos Public Opinion Poll. *How Important is Mental Health for People in Canada? Highlights of a Nanos Research Survey for the Mental Health Commission of Canada*. January 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Eight in Ten (82%) Canadians Believe that Prescription Drugs Should be Covered for Everyone, Regardless of their Insurance Coverage*. May 16, 2019. Page 2.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has proven to not only be an unprecedented global health crisis, but also a major economic and social crisis. There were already significant concerns around mental health supports and seniors care across Canada before the pandemic, and these issues have only been compounded.

As Canada plans to “restart” its economy, it is imperative that substantial investments related to seniors care and mental health be made in parallel with economic stimulus projects.

HEAL will soon be launching a more comprehensive policy document titled, *Beyond COVID-19: HEAL’s recommendations for a healthier nation*, which will include additional recommendations for the federal government’s consideration. We urge decision makers to consult this document.

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