



## SUBMISSION FOR THE 2024 PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATION

**BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF CANADA**

**AUGUST 2023**

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation #1:** That the Government implement the priorities for front-line charities identified in the submission of the Coalition of National Service Federations.

**Recommendation #2:** That the Government recognize the critical role played by charities in providing front-line community services and overhaul its inefficient and ineffective funding model for such organizations and services.

**Recommendation #3:** That the Government provide funding to the community-based youth mental health support structure that is facing increased demand with declining resources.

**Recommendation #4:** That the Government provide funding to community-based organizations to expand their Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programming for youth, particularly for new Canadians and Indigenous youth.



## WHO WE ARE

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada (BBBS) enables enduring mentoring relationships to ignite the power and potential of young people. Founded in 1913, we are a federation of 95 registered charities operating in 1,100 urban, rural, remote and Indigenous communities across Canada.

In 2022, BBBS mobilized 15,945 volunteers to provide mentorship to 26,435 children and youth. These young people face adversities in their lives, resulting in toxic stress that can negatively affect their development. Our trained adult volunteer mentors create positive relationships with youth. They provide developmental guidance and supportive role modelling. We meet community needs that are not always addressed through government social support structures. We are single, consistent support in their complicated lives.

As a national organization, BBBS has a supportive responsibility in improving the lives and outcomes for children and youth across Canada, including those from Indigenous, newcomer, racialized and LGBTQ2S+ communities. This is only possible through their involvement in mentoring relationships that acknowledge, honour and celebrate their communities and stories.

Our 2024 submission has four recommendations, and there are two common themes: the need to recognize the role that organizations like BBBS play in providing front-line community services, and that the federal funding framework is not designed to scale proven interventions to improve youth mental health and well-being.

## SUPPORTING A MODERN AND RESPONSIVE FRONT-LINE COMMUNITY SERVICE SECTOR

BBBS supports the recommendations made by the Coalition of National Service Federations to address critical issues facing front-line charities operating in communities across Canada.

This includes a much needed investment in national charitable foundations for modernization – a need that was not addressed through the Community Services Recovery Fund. BBBS had been a proponent of that fund, yet our national office received no funding, meaning we were unable to launch any national modernization initiatives. Any future funding must have a national focus as modernization across a national network is impossible if not resourced at the national level.

Federations like BBBS share resources and funding so we are well-positioned to equitably distribute resources across a service delivery framework guided by national standards. BBBS provides cost-effective infrastructure, technology, governance and stability. Our National client management platform includes a central resource to track and analyze the effectiveness of mentoring services across a variety of measures. We adhere to privacy laws and client protection. This supports members who might otherwise not be able to manage this.

The joint submission also highlights the need for a sector workforce strategy, including volunteers. This critical shortage is reducing the scope of our service delivery. We previously had 21,000 volunteers



providing mentorship to 41,400 youth. Those numbers have dropped to 15,845 and 26,435 respectively based on reduced available resources.

***Recommendation #1: That the Government implement the priorities for front-line charities identified in the submission of the Coalition of National Service Federations.***

### **FIXING A BROKEN FUNDING SYSTEM**

Mentoring is a proven critical intervention to address youth mental health, as shown in surveys. For example, 42% of BBBS mentored youth said their mentor helped them feel less isolated, and 70% who had regular contact with their mentor said it helped them feel less worried or anxious (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, 2021). Interestingly, BBBS mentees reported more inequities compared to non-BBBS youth, such as household income and racialization. Despite that, BBBS mentees reported better mental health, suggesting that being a BBBS mentee may provide protective factors against some mental health problems – a significant finding that points to the preventive and protective power of mentoring.

The research encourages us to make mentorship accessible to all young people facing adversities and provide them with supports for positive mental health and well-being.

Our societal challenge is that there are around 15,000 youth on our waiting list. We have pivoted to address each new challenge, and the increased demand for our services juxtaposed with fewer volunteers and not enough revenue is making the situation almost insurmountable. As detailed above, this led to an almost 40% decline in the number of youth we are able to serve.

In short, we have the tools to address youth mental health and well-being, but not the financial resources to meet the demand to implement those proven interventions, the volunteers to provide mentoring for youth, or the financial means to recruit and train new volunteers. In a recent survey of our local agencies across Canada, 93% identified core funding as their top priority.

It is critical the Government recognize how important these services are to the families of 26,435 children and youth in 1,110 Canadian communities we support, who would lose these services if we are not there.

Unfortunately, we have nowhere to turn for Federal Government funding support. For example, the Government will fund crisis lines like Kids Help Phone, but not organizations upstream like BBBS to whom many of those callers get referred. Likewise, there is often funding for mental health research, yet when we have proven, well-documented interventions that work and can be easily scaled to help youth in need, there is no funding available. Another frustration relates to physical infrastructure versus service delivery. We could apply for funding for a building in which mentors and mentees could meet, but not the work to make those relationships a reality.

A major flaw in the system is the constant focus on “program” funding, in which the Government creates a program for which organizations like ours try to fit our existing need, namely the huge gap



between demand and supply for mentors. A program focus requires organizations to invest excessive time filling out applications for funding that usually does not address core needs, and always comes with an expiry date. It is incredibly inefficient and ineffective to focus on administration rather than service delivery – particularly for BBBS since we seek to build long-term mentor-mentee relationships. (This is not to suggest program funding may be needed for specific cases, but for our tried and tested service offerings, it is not a sustainable approach.)

BBBS has provided proven interventions improving youth mental health and well-being for over 110 years. No one – including government – is suggesting otherwise. With BBBS' track record of success and proven interventions, it remains unknown as to why we are unable to access financial supports to scale these services and interventions to meet growing demand. The answer seems to be simply that the funding model does not work. If the government is concerned with youth mental health, then we should be a partner in service delivery. Instead, we are overwhelmingly reliant on the goodwill of our corporate and individual donors to provide the services that governments seemingly expect and Canadian families deserve.

***Recommendation 2: That the Federal Government adopt a new approach for funding opportunities for organizations providing front-line community services that prioritizes service delivery over physical infrastructure and program creation.***

### **FUNDING BAND-AIDS, IGNORING ROOT CAUSES**

The Government has provided millions in support for the Kids Help Phone, which we endorse, but nothing to BBBS, to which many of those callers are referred. During the pandemic, calls to the Kids Help Phone were up by 55% and through text by 61%, with 76% of callers saying they had no one else to talk to, while the connection that BBBS mentors make is designed to address this critical need in children and youth.

With investment in the national 988 suicide prevention line, we anticipate increases in referrals. However, once again, there has been no talk of providing financial support to the organizations that manage those referrals over the subsequent months and years. At the opposite end, governments spend tens of billions on health care and the criminal justice system, both venues at-risk youth may turn up in without community interventions.

In effect, governments are funding the bandages while ignoring the root causes and the opportunities to implement proven community interventions, like youth mentoring.

BBBS had hoped the pending mental health transfer would have offered support to community organizations providing services. We fully endorse the past recommendation of the Canadian Mental Health Association that 50% of that transfer go to community organizations; however, that transfer now seems dead, cutting off another potential funding opportunity.



As we anticipate recommendation #2 above may take years to address, we are obliged to recommend program funding in this case to offer some immediate means for organizations like BBBS to continue to provide proven mental health interventions, particularly due to increased demand from the backlog and anticipated referrals once the 988 line is fully operational.

***Recommendation #3: That the Government provide funding to the community-based youth mental health support structure that is facing increased demand with declining resources.***

### **EXPANDING EDI PROGRAMMING**

In the recent survey of BBBS local agencies in Canada, the second ranked priority behind core funding is funding for EDI. An immediate need surrounds new and marginalized Canadians. As Canada sets its ambitious immigration targets, many communities are seeing an increased need for local supports, including those offered by BBBS. As we have detailed throughout this submission, BBBS provides proven mentoring interventions to help youth, including newcomers. We can provide these – if we have sufficient volunteer mentors and the resources to facilitate a match with a mentee.

We would also need to scale our programming focused on Indigenous youth, and again, we lack volunteers and funding to develop and provide culturally relevant resources and supports.

***Recommendation #4: That the Government provide funding to community-based organizations to expand their EDI programming for youth, particularly for new Canadians and Indigenous youth.***

### **MENTORING WORKS**

The survey data cited earlier showed the immediate protective factor of BBBS mentoring. All children have a right to receive this protective relationship. There is also long-term data demonstrating that mentoring is an investment in Canada's future.

According to the Building Bigger Connections joint research findings from York University (Drs. Craig and Pepler) and the University of Victoria (Dr. Ames), 70% of BBBS Mentees who had regular contact with their Mentors reported feeling less worried or anxious. And, 65% of BBBS Mentees are accessing Mental Health Services regularly. BBBS works as a trusted bridge to help families and children access and navigate other services across the health and social system.

Those who had a BIG (mentor) had less signs of depression and anxiety if they had a mentor connecting with them through the Pandemic. Non-BBBS youth were more likely to report significant symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Our cost to make a successful mentor/child match is \$1,764 average per year. This increases by 34% when services and social interventions are provided to mentor matches in rural, remote and Indigenous communities. Therefore, with 15,000 youth on our waiting list, we need at least \$25 million in additional annual revenue to meet that demand, but no options to pursue federal funding.



The Government needs to recognize BBBS' integral role in youth mental health – helping keep youth out of publicly funded facilities like hospitals or correctional facilities. We do so almost entirely based on donations and with the support of about 16,000 volunteers. It is impossible to put a price on that work but hiring 16,000 mental health specialists at \$100,000 each, would cost \$1.6 billion yearly – not to mention the costs involved with hospitalization or corrections.

We can – and should – be partners in ensuring youth mental health and well-being. However, this is impossible under current funding frameworks.

