October 23, 2019

The Honourable Andrew Scheer, M.P.
Leader of the Official Opposition
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Scheer,

On behalf of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), I am writing to congratulate you on the Conservative Party of Canada's election performance and offer our Association's support in recognition of role as Leader of the Official Opposition: we look forward to working with you and the CPC to build a fairer, better, and more equitable Canada for everyone.

As background for you, CASW is the national association voice for social workers in Canada, working to strengthen and promote the profession while advancing issues of social justice. CASW is an organization known for its commitment to equity and human rights.

To this end, the next crucial step in ensuring Canadians' health and well-being, as well as helping to address the ongoing opioid crisis and reduce the overall burden of health care costs in our country, is bringing about *Mental Health Parity* in Canada.

Mental Health Parity is the simple idea that mental health must be treated on par with physical health: evidence shows that our physical and mental health are linked not only to one another, but to social and economic well-being as well. Further, the lack of timely and accessible mental health and substance use services for so many across Canada is not only troubling from a human perspective, but results in huge costs to our healthcare systems as individuals cycle in and out of emergency rooms, or see their physical health decline as a result of mental illness.

From CASW's perspective, legislating *Mental Health Parity* is the only way to force the system change required to realize equity of access to mental and physical health care, which will foster well-being, create equity, and save lives. Additionally, *Mental Health Parity* is a concept that has been successfully operationalized in other countries: for further context and background, please consult our background paper this topic.

The federal government has a responsibility to provide a coordinated vision and leadership – not lag behind – the provinces' and territories' work in this area. New legislation bringing about *Mental Health Parity* would also build on the previous Conservative government's legacy of the creation of the *Mental Health Commission of Canada,* representing a new step forward for Canadians.

As you begin to develop a Shadow Cabinet, CASW proposes that you consider establishing, regardless of the composition of Cabinet, a senior parliamentary critic for Mental Health and Wellbeing. The creation of such a critic role would affirm CPC's leadership and legacy of supporting mental health and recovery, including dedicated strategies and plans to address suicide.

Finally, recruiting and retaining social and health professionals in rural and remote communities is an ongoing challenge in Canada, something the federal government has recognized for other professions by offering Canada Student Loan forgiveness for nurses and family doctors. That said, many rural or remote communities are facing mental health crises: we believe that expanding eligibility for student loan forgiveness to social workers would be an effective tool to better care for underserved communities, as well as encourage professionals to move to – or return home to – rural and remote locations.

We know that the CPC feels strongly about serving rural and remote communities while encouraging robust, vibrant economies – we believe federal student loan forgiveness for social workers would serve both these purposes, and we would be delighted to discuss our recommendations further with your office.

CASW looks forward to supporting you and your party in the implementation of positive changes for Canada. On behalf of the CASW federation, we await your next steps as leader of the Official Opposition with hope and optimism.

Sincerely,

Janice Christianson-Wood, MSW, RSW
President, CASW