



**CASW ACTS**  
Canadian Association of Social Workers / Association canadienne des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux

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October 23, 2019

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau  
Prime Minister of Canada  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

On behalf of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), I would like to extend our sincere congratulations on your re-election. We look forward to continuing to work with your government for a fairer, better future for all those who call Canada home.

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 for all Canadians and was strongly supportive of many of the historic changes brought during your previous mandate, including the National Housing Strategy, the first ever National Poverty Reduction Strategy, and investments in mental health. We applaud these achievements and their contribution to a better society.

That said, 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](#).

To support both the spirit and the practical application of *Mental Health Parity and* guarantee that mental health and substance use receive the federal attention required for change, CASW recommends that you create a new *Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Presently, there are no federal departments or agencies that specifically address mental health and substance use issues. Given the seamless relationship between the two, there needs to be a shift from addressing mental health and problematic substance use in isolation to a joint approach towards overall mental wellness.

CASW proposes that the creation of a federal *Minister of Mental Health and Wellbeing* would highlight the importance of considering the various factors contributing to mental health and wellbeing, including the role of substance use. Furthermore, the creation of such an office would affirm, complement, and support the many excellent initiatives ongoing in different provinces and territories to address mental illness, support mental health and recovery, including dedicated strategies and plans to address suicide and the opioid crisis.

The federal government has a responsibility to provide a coordinated vision and leadership – not lag behind – the provinces’ and territories’ work in this area. Through your investments during the previous mandate, we know your government understands the critical importance of supporting mental health and well-being. This new *Minister* would cement mental health as a fiduciary, social, and philosophical priority in our country.

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.

CASW looks forward to supporting you and the federal government in the implementation of positive changes for Canada. Again, on behalf of the CASW federation, I extend our sincere congratulations on your re-election and CASW awaits your next steps as Prime Minister of Canada with great hope and optimism.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jan Christianson-Wood". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jan Christianson-Wood, MSW, RSW  
President, CASW