

**Canadian Association of Social Workers' Pre-Budget Submission
to the Standing Committee on Finance:**

**Sustaining Leadership:
Towards an Equitable Canada**

2018 Pre-Budget Consultation



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).

Introduction

CASW is encouraged by the leadership role that the current Federal Government has demonstrated in the goal of improving health and social conditions for Canadians. To this end, CASW continues to emphasize the importance of investing in the social determinants of health. The Federal Government's commitments to children, women, Indigenous communities, affordable housing, and addressing poverty align with CASW's vision of a more equitable Canada. To this end, CASW applauds the Federal Government for the leadership role that they have taken and looks forward to holding this government accountable to the implementation of these important promises.

As a strong proponent of the social determinants of health and a member of the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH), CASW is encouraged by the government's promise to provide 5 billion dollars over 10 years to increase access to mental health services.

CASW is hopeful that the Federal Government will continue to lead the way towards a more equitable Canada by adopting and implementing the recommendations below:

- 1) Adopt a *Universal Basic Income Guarantee: The Next 'BIG' Thing in Canadian Social Policy* to address poverty in a compassionate and cost-effective manner.
- 2) Adopt a *Social Care Act for Canada* to guide social investments and increase government accountability and measure return on investment.
- 3) Implement a *Mental Health Parity Act* to address the discrepancies between physical and mental health care in Canada.
- 4) Commit to continue working with First Nations communities to honour the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal rulings regarding the discrimination of 165,000 First Nations children.
- 5) Implement loan forgiveness for social workers that practice in the North to increase equitable care, decrease wait times and attract social workers to rural and remote areas.

CASW'S Recommendations:

1) Adopt a *Universal Basic Income Guarantee: The Next 'BIG' Thing in Canadian Social Policy* to more effectively address poverty in Canada

CASW proposed the adoption of a basic income guarantee (BIG) in the form of a universal demogrant model as a concrete step towards addressing poverty in Canada. The costs of current income support programs in Canada are close to \$200 billion per year, but programs are piecemeal, difficult to navigate, heavily monitored, vary from province to province, and are ultimately unsuccessful in regards to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Up until this point, basic income plans in North America have been built around the negative income tax model, which create a “benefit trap” by making the adoption of part-time work unattractive. The “benefit trap” does not exist within the universal demogrant model.

The universal demogrant model reduces stigmatization, increases dignity, increases social cohesion, and addresses the social determinants of health. Furthermore, the universal demogrant model alleviates administrative burden and is cost-effective in the long term.

While careful design and implementation are crucial, CASW believes that a universal demogrant BIG is a cost-effective and socially responsible mechanism through which Canada can ensure dignity for all. CASW recommends that the Federal Government take a leadership role in researching and implementing a federal universal basic income guarantee to be distributed through the Canada Revenue Agency.

2) Adopt a *Social Care Act for Canada* to guide social investments

CASW proposed the adoption of a *Social Care Act for Canada* with principles similar to 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. The *Social Care Act* is necessary to produce the conditions for federal leadership that would be required for the successful implementation of a universal BIG.

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.

For example, while CASW greatly appreciates the new Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the program is weakened by the lack of a mechanism to protect recipients from claw backs at the provincial level. Instead of relying on an unspoken commitment to protect recipients of this benefit from claw backs, Canadians should celebrate our restored compassion driven policy ethos and make these decisions official with a *Social Care Act*.

The proposed *Social Care Act for Canada* can be read in full on CASW's website, www.casw-acts.ca .

3) Implement a *Mental Health Parity Act* to address the discrepancies between physical and mental health care

While Canada has adopted a Mental Health Strategy and the provinces have implemented Mental Health and Addiction Action Plans and strategies, CASW argues that more robust tools are needed to fully represent mental health needs and to bring about funding parity for physical and mental health. CASW proposes a Mental Health Parity Act to address the discrepancies that exist between physical and mental health care in Canada.

Across Canada, public health insurance does not cover many mental health services and private health insurance plans put caps on coverage. This limits the accessibility, duration, and quality of mental health services.

That is why CASW supports the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health in seeking parity of government funding for mental health – increasing spending from 7.2 percent of total public health spending to a minimum of 9 percent. The federal government's share of this should be 25 percent. This translates into the federal government contributing an additional \$777.5 million annually to the provinces and territories to improve access to a range of mental health programs and services, and to get better health outcomes. The committed \$5 billion in Budget 2017 over 10 years is a good first step forward in achieving the parity required to truly move mental health out of the shadows.

4) Commit to continue working with First Nations communities to honour the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal rulings regarding the discrimination of 165,000 First Nations children

At the beginning of 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) ruled that over a series of decades, the Government of Canada has discriminated against 165,000 First Nations children and their families and has neglected opportunities for child welfare reform.

The CHRT ordered the Government of Canada to perform the following by July 1, 2017: halt discriminatory practices, provide immediate funding for relief, implement Jordan's Principle correctly and wholly, and work with First Nations to correct service and funding gaps.

So far, the Government of Canada has committed \$71 million to First Nations children via the 2016 federal budget. According to the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada's estimates, the Government of Canada has fallen \$155 million short of their commitment to First Nations children.

CASW encourages the Federal Government to continue to work with First Nations people and communities and to fulfill its duties with respect to First Nations child welfare practices and services. CASW is hopeful that the Government of Canada will continue to forge a path towards reconciliation.

5) Loan forgiveness for social workers practicing in the North

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.

In light of Canada's particular context, in which Indigenous communities are often located in rural or remote areas, already underserved populations are made even more vulnerable.

Social workers are highly trained professionals who are capable of offering 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 case work, assessment, therapeutic counselling, and referrals to other community supports. Concurrently, many communities have great difficulty attracting mental health professionals.

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.