

Submission to the 2022 Pre-budget Consultations  
September 2022

## Canadian Association of Social Workers



## RECOMMENDATIONS

That the federal government:

1. Fund a comprehensive *social work sector study* to understand the workforce, identify gaps, and meet future needs
2. Act swiftly to include social workers in the existing Canada Student Loan forgiveness programme, as promised by the Liberal Party of Canada during the last election campaign and as outlined in the Ministerial Mandate Letters
3. Study the concept of mental health parity for Canada, and how this concept might guide future investments
4. Launch 3 *basic income pilot projects* – northern, rural, and urban – with a view to the eventual implementation of a *Universal Basic Income Guarantee* to ensure Canadians thrive in a post-pandemic/endemic economy

*The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national professional association for social work in Canada. Founded in 1926, CASW is a national federation composed of 10 partner organizations in the provinces and territories.*

This is a pivotal moment for Canada's future: as we move away from the acute height of the pandemic, the critical issues with Canada's social supports, and the way these supports most egregiously fail certain groups, have never been more apparent. At the same time, the public agrees striving to return 'back to normal' is not good enough, and support for robust social funding and support has never been stronger. This presents a unique opportunity for this Government to make investments that will allow Canada not just to recover, but to thrive. Further, we urge this government to center reconciliation in their work, following the lead of Indigenous people, communities, and organizations; truly upholding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and continuing to action implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Inquiry Calls for Justice.

Social workers' front-line experience in social programs and institutions across our country gives them crucial experience with social and economic inequity, health, mental health and substance use, crime and victimization, and the necessary conditions for children to thrive. Their unique roles and training give them the perspective to effectively bring equity and justice for all those who call Canada home. Despite some essential policy pieces in place to begin addressing the well-being of all Canadians across the country such as national strategies for housing and poverty reduction, even as the pandemic wanes Canada will remain in crisis if the Government and Parliament of Canada does not think beyond recovery – we must instead strive toward a just, bold, and innovative future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Support Social Workers for Better Social Outcomes***

#### **1. Fund a comprehensive *social work sector study* to understand the workforce, identify gaps, and meet future needs**

Currently, we have little understanding of the number of social workers, or proportion of social workers in different practice areas, working across Canada and, crucially, whether this workforce has the capacity to meet current or projected needs of Canadians: we lack key demographic, labour market and education/training information. The last such study, [\*In Critical Demand\*](#), was completed in 2000.

CASW appreciates the opportunity presented by the Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program (SWSP) housed by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and did apply to the program for funding for this proposed, and necessary, project. That said, Canada's health and social services landscape cannot continue – and will certainly not thrive – without the information that a sector study would provide. If the SWSP is not well enough resourced to provide funding for all necessary Health and Human Resources projects, other streams must be provided.

Indeed, a comprehensive sector study is required for the profession to support recruitment and retention, education/training realities and projections, and provide the basis for strategies to ensure a strong social work workforce moving forward. COVID-19 has only increased public need for Registered Social Workers (RSW) – who serve in myriad of essential roles in our communities from hospitals to mental health to child welfare, to healthcare, to substance use, to name only a few. As integral members of interdisciplinary healthcare teams, a sector study is required to ensure that the professional social work workforce can meet Canada’s growing health and social needs moving forward. The three pillars of the social work profession, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulation (CCSWR), Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) are in consensus that a comprehensive sector study is essential and are ready to work collaboratively with the Government of Canada to realize this initiative.

Budget request:           \$1-1.5 million

**2. Expedite student loan forgiveness for social workers that practice in rural and remote communities to increase equitable care, decrease wait times, attract, and retain social workers in these communities.**

CASW was delighted that, during the last election campaign, the Liberal Party of Canada included this change in their platform and solidified as a government initiative through its inclusion in the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion’s mandate letter. CASW continues to push for the swift realization of this promise, for several critical reasons we know this government appreciates.

Given the gap between urban and rural areas in the availability of health services, including mental health, and the resulting wait times and correlated harms, CASW advocates the inclusion of social workers in the Canada Student Loan Reimbursement Waiver Program, which currently applies to other professions, including 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 pandemic worsening circumstances even further.

Additionally, as Indigenous communities are often located in rural or remote areas, already underserved populations are further ignored. Social workers are trained professionals who can offer many of the same therapeutic services as psychologists and mental health nurses but at a significantly lower cost. Further, in a small community that can only support one mental health practitioner, a social worker provides great value: with broad skill sets, they can provide many types of care, such as casework, assessment, therapeutic counselling, and referrals to other community supports.

Many young social workers, including Indigenous social workers, wish to return to their rural/remote communities but cannot afford to do so. Additionally, as the profession is predominantly composed of women, loan forgiveness for social workers would facilitate many

young women establishing their careers in a community of their choosing and help reduce the high burden of educational costs.

### ***Beyond 'Recovery' toward Growth and Transformation***

#### **3. Study the concept of *Mental Health and Substance Use Health Care for All***

While the pandemic has exposed, and exacerbated Canada's mental health and substance use concerns, the core issues well predate COVID-19. With a new Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and a new transfer on the horizon, it is the ideal time to explore the concept of Mental Health Parity and how this concept might guide future investments.

Though parity is the simple idea that all those who live in Canada should have access to mental health and substance use services in the same way they can rely on services for physical health, the complexity is, as always, in the details.

CASW strongly recommends that the Parliament and/or Government of Canada **undertake a study of the concept of Mental Health Parity** to determine the best way forward in achieving this important goal through existing as well as new investments.

#### **4. Launch 3 basic income pilot projects – northern, rural, and urban – with a view to the eventual implementation of a Universal Basic Income Guarantee to ensure Canadians thrive in a post-pandemic/endemic economy.**

Due to both the continued fallout of the pandemic, as well as skyrocketing costs of daily living, many Canadians are in crisis. CASW calls on the federal government to use this opportunity to **launch three basic income pilot projects** using the cancelled Ontario pilot as a model in **one northern, one rural, and one urban community across Canada**. This work would complement Canada's existing National Poverty Reduction Strategy, which uses the Market Basket Measure to determine a basic standard of living, and which is geographically dependent. Knowing this government's emphasis on prudent and responsible spending, such pilots would give the necessary basis for full basic income implementation across Canada.

The success of experiments such as the Manitoba MINCOME project in the 1970s and the more recent Ontario pilot prove that up front investments in people that do not rely on means-testing are the most successful and cost effective. As a basic income is an effective and efficient way to alleviate income insecurity, it would also reduce the long term social and financial costs of poverty in areas such as health care, child welfare, and criminal justice. Indeed, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer [costed a national basic income](#) based on Ontario's model, and found it would benefit more than 7.5 million Canadians, with a per capita cost estimated at ~\$10,000 per year. The PBO notes, however, that the net cost would be strongly reduced as a basic income would begin to replace many existing payments such as provincial transfers for low-income individuals and families and tax credits. This is not only achievable, but necessary for Canadians.

A basic income would also help alleviate growing rates of intimate partner violence, as many individuals are forced to remain in dangerous situations due to financial concerns. Additionally, it would begin to address the systemic economic inequities that ineffective, misguided and/or deliberately prejudiced policies have created for racialized people.

Many find this evidence compelling. Worldwide, countries such as Brazil, Finland, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands and others are all experimenting with the concept. At home, support for a basic income is non partisan, with a [motion](#) from NDP MP Leah Gazan and a [Private Member's Bill](#) from Liberal MP Julie Dzerowicz. Further, over [50 Canadian Senators urged the government to implement a basic income](#) last year, with a special committee struck up on Prince Edward Island calling for one in their province.

As the public continues to ask themselves why Canadians were deemed deserving of a basic-income-like support in the form of CERB through the height of the pandemic but underserving when faced with myriad other serious life challenges – including ‘shadow’ pandemics such as homelessness, poverty, intimate partner violence, substance use, and more – support for the idea of a basic income grows while voters are less and less concerned with government spending. The time is now to take this next step in supporting Canadians.