



Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2025 Budget

August 2024

Recommendations:

To ensure the maximum positive impact of existing federal investments on Canadians' health, social, and economic wellbeing, and bolster social work's ability to support these initiatives, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) recommends that the federal government:

- 1) Follow through on the commitment to include social workers in the Canada Student Loan forgiveness programme and earmark additional funds to support communities with extenuating circumstances;
- 2) Provide funding for a social work sector study to complement ongoing human resource planning;
- 3) Include social work in existing federal human resource planning initiatives.

Introduction

It is now well established that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing health, social, and economic issues in Canada. Since then, CASW recognizes that this government has heard calls for change from across Canada and has applauded many historic investments and strategies this government has launched to support a better future.

Though it fell short of a permanent Mental Health Transfer promised in 2021, the \$25 billion bilateral agreements are a strong investment that complement other initiatives seen under this government's mandate including the establishment of the first ever Minister of Mental Health, the launch of the first ever official Poverty Reduction Strategy, massive investments in housing, childcare, and an overall commitment to using a GBA Plus lens in the creation of policy.

CASW further recognizes this government's work to prevent the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic from ever being repeated: as wait times for health, mental health, and nearly all other complementary services that support the wellbeing of Canadians grow even longer, the opioid epidemic continues, and Canadians are still seeking real change for Indigenous, Black and other equity denied groups, CASW recognizes this government's desire to better plan to meet Canadians' needs now and in the future.

We further applaud the impetus to measure impact and accountability of federal dollars: with the number of investments flowing to the provinces across a spectrum of initiatives, now is the time to create the conditions, including permanent structures, to facilitate success -- and, indeed, to ascertain whether success has been achieved.

With debt and soaring cost of living chief concerns for governments and Canadians alike, now is the perfect time to invest in Canada's most polyvalent, affordable mental health practitioners. We encourage this federal government to support social workers for better social outcomes and to best meet their goals of shortening wait times for health, mental health, substance use, and social service – especially in underserved areas and with equity denied groups. Social workers are a key part of the fabric of our health care system: every time the government discusses how they can reorganize and/or improve care, social workers must be part of those conversations.

Recommendation 1: That the government follow through on the commitment to include social workers in the Canada Student Loan forgiveness programme and earmark additional funds to support communities with extenuating circumstances.

CASW was delighted with the announcement in Budget 2024 to include social workers in this programme. Knowing that the expanded programme is not set to begin until late 2025 and that this time is being spent in developing policy specifics, CASW encourages this government to consider a case-by-case expansion of the proposed 30,000 population cap for eligibility based on a community's potential extenuating circumstances.

Since the announcement in Budget 2024, CASW has heard from many concerned social workers in communities that just exceed the 30,000-population cap but that are, due to compounding factors, exactly the type of community this policy is intending to serve by incentivizing the retention and the return to home of newly educated professionals who left their community to seek education.

Take, as one example, the case of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Prince Albert has a population of 35,000, technically excluding it from this potential programme, however it has many factors that make it the type of community the government should be seeking to prioritize: it is the gateway to the northern part of the province, there are no large cities for hundreds of kilometers in any direction and the 35k population covers a massive landmass, meaning residents are highly dispersed. Finally, approximately half of Prince Albert's population identifies as Indigenous, meaning prioritizing serving this community would also help meet Canada's commitment to reconciliation.

CASW recommends that this government earmark additional funds for communities such as this that may be slightly over the 30,000-population cap but that are: significant distances from other large communities; highly dispersed over a large landmass; have high Indigenous population and/or high population of newcomers and/or equity-denied groups; and serve as a gateway community to very northern or very remote parts of Canada. This would not represent a much larger cost above the \$84.3 million a year ongoing currently committed to the expansion of the Canada student loan forgiveness programme but would create a very substantial impact on the communities in question.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government provide funding for a comprehensive social work sector study.

Canada's health care system continues to face staffing shortages, putting immense strain on the continuum of care. This health human resource crisis is well understood by this government, however CASW advises that allied professions such as social work must be robustly included, as well. At this time, there is no appropriate data that would allow us to best address this crisis.

Currently, we have little understanding of the number or proportion of social workers in different practice areas working across Canada. We lack key demographic, labour market and education/training information. This is critical as social workers provide services in a variety of settings, including health care, to help Canadians attain physical and mental well-being. To ensure that the social work workforce has the capacity to meet the current and projected needs of Canadians, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive social work sector study.

Social workers are Canada's most numerous and versatile mental health practitioners. To better illustrate, according to CIHI's 2021 data, there are just under 20,000 psychologists, 11,000 counselling therapists/psychotherapists, 6,500 psychiatric nurses, and 60,000 social workers in Canada¹. With their broad scope of practice, social workers are regulated, accountable, highly trained professionals able to provide many of the same services (and more) as these professions, often at a more fiscally responsible price point.

It is also important to note that – though we do not yet have the demographic data that would be provided by a sector study – we know from our own data that the social work profession is strongly dominated by women. There are also large numbers of social workers from equity denied groups. Further, we know that service users and clients often prefer – and thus experience better health and social outcomes – to receive services from a clinician or practitioner from the same demographic background.

In this way, either from the perspective of supporting, measuring, and bolstering existing social workers from equity denied groups, or, alternately, securing the data necessary to prove why a targeted strategy is required to increase the number of social workers from equity denied groups, investing in a social work sector study is important from an equity perspective.

Registered Social Workers (RSW) serve in a myriad of essential roles in our communities: from hospitals to mental health, to child welfare, to health care, to substance use. As integral members of interdisciplinary health care 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.

¹ Data from CIHI's *Health Workforce in Canada, 2017 to 2021: Overview — Data Tables*:
<https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/health-workforce-canada-2017-2021-overview-data-tables-en.xlsx>

The last social work sector study conducted nearly 25 years ago: released in 2000, in partnership with academic, professional and service sector organizations, *In Critical Demand: Social Work in Canada*² explored issues and demographics within the social services sector in order to support the development of a long-term human resources strategy. Now, more than ever, a social work human resources strategy is essential to improve the Canadian health and social system.

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.

Budget request: \$850,000

² Stephenson, Marylee, Gilles Rondeau, Jean Claude Michaud, and Sid Fiddler. “In Critical Demand: Social Work in Canada Volume 1- Final Report.” 2000, Canadian Association of Social Workers.
https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/attachements/in_critical_demand_social_work_in_canada_volume_1_pages_1-24_.pdf.

Recommendation 3: Include the profession of social work in existing federal human resource planning initiatives.

CASW recognizes that one initiative to help plan for a better health future for Canadians is the recently announced \$47 million investment in improving health workforce research, planning, and data. CASW especially notes the \$22.5 million to Health Workforce Canada to measure and create solutions to address key gaps in health workforce planning, and the \$11.6 to Canadian Institutes of Health Research and partners to teams that are investigating ways to strengthen and support Canada's health workforce.

As previously noted, social workers are Canada's most numerous mental health care providers but are conspicuously absent from these initiatives: Canada will not succeed in its goals of improving health and social care in Canada if these conversations are restricted solely to physicians and nurses.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction released data in late June 2024 from the Canadian Substance Use Cost and Harms (CSUCH) project that showed that the lost productivity cost related to substance use and related mental health concerns is valued at \$22.4 billion per year³. We can no longer fail to meet Canadian's health, mental health, and substance use service needs: the fiscal and human costs are far too great.

Recognizing that Canadian's health does not exist in a silo but is inextricably tied to all other facets of their wellbeing – and that, practically speaking, many physicians and nurses work in team settings with many other professionals – allied professions such as social work must be tracked and measured alongside physicians and nurses. Without proper measurement, the impact of the many excellent investments made by this government cannot be truly ascertained, and successes may not be able to be repeated. All investments should be matched by equally robust accountability and data collection initiatives.

Further, as the majority of physicians and nurses work in traditional, provincially funded environments, measuring solely their activities and impact will leave out a significant portion of the health landscape in Canada: those services offered in community and in the private and extended health spheres. These practitioners' impact must be measured, as well, to truly garner an understanding of where gaps must be addressed.

Finally, there must also be sustained funding, through CIHI or other bodies, to assist in empowering the social work profession to systematically implement a minimum data standard. Routinely and systematically collecting data about social workers – and all those involved in the health workforce – is a key component of effective future workforce planning.

³ Access and review Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms project data:
https://csuch.ca/?_cldee=5J2Ced6JLORFiBHOvZxUQ6MGNwlpLs1li5wRJzqA6xR2Ce2P9igeEy0kaQbEZBH2&recipientid=contact-a5374aaa111ee7118111480fcfeab9c1-120799a2e28b4d6290a21682198bdfba&esid=57a0e4d5-af2d-ef11-8e50-000d3ae9a76d



About CASW

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 and a national office. <https://www.casw-acts.ca/>