



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF
SOCIAL WORKERS

Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Budget



August 2023

Recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** That the federal government provide funding for a comprehensive social work sector study.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government follow through on its commitment to include social workers on the list of professionals eligible for the Canada Student Loans forgiveness program.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the federal government follow through on its commitment to establish the Canada Mental Health Transfer.
- **Recommendation 4:** That the federal government launch three basic income pilot projects.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed long-standing inequities – social conditions that have always existed but were highlighted by a once-in-a-generation crisis. A March 2023 report from Statistic Canada detailed some of these challenges¹: Deaths from drug and alcohol abuse, particularly among young people, increased to record highs. Canadians are having difficulty keeping a roof over their head, with the average cost of a home increasing by 33 per cent, or \$179,000, since the start of the pandemic. Inflation is also making things more unaffordable for many; despite the inflation rate falling to 2.8 per cent in June 2023, food prices have risen by almost 20 per cent in just two years.²

Addressing the social determinants of health to improve quality of life in Canada must be a priority. CASW welcomes the recent investments made by the federal government to strengthen Canadian health and social systems. We are hopeful government will continue to focus on bolstering health and social conditions in collaboration with organizations, Indigenous communities and their provincial and territorial counterparts.

The Government must centre reconciliation in their work. Now is the time to truly uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and continue 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 roles in social programs and institutions across our country give 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. Social workers are a key part of the fabric of our health care system; every time government discusses how they can reorganize care and expand professional scope to better suited deliverables, social workers should be part of that conversation. 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, Canada will remain in crisis if the government does not provide adequate support toward a just, bold and innovative future.

¹ "Research to Insights: A look at Canada's economy and society three years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic," March 9, 2023, Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2023004-eng.htm>

² Evans, Pete. "Canada's inflation rate falls to 2.8%," July 18, 2023, CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-inflation-rate-june-1.6909635>

Recommendation 1: 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. The health human resource crisis has been percolating for years. It is not a new issue and we understand that governments throughout the country are taking it seriously. Yet, we still do not have 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, mental and spiritual 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.**

The last social work sector study was released in 2000, in partnership with academic, professional and service sector organizations. *In Critical Demand: Social Work in Canada*³ 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.

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

³ 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.

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

Recommendation 2: That the government follow through on its commitment to include social workers to the list of professionals eligible for the Canada Student Loan forgiveness program.

CASW was pleased to see the commitment to include social workers to the list of professionals eligible for the Canada Student Loan forgiveness program in the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion mandate letter, and we hope to see this commitment maintained in the new mandate letters. CASW is encouraged by the progress made to increase the maximum amount of forgivable student loans by 50 per cent for family doctors, residents in family medicine, nurse practitioners or nurses. CASW continues to push for the swift realization of the expansion to social workers, for several critical reasons we know this government appreciates.

As mentioned earlier in our submission, Canada is dealing with a number of social determinants of health that are exacerbating inequality in Canada; coupled with this is the health human resources crisis. Attracting and retaining skilled professionals is crucial to addressing these two health-related problems – social workers are ready and able to help.

Social workers offer many of the same therapeutic services as psychologists and mental health nurses but at a significantly lower cost. 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, there is a massive opportunity to leverage the skillsets of social workers.

Social workers can also play a key role in Indigenous communities; often located in rural or remote areas, these already underserved populations are further ignored. In a small community that can only support one mental health practitioner, a social worker provides great value: They can provide many types of care, such as casework, assessment, therapeutic counselling and referrals to other community supports.

Of course, social workers need the support in order to realize this potential. By fulfilling the government's promise to extend loan forgiveness to social workers, these critical skilled workers will be able to provide care to Canadians from coast-to-coast-to-coast .

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 vast majority of social workers are women, loan forgiveness would unlock the economic potential and career paths of many young women, allowing them to establish themselves in a community of their choosing.

Recommendation 3: That the federal government follow through on its commitment to establish the Canada Mental Health Transfer.

The mandate letter to the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions committed to the establishment of a new federal transfer to provinces and territories – the Canada Mental Health Transfer. Today, Canadians are still waiting for the government to fulfill this commitment.

CASW appreciates investment in Budget 2023 of \$25 billion annually over 10 years spread across four health care spending priorities, including mental health care, through bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories. However, the funding does not match the level of need in the country.

Canada is currently facing a mental health and addictions crisis. Canadians are struggling under the rising cost of living and have limited access to mental health and substance use health care. Implementing a Canada Mental Health Transfer will help provide accessible and affordable care and treatment for mental health issues. The Canada Mental Health Transfer has the potential to address barriers to care such as long wait times, cost, geography, culturally inappropriate care and shortages in the mental health care workforce, all of which are well-documented.

Implementing the Canada Mental Health Transfer would ultimately bring Canadians closer to achieving mental health parity and improve quality of life in Canada.

Recommendation 4: That the federal government launch three basic income pilot projects.

CASW calls on the federal government 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.

As we have highlighted earlier in our submission, Canadians across the country the country are struggling with housing costs and struggling with the price of groceries. A July 2023 report found a staggering 52 per cent of Canadians were only \$200 away or less from making their bill payments.⁴ This precarious financial situation for the majority of Canadians must be improved on.

The success of past basic income 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 year⁵. 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.

Many find this evidence compelling. Worldwide, countries such as Brazil, Finland, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands are all experimenting with the concept. At home, support for a basic income is non-partisan, with a motion from NDP MP Leah Gazan⁶ and a Private Member's Bill from Liberal MP Julie Dzerowicz. Further⁷, 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 province⁸.

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.

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) kept many people afloat and financially secure during the pandemic, leading many to wonder why a more permanent system couldn't be implemented to ensure fiscal stability for all. CASW believes that a basic income would be the most impactful way to address many of the social determinants of health in this country. The time is now to take this next step in supporting Canadians.

⁴ "More than half of Canadians \$200 away or less from missing bill payments: MNP," July 10, 2023, Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9821168/debt-worries-inflation-interest-rates-mnp-july/>

⁵ "Costing a National Guaranteed Basic Income Using the Ontario Basic Income Model." The Parliamentary Budget Officer, April 17, 2018. https://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/Documents/Reports/2018/Basic%20Income/Basic_Income_Costing_EN.pdf.

⁶ Gazan, Leah. It's Time for a Guaranteed Livable Basic Income! https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_2JaMB5A3hLQRKEH7CpWp6M-TR_NylUc/edit.

⁷ "Bill C-273 - An Act to Establish a National Strategy for a Guaranteed Basic Income." Parliament of Canada. <https://www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/en/bill/43-2/C-273>.

⁸ "P.E.I. Senators: Basic Income Is an Idea Whose Time Has Come." SaltWire, February 10, 2021. <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/pei-senators-basic-income-is-an-idea-whose-time-has-come-550641/>.



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.