

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations  
in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget  
August 2021

## Canadian Association of Social Workers



## RECOMMENDATIONS

That the federal government:

1. 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.
2. Table and expedite a *Mental Health and Substance Use Health Care For All Parity Act*.
3. Introduce *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.
4. Fund a nation-wide *Child Welfare Caseload Study*
5. Fund a comprehensive *social work sector study* to understand the workforce, identify gaps, and meet future needs

*The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national professional association for social work in Canada, with a dual mandate to promote and support the profession and advance issues of social justice.*

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. Indeed, recent Angus Reid polling found that **the deficit/government spending is no longer a top three concern for voters**. 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 immediately acting on the recommendations of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**.

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 wains **Canada will remain in crisis if this government does not think beyond recovery** – we must instead strive toward a **just, bold, and novel future**.

CASW is pleased to submit four recommendations with a view to this future in two categories below.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- 1. 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.**

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 among the Parliamentary chatter. Further, over [50 Canadian Senators urged the government to implement a basic income](#) this 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.

## **2. Table and expedite a *Mental Health and Substance Use Health Care For All Parity Act*.**

While the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated Canada's mental health and substance use concerns, the core issues well predate COVID-19. As a member of the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH), CASW joins 12 other national organizations representing both service providers and those with lived experience of mental illness and their families in calling for a new piece of legislation – a *Parity Act* – that affirms that mental health is valued equally to physical health.

This *Act* would: enshrine in federal legislation the provision of timely, inclusive and accessible mental health and substance use programs, services and supports that are valued equally to those provided for physical health problems and conditions; include clear national performance indicators; and be linked to an appropriate funding envelope. A fulsome review of the proposed *Parity Act* [is available here](#).

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

### **3. Introduce 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.**

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.

The Standing Committee on Finance's 2018 included social work student loan forgiveness in its [2018 report](#) (recommendation 58), and we hope this committee continues to see the value of this proposal.

### **4. Fund a nation-wide Child Welfare Caseload Study**

When social workers are prevented from remaining in their positions or developing relationships with communities, children and families suffer – resulting, in turn, in more kids in care and more families in crisis. In 2018, [CASW completed a major research project](#) assessing the state of social workers in child welfare and discovered the following issues which directly cause many of the issues experienced across Canada:

- excessive workload and caseloads are a key factor in social workers leaving child welfare positions;
- organizations have inadequate mental health and wellness resources to respond to staff vicarious trauma and burnout;
- there is a troubling lack of adequate data and information to guide policy and planning and;
- Increased administrative requirements that create added burden on social work practice.

The intended role of social workers in child welfare practice is to develop relationships with communities to support families to remain intact. In the current climate, with huge caseloads requiring

overwhelming administrative burden, this one-on-one aspect of social work is often pushed to the wayside. Families needing supportive interventions are then only seen once a negative incident has taken place, causing another child to be taken into care.

We also know that child welfare practice has the most success in keeping families together when the community has a healthy, long-term relationship with a worker. Currently, high caseloads are causing frequent burnout, meaning many social workers leave the field of child welfare, creating a ‘turn-style-effect in many communities that ruptures family relationships with professionals, discouraging them from seeking assistance upstream.

Currently, there are no national standards governing caseloads in child welfare practice. Tools for how to measure appropriate caseload size and complexity vary from region to region. Practices, and successes, vary as well. There has been no large-scale study to help child welfare organizations, both on and off reserve, determine a healthy and appropriate caseload for their workers.

We recommend that the Government of Canada fund such an initiative through Employment and Social Development Canada.

**5. 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.

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 a 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 – and a sector study is an important piece in ensuring that the professional social work workforce can meet Canada’s growing needs moving forward.