



Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget 2025

August 2025

- **Recommendation 1:** That the government follow through on the commitment to include social workers in the Canada Student Loan forgiveness programme
- **Recommendation 2:** That the government amend the Federal Framework on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to include social workers in existing and future initiatives for public safety personnel.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the government provide funding in the amount of \$850,000 for a social work sector study to complement ongoing health human resource planning.

Introduction

This election signalled that Canadians are looking for strong leadership and material improvements in their lives. Canadians not only want protection from threats to health, safety and economic wellbeing but also freedom from illness, poverty, exclusion and marginalization. These two imperatives require that the Government of Canada do two things simultaneously, act swiftly in response to current urgent needs as well as move strategically toward emerging opportunities.

CASW recognizes this government's achievements. Already, this government has increased investments in defence and established national priorities related to housing and cost of living. Important commitments, such as childcare, the Canadian Disability Benefit and the Canada Dental Care Plan have been protected. Moreover, this government has laid out strategic directions focused on sovereignty, effectiveness and efficiency. It is evident that Canada will secure its future globally through research, innovation and technology.

CASW further acknowledges the government's commitment to improving its response to the ongoing opioid crisis and to addressing growing wait times across health, mental health, and broader wellbeing services, while recognizing that Canadians continue to call for meaningful change for Indigenous, Black, and other equity-denied communities.

CASW further applauds 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, importantly, to ascertain whether success has been achieved.

As government and Canadians confront rising debt and living costs, investing in Canada's most versatile and cost-effective mental health professionals is crucial. Social workers are integral to improving health, mental health, public safety, and social outcomes particularly in underserved areas and among equity-denied populations. Social workers are a fundamental part of our safety and health care system; every time 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.

After over eight years of advocacy, CASW was deeply encouraged with the announcement in Budget 2024 that committed to include social workers in the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness program. CASW requests that this government follow through with the commitment to include social workers in the Canada Student Loan forgiveness programme.

There are approximately 60,000 social workers in Canada. As the most numerous mental health providers in the country, social workers are indeed often found in mental health and substance use roles but have a much broader scope of practice and unique training that spans across health and social care settings. Moreover, social workers can provide many of the same types of care as other professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health nurses, but at a significantly lower price point.

By supporting social work students from rural and remote areas with student loan forgiveness, the government helps ensure these communities are represented within the profession itself. This local representation would provide critical elements needed to sustain health and social service delivery by fostering trust, cultural alignment, and long-term commitment.

The Government of Canada must prioritize access to social workers. With per capita levels for social workers being significantly less than physician ratios, at only 1.57 registered social workers and social service workers per 1,000¹ Canadians, remote regions continue to be disadvantaged.

Targeted loan forgiveness is an effective policy lever to attract and retain social workers in remote and underserved regions, particularly in light of the considerable student debt many carry upon entering the profession. According to current research, social workers complete their undergraduate and graduate degrees with higher-than-average student

debt.² Without such incentives, these communities will continue to face barriers to care, further exacerbating access to services, inequities in health, wellbeing and economic outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Include social workers in existing federal initiatives for public safety personnel.

In 2020, the Government of Canada announced a national action plan for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). CASW was pleased to learn that the Government recently renewed their commitment to the Action Plan for another 5 years as well as the significant funding focused on researching and implementing evidence informed prevention and treatment of PTSD for public safety personnel (PSP).³ However, CASW is concerned that social workers are not included in the Government's definition of PSP.

Although the Government of Canada's plans were informed by consultations, social workers do not appear in the list of witnesses who informed the foundation of subsequent plans or investment. This exclusion hinders the Government's ability to fulfill its mandate for public safety because it contradicts Operational Stress Injury (OSI) research about social workers as well as evidence demonstrating the vital role of social workers in public safety.

Currently PSP are defined as firefighters, police officers, paramedics, correctional officers, public safety communications personnel, operational and intelligence personnel, border services officers, and Indigenous emergency managers. Most of Canada's public safety personnel identify as men⁴ and most social workers identify as women.⁵

Despite the Government of Canada's commitment to a Gender Based Analysis Plus and acknowledgement that "social workers, and other health care providers witness trauma, pain, suffering, and/or death on a regular basis in their work to care for the health of individuals, families, and communities"⁶, social workers remain excluded from the research and benefits afforded to other PSP covered in the framework. Excluding social workers from Canada's definition of PSP, contributes to an existing gender bias and is incongruent with GBA Plus.

Social workers are embedded in emergency, first and trauma response interventions, such as policing, and therefore encounter acute and chronic trauma alongside other first responders. Significantly, social workers are faced with high-risk situations where their actions impact the life, health and safety of Canadians; these Canadians are often the most vulnerable people including children, seniors, victims of violence, people from marginalized communities and people at risk of suicide.

Social workers are often the first to respond and investigate situations of extreme physical, sexual and psychological abuse. In these circumstances social workers are frequently called upon to complete emergency investigations, often without the accompaniment of law enforcement.

A promise to public safety without social workers does not align with either human or economic strategies.

Additionally, research indicates that demand for mental health support continues to exceed supply. Canada faces a shortage of mental health professionals, such as social workers, who have the training, credentials, and specialized expertise to provide trauma-sensitive programming. Without supporting social workers' mental health, Canada undermines its ability to provide effective trauma responses, not only for PSP, but also for their families.

Recommendation 3: That the government provide funding in the amount of \$850,000 for a social work sector study to complement ongoing health human resource planning

Canada's health care system continues to face staffing shortages resulting in immense strain on the continuum of care. While this government recognizes the severity of the health human resources crisis and Health Canada has prioritized the need for data related to health human resources⁷, CASW urges that allied professions, particularly social work, be meaningfully integrated into a response. At present, the lack of comprehensive data hinders effective planning to this pressing challenge.

There is little current data about the scale and scope of social workers in different practice areas across Canada. Key demographic, labour market and education/training information is needed. Social workers provide services in a variety of settings, including primary 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 as part of health human resource planning.

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 Canada⁸. 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.

Further, research demonstrates that the social work profession is strongly dominated by women.⁹ There are also large numbers of social workers from equity denied groups. Clients and service users often prefer, and thus experience better health and social outcomes, to receive services from a clinician or practitioner from the same demographic background.

Investing in a social work sector study is important from an equity perspective because it will bolster support to social workers from equity denied groups or alternately provide data to inform the social work needs of equity denied groups.

Registered Social Workers (RSW) serve in a myriad of essential roles in our communities: from hospitals to mental health, to child welfare, to primary 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.

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*¹⁰ explored issues and demographics within the social services sector 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.

A comprehensive sector study that includes social workers in health human resources planning will identify workforce gaps, inform evidence-based investments, and enhance the effective deployment of social workers across domains and regions. A robust, well-planned social work workforce is crucial to supporting economic growth, labour market participation, and healthy, thriving communities nationwide.

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/>