



# **CASW Position Statement**

## Social Workers Excluded as Public Safety Personnel

November 2025

**The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) has committed to promoting the social work profession and to ensuring that Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging are at the forefront of concrete actions.**

CASW supports Canada's ongoing commitment to the health and well-being of public safety personnel (PSP), as reflected in the *Federal Framework for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD). Researchers, policymakers, and mental health practitioners recognize that public safety is maintained through various roles and occupations.

However, CASW is concerned that social workers are not included in the Government of Canada's (GOC) definition of PSP.

This exclusion not only hinders the GOC's ability to fulfill its mandate for public safety but also contradicts evidence from Operational Stress Injury (OSI) research as well as social workers' vital role in public safety.

Furthermore, the current policy fails to align with the GOC's commitment to applying a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) framework. We urge the federal government to formally include social workers in the PSP definition and concurrently expand resources available to those affected by workplace trauma.

## **Background on Public Safety Canada's Commitment to Support Public Safety Personnel**

In its 2016 report, the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security emphasized that "the well-being of those who help to ensure the safety and security of Canadians is paramount."<sup>1</sup> That same year, Public Safety Canada, as part of the Public Safety and Health Portfolio, produced the *Healthy Minds, Safe Communities Report*, followed by *Supporting Canada's Public Safety Personnel: An Action Plan on Post-Traumatic Stress Injuries* (2019) and the *Federal Framework on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2020). These reports and frameworks outline the GOC's research and strategy to address occupational stress injuries among PSP. However, social workers' contributions are excluded.

The GOC currently defines PSP as firefighters, police officers, paramedics, correctional officers, public safety communications personnel, operational and intelligence personnel, border services officers, and Indigenous emergency managers.<sup>2</sup> The *Report of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security* (2016) specifically recommends that Public Safety Canada, in the response to Operational Stress Injuries (OSI), such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), broaden the definition of PSP to include other personnel who support and work alongside public safety officers.<sup>3</sup>

Although the GOC's plans were informed by consultations with federal, provincial and territorial governments, public safety organizations, academia, union representatives, mental health professionals and nongovernmental organizations, social workers do not appear in the list of witnesses who informed the planning or investments.<sup>4</sup>

### **Excluding Social Workers Impedes Public Safety**

To implement recommendations from the reports, the GOC formed a research consortium focused on PSP-related issues; the consortium includes the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT-ICRTSP). In their work, CIPSRT-ICRTSP notes that the term *public safety officer* caused many occupational groups to feel excluded, as they did not identify with military or police forces.<sup>5 6</sup>

While PSP is intended to broadly encompass front-line personnel ensuring public safety across all jurisdictions, social workers remain excluded from this definition. As a result, social workers are not recognized as PSP, are omitted from OSI-related policies and therefore denied access to essential benefits. Their exclusion contradicts evidence demonstrating their critical role in public safety and their vulnerability to workplace-related trauma. Addressing this oversight is crucial to ensuring that social workers receive the same protections and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cn37509-eng.pdf> p.1

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/federal-framework-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cn37509-eng.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cn37509-eng.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2019-ctn-pln-pts/index-en.aspx> p.3

<sup>6</sup> [CIPSRT-ICRTSP.CA Glossary](https://www.cipsrt-icrtsp.ca/glossary)

resources afforded to other PSP.

CASW acknowledges this government’s commitment to evidence informed policy and practices. Research consistently highlights the significant human and economic benefits of social work. A 30-year review of international studies found that “social work services had positive benefits for both health and economic outcomes for vulnerable adults, children, pregnant women, and older adults.” (Steketee et al. 2017, pS256). A promise to public safety without social workers does not align with either human or financial 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.<sup>7</sup>

Social workers are, in fact, the largest providers of mental health services nationwide. PSPNet, the federally funded support program for PSP includes clinical social workers to deliver internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT).<sup>8</sup> Without supporting social workers’ mental health, Canada undermines its ability to provide effective trauma responses, not only for PSP but also for their families.

### **Social Workers’ Role in Public Safety and Operational Stress Injury Research**

Social workers contribute to public safety across multiple domains, including but not limited to corrections, the military, healthcare, community policing, adult and child protection. As of March 31, 2022, an estimated 61,104 children were in out-of-home care across Canada, with a national rate of 8.24 children per 1000 population.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing social workers as PSP acknowledges their essential role in crisis intervention, child protection, counseling, mandated reporting, and collaborative public safety efforts. Such recognition also formally validates the support social workers provide in response to emergencies, violence, and mental health crises, placing them alongside other PSP.

Similar to other PSP, social workers are legally obligated to act in situations where harm is likely to occur. Their duties are codified in various legislative frameworks, further underscoring their essential role in protecting Canadians. The following table outlines examples of how social work is legislatively tied to public safety:

Public Safety Domain	Examples of Legislated Duty	Social Workers’ Role
Child Protection	Children and Youth Services Acts provide the framework for child protection and social services for children and youth.	Social workers are often involved in child protection, investigating reports of abuse or neglect and ensuring the safety and well-being of children.

<sup>7</sup> PSYNOPSIS, CANADA’S PSYCHOLOGY MAGAZINE • ISSUE 1 • 2025

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pspnet.ca/en/for-ssp/unit-team>

<sup>9</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada (February 2024). ISSN:2368/738X

Adult Protection	Adult Protection Acts protect vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, or exploitation	Social workers work with adults who may be at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, ensuring their safety and well-being.
Mental Health	Mental Health and Addictions Services Acts provide for the treatment and support of individuals with mental health and addictions.	Social workers play a role in supporting individuals with mental health challenges, contributing to public safety by helping to prevent violence or other harmful behaviors
Addressing Social Determinants of Health	Education Acts, Social Assistance/Income Support legislation, Public Health Acts and Human Rights Codes are examples of provincial/territorial legislation that enact access to the social determinants of health.	Social workers work to address the underlying social factors that can contribute to public safety issues, such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and discrimination.
Respecting Dignity	Personal Health Information Protection Acts (PHIPA) regulate the collection, use, and disclosure of personal health information, which is relevant for social workers who work with individuals.	Social workers adhere to professional standards that are evident in the collection, use and disclosure of information.

The *Action Plan on Post-Traumatic Stress Injuries (2019)* identifies that PSP’s work encompasses: “maintaining order, saving lives and protecting property and the environment, often at great personal risk.”<sup>10</sup> Further PSP “are unique in that they are repeatedly exposed to traumatic experiences in stressful situations (e.g., responding to suicides, accidents and disasters), which can take a significant toll on their mental health and well-being.”<sup>11</sup> “Public safety personnel face traumatic experiences unique to their occupations on a daily basis (e.g., responding to crimes, accidents, or natural disasters that include serious injuries, deaths, or threats to lives).”<sup>12</sup>

More often, social workers are embedded into 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.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2019-ctn-pln-pts/index-en.aspx> p.6

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2019-ctn-pln-pts/index-en.aspx> p.3

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2019-ctn-pln-pts/index-en.aspx> p.6

As noted in research, social workers, especially those working on the front lines, are exposed to trauma, high-risk environments, heavy workloads, organizational challenges, and legal and ethical pressures.<sup>13</sup> In fact, social workers are often the first to respond and investigate situations of extreme physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

In these circumstances social workers frequently are called upon to complete emergency investigations, often without the accompaniment of law enforcement. In carrying out their duties, social workers witness the most heinous acts humans impose on themselves and each other; social workers experience both chronic and acute trauma due to constantly processing the trauma of others.

In 2018, CASW undertook a research project of more than 3200 social workers across Canada and found that 44% of social workers in child protection roles have experienced threats or violence on the job, and 45% of social workers who left the field did so due to vicarious trauma and/or overwhelming stress.

The GOC has committed to establishing a fair and equitable framework for some PSP; however, continuing to exclude social workers from the federal definition of PSP overlooks the risks they face and denies them access to necessary support for OSI.

### **Excluding Social Workers as PSP is Incongruent with GBA Plus**

Further, to keep all Canadian's safe, the Liberal government and Public Safety Canada have committed to applying a GBA Plus to develop and implement policies and programs. Excluding social workers from Canada's definition of PSP, contributes to an existing gender bias and appears incongruent with the commitment to GBA Plus.

Most of Canada's public safety personnel identify as men.<sup>14</sup> For example, in the police sector, according to Statistics Canada, as of May 15, 2022, 77% of police officers in Canada were men, while 23% were women.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 95% of firefighters are men.<sup>16</sup>

These figures indicate that men continue to hold a significant majority of jobs in Canada's public safety fields, whereas most Canadian social workers identify as female.<sup>17 18</sup> Despite the GOC's 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"<sup>19</sup>, social workers remain excluded from the research and benefits afforded to other PSP covered in the framework.

Social work, and other occupations associated with traditional gender roles, are often undervalued, disproportionately affecting women, especially women from marginalized

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<sup>13</sup> Steketee G, Ross AM, Wachman MK. (2017). Health Outcomes and Costs of Social Work Services: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Public Health*. Dec;107(S3):S256-S266. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2017.304004

<sup>14</sup> [Public Safety Canada GBA Plus](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Statistics Canada](#)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/federal-framework-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html>

<sup>17</sup> [University of Toronto PTSD and Social Workers](#)

<sup>18</sup> Sharanjit Uppal and Katherine Savage. (June 5, 2021). Child care Workers in Canada .ISSN 2291-0840

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/federal-framework-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html#s1-3> p.8

communities. Excluding social workers from public safety definitions overlooks their frontline exposure to trauma and violence, despite their critical roles in crisis response and community safety.

As the PSP classification primarily includes male dominated professions, women are largely excluded from accessing benefits; women bear a disproportionate burden of proving that their workplace trauma qualifies for occupational health support. This exclusion reinforces systemic gender inequality in public safety policy and resource allocation. The impact is significant given that PTSD appears to be twice as common in women as in men.<sup>20</sup>

Further, because of discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping, there are many barriers to occupational health supports for marginalized people (e.g., women, 2SLGBTQIA+, People of Colour, Black people and First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples).<sup>21</sup> Expanding the PSP definition to formally include social workers would support access to key resources, including Peer Support Programs, CIPSRT tools, and PSPNET's internet-based cognitive therapy.

### **CASW's Position on Social Workers as Public Safety Personnel**

CASW upholds the Code of Ethics, which emphasizes the promotion of social justice and the dignity and worth of all individuals. To align public safety policy with Canada's commitments, CASW urges the government to implement the following actions:

1. **Enhance Public Safety Canada's PTSD mandate to include social workers** to accurately reflect the role social workers have in upholding public safety. This action means involving social workers in the development of public safety policy and programs.
2. **Address the existing incongruence** between Canada's commitment to GBA Plus and the exclusion of a social workers, a predominately female workforce, as public safety personnel. Embedding social work perspectives in training, crisis response, and community safety planning is recommended.
3. **Offer social workers the same access to the programs and supports** offered to other public safety personnel. Not only is social workers' exposure to operational stress injury well documented in research but moreover the exposure and injuries mirror those of the current recognized public safety personnel.

We stand ready to work with the government to advance these changes and ensure that Public Safety Canada is better prepared to meet the needs of all Canadians especially Canadians who are first to identify and respond to trauma and emergencies. The demand for mental health supports shows no signs of abating; Canada needs all the bench strength possible. Including social workers as PSP enhances Canada's preparedness to respond to public safety concerns and to keep the people safe who keep Canadians safe.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/federal-framework-post-traumatic-stress-disorder.html#s1-3>

<sup>21</sup> Canning, C., Szusecki, T., Hilton, N., Moghimi, E., Melvin, A., Duquette, M., Wintermute, J. and Adams, N. (2025). Psychological health and safety of criminal justice workers: a scoping review of strategies and supporting research. *Health & Justice*. 13:10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-025-00320-0>



## **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 comprised of 10 partner organizations in the provinces and territories.