



The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

September 2, 2020

Re: Recommendations for Canada's just recovery plan – Flattening the curve of Inequality

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

On behalf of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), we want to acknowledge the Government of Canada's urgent actions to address the mass disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada, during this unprecedented time, continues to face significant pandemic-related hardship and suffering including a rising economic insecurity, overdose crisis and deepening health inequality.

Canada must do more to address this compounding pandemic and flatten the curve of inequality. Consequently, in anticipation of the upcoming Speech from the Throne, CASW is writing to provide its recommendations for a recovery plan rooted in justice, equality, and dignity for all.

Admirably, in this unprecedented time, the Government of Canada has acted promptly to put in place far-reaching measures intended to support the safety and security of people in Canada. Although the government has taken significant steps toward mitigating the physical, psychological, and economic concerns of the nation, more must be done to ensure that all people in Canada are supported and protected through, and beyond, this time of grave uncertainties.

We must move toward an equitable economic recovery that embraces and champions human rights including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and commitments to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Canada's recovery must be grounded in Reconciliation, meaningfully addressing systemic racism and structural gaps, blatantly exposed by COVID-19.

Consequently, CASW strongly advocates that the recommendations provided below must be implemented to achieve a just long-term recovery plan for all people in Canada:

1. Implement a national Universal Basic Income Guarantee (uBIG);
2. Recognize mental health as a human right through the legislation of a Mental Health Parity Act;
3. End Mandatory Minimum penalties for drug offences which directly lead to the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous and racialized peoples within the criminal justice system;
4. Collect disaggregated, race-based data related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
5. Decriminalize personal use of psychoactive substances.

1. Implement a national Universal Basic Income Guarantee

CASW acknowledges that the Government of Canada is listening to the feedback from social workers and others that have called for a restructuring of the financial support programs. To this end CASW acknowledges the tentative step towards a uBIG with the announced restructuring of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) – allowing recipients to earn much more income than either the CERB or Employment Insurance (EI) before benefits are reduced.

CASW urges the Government of Canada to take the next step forward in flattening the curve of inequality in Canada by introducing a uBIG, establishing a floor of income for all with payments declining as earnings from wages rise.

The fundamentals of a uBIG are already in place in Canada and the evidence of the immediate positive impact of a uBIG is undeniable and overwhelming. It is time to merge the layers of Canada's social safety net into a uBIG that will have all people in Canada live and die with dignity and respect.

2. Recognize mental health as a human right through the legislation of a Mental Health Parity Act

Given the federal government's commitment to "*set national standards for access to mental health services so Canadians can get fast access to the support they need, when they need it,*" CASW, along with its coalition partners in [Canadian Alliance for Mental Illness and Mental health](#) (CAMIMH), advocate that national standards should be held accountable through an amended *Canada Health Act*, or through a new piece of legislation, a *Mental Health Parity Act*.

3. End Mandatory Minimum penalties for drug offences which directly lead to the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous and other racialized people within the criminal justice system

The Government of Canada must swiftly move to amend the Criminal Code to end mandatory minimum penalties specific to drug charges. Amid the Coronavirus pandemic, social workers are managing multiple public health threats concurrently; the significant loss of personal income, isolation, homelessness, and the overdose crisis – all of which are grounded in structural and systemic racism that includes the continued criminalization of substance use in Canada.

Since their drastic expansion in 2012, mandatory minimum sentences have served to deepen the opioid crisis, while contributing to the near doubling of federally incarcerated Indigenous people in Canada.

The alternative to the criminalization of substance use is a public health approach based on the principles of social justice, human rights, and equity, accompanied by equitable access to evidence-informed treatment and addressing the underlying determinants of health. Ending MMPs will begin to reform our systems to be rooted in equality, reconciliation, and justice — and will make significant strides in addressing racism, poverty, and human rights.

4. Collect disaggregated, race-based data related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Undeniably, systematic racism exists in Canada. We acknowledge the Government of Canada's commitment to Reconciliation and willingness to embrace systemic reforms to end systemic racism in Canada, however, more is needed to measure the impact COVID-19 has had on racialized communities. Without disaggregated race-based data, the intersection between COVID-19 and the impacts of racism for Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities, will be largely unknown.

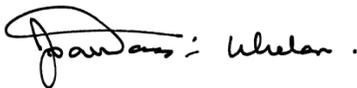
Recent events affirm, once again, that we have far to go in pursuing social justice for racialized people, including fighting for safety from violence and discrimination, access to a living income, adequate housing and accessible health care and many other basic human rights. We cannot move forward without recognizing and learning from the mistakes of our past; bearing humility and a willingness for true collaboration and change and investing in data that has the potential to save lives.

5. Decriminalize personal use of psychoactive substances

Prior to the pandemic, Canada was already experiencing a public health crisis, deepened by the continued criminalization of substance use. The government must join the many calling for the decriminalization of personal drug use – this recommendation aligns with the Chief Public Health Officers recent public recommendations, the improvements to the Public Prosecution Service of Canada's (PPSC) approach to simple possession offences under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, and the need for the government to immediately address the opioid crisis, exacerbated by COVID-19.

We look forward to continuing to work with you and your caucus colleagues on transforming the health and wellbeing of all Canadians.

Sincerely,



Joan David-Whelan, MSW, RSW
President, CASW President

cc:

Hon. Chrystia Freeland, Minister of Finance
Hon. Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health
Hon. Erin O'Toole, Leader of the Official Opposition
Jagmeet Singh - Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada

Ian Shugart, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet
Dr. Stephen Lucas, Deputy Minister of Health
Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada