

Submission to the 2022 Pre-budget Consultations
February 2022

Canadian Association of Social Workers



RECOMMENDATIONS

That the federal government:

1. Fund a comprehensive *social work sector study* to understand the workforce, identify gaps, and meet future needs
2. Fund a national *Child Welfare Caseload Study*
3. Study the concept of mental health parity for Canada, and how this concept might guide future investments
4. 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

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.

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 continuing to action implementing 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 the Government and Parliament of Canada does not think beyond recovery** – we must instead strive toward a **just, bold, and innovative future**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support Social Workers for Better Social Outcomes

- 1. 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 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. As integral members of interdisciplinary healthcare 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.

Budget request: \$1-1.5 million

2. 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 moral distress and injury, 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, and how to retain and protect the wellbeing of workers. A nation-wide child welfare caseload study will support the intention of the Government of Canada to support long-term reform of the child welfare system in Canada, especially as it pertains to the journey of reconciliation.

Budget request: \$2-2.5 million

Beyond 'Recovery' toward Growth and Transformation

3. Study the concept of *Mental Health and Substance Use Health Care for All*

While the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated Canada's mental health and substance use concerns, the core issues well predate COVID-19. With a new Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and a new transfer on the horizon, it is the ideal time to explore the concept of Mental Health Parity and how this concept might guide future investments.

Though parity is the simple idea that all those who live in Canada should have access to mental health and substance use services in the same way they can rely on services for physical health, the complexity is, as always, in the details.

CASW strongly recommends that the Parliament and/or Government of Canada **undertake a study of the concept of Mental Health Parity** to determine the best way forward in achieving this important goal through existing as well as new investments.

4. 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. Further, 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 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.