

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of  
**Social Workers**

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Pre-Budget Submission

February 24, 2014

Presented to: Honorable Charlene Johnson

Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board

## **Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)**

NLASW is the regulatory body and professional association for over 1500 professional social workers in this province. The vision of the NLASW is excellence in social work.

As a profession, social work is committed to improving the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities through the provision of or by engaging in counselling, social policy analysis, collaboration, research, health promotion and community capacity building.

In the pursuit of excellence in social work, the NLASW is actively engaged in social policy analysis. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations for the 2014 provincial budget.

### **Profession of Social Work Priorities for Funding**

The NLASW recently participated in the consultation process to inform the development of a provincial population growth strategy. The information presented by the NLASW incorporated key issues and recommendations articulated in previous policy submissions to inform the development of provincial strategies and policies. It is important to highlight that the policies and programs which support population growth are those which will enhance the overall health and well-being of the people who reside in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is imperative that government continue to ensure that NL has a strong public sector, a competitive minimum wage, accessible and high quality child care, and progressive employment incentives.

In budget 2014, social workers recommend that the provincial government continue to focus on investments in social policy, program development and service delivery, in the same regard as economic planning and development. This brief

addresses the following priority areas:

- 1. Commitment to Social Policy and Program Development**
- 2. Strong Public Sector**
- 3. Competitive Minimum Wage**
- 4. Safe and Caring Schools & Social Work**
- 5. Child, Youth and Family Services**
- 6. Professional Development**

### **Commitment to Social Policy and Program Development**

In 2005, government engaged community stakeholders in a consultation process to inform the development of a provincial poverty reduction strategy. This strategy was released in June, 2006. It is acknowledged that advances have been achieved over the past seven years to prevent and reduce poverty in our province. Following the release of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, other important strategies were released including the *Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy*, *Long Term Care and Community Supports Services Strategy*, *Early Childhood Learning Strategy*, *10 Year Child Care Strategy*, *Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities*, and the *Healthy Aging Strategy*. Collectively, these strategies and policies provide the framework to enhance the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities across Newfoundland and Labrador and to support population growth. Yet, these strategies can only be as successful as the level of economic and human resources committed to them.

Newfoundland and Labrador is experiencing a growing economy; particularly as it relates to the oil and gas industry. In a June 12, 2013 press release, the Department of Finance highlighted a report from the Conference Board of Canada which projected NL to lead the country in economic growth over the next two years. On June 21, 2013, the Department issued another press release highlighting a report from RBC Economics which predicted that NL would be among four provinces to have economic growth at a

rate faster than the national average. Yet, despite our growing economy, inequities still exist in this province. There are many residents who need to avail of pay day loans to make ends meet, access food banks and other community supports, and struggle to find affordable housing. It is imperative that the benefits of our provincial economic growth be experienced by all residents of the province. As a profession, social workers recommend that budget 2014 reflect government's commitment to the development and on-going implementation of the provincial strategies noted above to ensure that NL remains a healthy and vibrant province.

Government must also continue to work with the Federal government in negotiating the renewal of the Canada Health Transfer and the Canada Social Transfer. These federal transfers provide revenue to support health and social programs at the provincial level. It is in the province's financial interest to ensure that these transfers are maintained and enhanced.

### **A Strong Public Sector**

Investments and enhancements in the public service sector, particularly as it relates to health, education and social programming are essential to fostering a strong and vibrant province. Continued cuts in health care, social programming, and service delivery will have a detrimental impact on the people of NL.

In order to retain professionals with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities in health and social service delivery, and to attract professionals from other jurisdictions, it is important that employment opportunities in NL remain competitive. Incentives such as competitive wage packages, permanent positions, medical benefits, continuing education, and pension planning do make a difference. When these incentives exist, the province supports those who would prefer to stay in NL with their families and social networks and contribute to the provincial economy and social fabric, and fosters an environment for population growth.

## **Competitive Minimum Wage**

The service industry continues to face challenges such as high turnover rates in staffing and difficulty filling vacant positions. Yet, the service industry is a crucial part of the social fabric of the province, generating employment opportunities and supporting economic growth in the province. It is therefore crucial that we have a competitive minimum wage policy. A recent survey published by the Canadian Payroll Association (2013) showed that 54% of employees in Atlantic Canada are living pay cheque to pay cheque. Income is a key determinant of health and when policies are implemented that improve income and by association health, we build healthy and vibrant populations and reduce the strain on the health care system. This is important as we consider the high cost of health care in NL and the geographical challenges that contribute to these rising costs.

Fair and just increases to the provincial minimum wage will allow NL to remain competitive in the recruitment and retention of workers within the service industry; while building a strong provincial economy and reducing economic inequality. The NLASW supports government's decision to increase the minimum wage in 2014, and strongly recommends annual increases to the minimum wage that are indexed to inflation or tied to the average wage increase for the province, whichever is higher.

## **Safe and Caring Schools & Social Work**

The NL Safe and Caring Schools Policy (2013) notes, "The creation and maintenance of a safe, caring and inclusive school requires creativity, on-going collaboration and recognition of the complexities involved" (p. 5). There are many social issues and "complexities" that can impact on the implementation and success of the Safe and Caring School's Policy throughout the province. These issues include poverty, family relationships and dynamics, violence, drug and alcohol issues and mental health issues. As community resources are not always available, schools are

increasingly tasked with having to address these issues within the school community.

Incorporating social work into the education system would certainly assist in the implementation of a safe and caring school policy and in addressing the complexities that impact on academic achievement in the school environment. Section 4.2 of the provincial policy (School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports) outlines the areas which need to be addressed to improve student academic and behavior outcomes. These include:

- 4.2.1.1. Fostering preventative approaches to inappropriate behaviour and creating or maintaining an inclusive, engaging, responsive and productive environment.
- 4.2.1.2. Addressing classroom management and disciplinary issues.
- 4.2.1.3. Supporting students whose behaviours require more specialized assistance (e.g., emotional and behavioural disorders, mental health).
- 4.2.1.4. Maximizing academic engagement and achievement for all students.

The NLASW recommends that the Department of Education examine the current staffing complement within all provincial schools and consider the valuable role which social workers can play within the education system. Nationally and internationally, school social workers are a vital and integral part of the education team in schools. Social workers assist students to maximize their academic potential by providing:

- Counselling and therapy for individual, families and groups
- Education and support for parents and school staff
- Referrals and linkages with community agencies
- Community development programming

Schools that have social workers on site, benefit from the knowledge, skills and expertise of a profession who can help to address issues relating to transitions, anxiety, grief and loss, bullying, and low self-esteem. Through their skills of conflict resolution

and crisis intervention, social workers in the school can help students, educators and family members deal with issues in the “here and now.” When necessary, referrals can be made to outside agencies. However, through a case management perspective, school social workers can maintain the linkage with the school and work with all stakeholders to ensure that each student receives an equal opportunity to thrive academically and socially. As noted by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), “School social workers offer a unique perspective and knowledge to educators working with children, adolescents and their families. This can assist educators in offering the most valuable and complete education to all students to facilitate the development of students as healthy, contributing members of society”.

### **Child, Youth and Family Services**

It is imperative that government continue to place an emphasis on the health and well being of the children and youth in this province and that momentum and progress gained be continued and enhanced. Funding for child, youth and family programming must remain a priority.

While the number of regulated child care spaces increased in 2013, the supply is still not meeting the demand in many communities. Enhancing access to affordable, accessible and high quality child care must also be a priority in 2014 and beyond. A recommendation for consideration is the integration of kindergarten and child care. Having child care integrated within the kindergarten year will allow for more consistency and high quality programming that meets the developmental needs of children; while addressing the dilemmas that parents experience in the kindergarten year in trying to access child care and balancing employment.

## **Professional Development**

The NLASW is concerned about the continued budgetary restrictions respecting educational leave for health care professionals in the province. Access to continuing education opportunities is fundamental to the advancement of our health care system and ensuring excellence and high standards in the delivery of health care and social programming. It is recommended that the restrictions on educational leave be re-evaluated and lifted in the upcoming budget year.

## **Summary**

The NLASW has been encouraged by policy directions taken by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the social investments that have been made to enhance the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities in this province. However, with continued talks of economic restraints, deficits and departmental cutbacks, now is not the time to cut social programs or to stop the gains that have been made in our work towards building one of the most healthy and prosperous provinces. As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in meeting the needs of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

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