

# Enhancing Mental Health and Addictions Services in Newfoundland and Labrador



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Presented to:

All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions

## **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. This is achieved through engagement 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 enhancing mental health and addiction services in Newfoundland and Labrador. This brief addresses the following priority areas:

- 1) Mental Health and Addictions: A Social Work Perspective**
- 2) Horizontal Policy Analysis**
- 3) Enhanced Accessibility and Reduced Wait Times**
- 4) Social Programming and Supports**
- 5) Mental Health Promotion**
- 6) Addictions and Problematic Substance Use**

### **Mental Health and Addictions: A Social Work Perspective**

Social work is defined in the *Social Workers Act (2010)* as the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities by

- (i) Providing direct counseling and therapy services to a client*
- (ii) Developing, promoting and delivering human service programs, including those done in association with other professions*

- (iii) *Contributing to the development and improvement of social policy and*
- (iv) *Conducting research in the science, technique and practice of social work*

This definition covers a diverse range of social work activities including direct practice with individuals, couples and families, community development, health promotion, policy development, administrative practice and research.

As one of the largest providers of mental health care in the province, social workers across diverse areas of practice work with individuals and families impacted directly by mental health and addiction concerns and promote positive mental health and well-being. Social workers strive to enhance mental health by:

- Providing individual, family and group counselling to address issues related to mental illness, trauma, addictions, eating disorders, self-esteem, anger and coping, stress and anxiety, grief and loss
- Linking individuals and families to community resources
- Providing case management services
- Educating individuals and families about mental health and addictions
- Working with individuals and communities to remove mental health stigma and addressing the barriers which impact on health and well-being
- Providing crisis and disaster response services
- Promoting positive mental health at the individual, community, provincial, national and international levels

Given the integral role social workers have in mental health, it is recommended that a mental health and addictions strategy highlight this valuable role in the delivery of mental health services and ensure that adequate human resource planning is incorporated as part of the strategy.

### Horizontal Policy Analysis

Social workers understand that mental health is impacted by the social determinants of health including income and employment, food security, early childhood learning, safe and affordable housing, access to social support networks and a sense of belonging and inclusion. It is therefore imperative that the social determinants of health framework be captured in a mental health and addictions strategy to enhance mental health and addictions services and programs.

It is also recognized that horizontal policy analysis is necessary in developing and implementing a comprehensive mental health and addictions strategy that intersects with a) existing provincial strategies (i.e., *Poverty Reduction Strategy, Population Growth Strategy, Long Term Care and Community Supports Services Strategy, Early Childhood Learning Strategy, 10 Year Child Care Strategy, and Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities*), b) government departments including education, advanced education and skills, justice, seniors, wellness and social development, and health, and c) the visioning for primary health care renewal.

### Enhanced Accessibility and Reduced Wait Times

A comprehensive, coordinated service continuum is required with strong linkages between primary, secondary and tertiary levels of care. It is recommended that government continue to focus on initiatives that increase accessibility to mental health care through the health care system and community based programs. Accessibility to mental health services that is flexible and client centered, at the right time, in the right place, and by the right health care professional is critical as we move forward in meeting the mental health needs of the residents of this province.

To enhance accessibility and reduce wait times for mental health services and programs for children and youth, the NLASW recommends that the Department of

Education examine the staffing complement within all provincial schools and incorporate social workers in the K-12 school system.

### **Social Workers in the K-12 School 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

Incorporating social work into the education system would positively assist in the implementation of the safe and caring school policy and in addressing the complexities that impact on academic achievement in the school environment. This will also help address some of the lengthy waitlists for access to child and adolescent mental health services.

Schools that have social workers on site, benefit from the knowledge, skills and expertise of a profession in addressing issues related to transitions, anxiety, grief and loss, bullying, and low self-esteem. Research by Bye, Shepard, Partridge & Alvarez (2009) highlighted that school administrators viewed the provision of front line mental health services as a significant benefit of having social workers employed in schools. Social workers are also skilled in the areas of conflict resolution and crisis intervention and are able to intervene early and effectively to ensure that each student receives an equal opportunity to thrive academically and socially. A meta-analysis completed by Franklin, Kim & Tripodi (2009) highlighted the positive impact school social workers may have in addressing the emotional, mental, behavioral and academic needs of students.

### **Social Programming and Supports**

It is imperative that individuals living with a mental health or addiction issue have the necessary social supports and programs they need to improve health and quality of life. The NLASW recommends that the following areas be addressed in a mental health and addictions strategy.

#### **Housing and Homelessness**

A mental health and addictions strategy must address housing and homelessness. Without appropriate investments in safe and affordable housing, particularly for those with complex mental health needs, efforts to enhance the health and well-being of individuals and families in NL will not be recognized. A recent research report by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2014) on homelessness and mental health, demonstrated that a housing first approach was effective in helping those experiencing homelessness, including those who experienced “major mental health problems”. When people are housed, they are in a better position to take care of their mental and physical health care needs, seek employment opportunities, and focus on their goals and ambitions. This study also showed that a housing first approach resulted in lower costs for other services (i.e., hospitalization, shelters, police services and the judicial system).

#### **Competitive Minimum Wage**

Income disparity affects physical health, mental health, addictions, crime, chronic disease and education. These “social costs” are also financial costs that will have a great impact on our economy and future budgets if not addressed in the short term. 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.

### **Social Programs and Income Supports**

Continued investment in social programs for those experiencing poverty, and ensuring that income support rates are able to adequately meet the needs of those requiring this support is important. On-going community involvement is also important in fostering a province where all individuals feel included and supported. Social workers recognize and acknowledge the on-going work of community, government departments, and health authorities in meeting the needs of individuals coping with mental illness. It is imperative that government review current initiatives such as NAVNET for expansion, and recognize and support innovative community programming through organizations such as Stella Burry Community Services that have had a positive impact on persons living with mental health issues.

It is also important that government support community organizations that work with youth “at risk”. These organizations are fundamental in providing youth with access to the resources and supports they need to make healthy decisions within a supportive environment. Support for “non-traditional” education programs for youth who leave the mainstream education system also is important in keeping youth connected to essential services and supports within the community, while building on their strengths and capacities.

### **Mental Health Promotion**

It is recommended that government continue to support the development and adoption of initiatives that promote positive mental health. This includes anti stigma campaigns to address attitude change, education campaigns and community mobilization. There is a need to mobilize communities through partnerships with municipalities and other community groups to develop social and recreation supports to enhance quality of life and provide a sense of community for persons with mental illness. Partnerships need to involve consumers, professionals, families, and policy makers.

### Addictions and Problematic Substance Use

While mental health and addictions are often interrelated and services have been integrated, it is important that a mental health and addictions strategy recognize addictions as a key priority area. In 2008, government facilitated a consultation process to inform the development of a substance use strategy that was not released. However, a Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Advisory Council was established in 2010, and the All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions was formed in 2015. In addition, *Provincial Addictions Treatment Standards and Concurrent Disorders Guidelines* were released in March of 2015. In terms of direct service delivery, the Hope Valley Centre for youth with addictions and the Tuckamore Centre for youth with complex mental health needs recently opened, and the hours for the Mobile Crisis Response Team was expanded. These have been important and timely initiatives.

In addition to the proceeding recommendations, it is also important to ensure that the following recommendations are captured in the strategy as it relates to addictions:

- Increase in flexible treatment options (methadone treatment, non-medical detox, etc.).
- Access to a broad range of counseling options (brief therapy, long term counseling, and recovery support).
- Enhanced services for incarcerated individuals.
- Community support for individuals living with an addiction to reduce stigma and increase opportunities for early intervention.
- Increased awareness and understanding of harm reduction, and expansion of harm reduction services throughout the province as needed (i.e., needle exchange, methadone programming, etc.). This will require a collaborative approach among the various health care professional groups, government, and the community.



- Focus on prevention and early intervention programming addressing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). It is important that government continue to a) enhance services and supports to meet the specific needs of women with addiction issues, b) ensure timely access to services for women, c) expand public education initiatives, d) foster a healthy and supportive environment for women to increase prevention and early intervention strategies, and e) increase support services and early intervention for children living with FASD.

### **Conclusion**

The NLASW is encouraged by the formation of an All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions and on-going efforts to enhance mental health and addictions services in Newfoundland and Labrador. From a public policy perspective, government must continue to develop strategies and policies that recognize the impact of the social determinants of health (i.e., education, socioeconomic status, employment, housing, positive early life experiences, access to social supports, and food security, etc.), and ensure that government departments collaborate with each other and with the community.

As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development to enhance mental health and addiction service delivery in NL.

## References

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