

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of  
**Social Workers**

Population Growth Strategy

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Written Submission

October 28, 2013

Presented to: Provincial Population Growth Strategy

Executive Council

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

NLASW is the regulatory body and professional association for 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 intervention and counselling, collaboration, research, health promotion, policy and program development, and community capacity building.

In Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), the profession of social work is diverse with social workers practicing in various settings. Social workers practice within hospitals, community care, seniors' homes, adult and youth corrections, child welfare, addictions, mental health, community based centres, government departments and universities. Social workers are also self-employed in private practice and consulting businesses.

In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations into the development of a population growth strategy for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

### **A Population Growth Strategy**

As a profession, social workers support the social policy directions and investments made by government in recent years. These policy initiatives have included the development of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, *Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy*, *Long Term Care and Community Supports Services Strategy*, *Early Childhood Learning Strategy*, *10 Year Child Care Strategy*, and the *Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities*. Social workers supported government's decision to raise the minimum wage to \$10 an hour in 2010, and participated in the 2012 review of the minimum wage policy. 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. It is therefore

recognized that horizontal policy analysis is necessary in developing and implementing a comprehensive and progressive population growth strategy that intersects and encompasses existing provincial strategies. Government, industry and communities must also work together to ensure that policies and mechanisms are put in place that will allow NL to thrive as a vibrant, strong and growing province.

The NLASW recommends that the following key areas are addressed in a provincial population growth strategy.

### **A Strong Public Sector**

Newfoundland and Labrador is experiencing a growing economy; particularly as it relates to the oil and gas industry. It is imperative that the benefits of this economic growth be experienced by all residents of the province. 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 where people want to live and work. Now is not the time to reduce funding in the public service sector. Cuts in health care, social programming, and service delivery will have a detrimental impact on the people of NL. Government needs to keep population health at the forefront of policy decisions that are being made in the development of a population growth strategy. Government must also work to support the public sector workforce at all levels, as changes or cutbacks in one area will ultimately have a negative impact on other levels including front line service delivery.

Regional diversification is also important in building a strong provincial public service sector. Oftentimes, some of the more difficult employment positions to fill are found in rural and remote areas of the province where there may be limited employment opportunities in other sectors. Couples often choose to live in communities where there are greater employment prospects for both partners. Therefore, continued investments in rural NL are crucial to attracting people to live and work in this province.

## **Recruitment and Retention**

Economic security is vital to population growth. Therefore partnerships with industry, unions and organizations are necessary to ensure that employment opportunities in this province are competitive. Otherwise those with the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise may leave our province and put down roots in other jurisdictions. As people leave the province, the chance of them returning to NL for work is reduced. 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.

While our economy continues to grow and industry advancements are made, it is important that as a province we also balance the need for job creation and sustainability with our environmental responsibilities. As we know from our tourism industry, one of the factors that attract visitors to our province is its' pristine beauty. This is also what makes our province inviting and welcoming to those who are immigrating.

## **Competitive Minimum Wage**

The recruitment and retention of employees in Newfoundland and Labrador continues to be an issue for employers in the province. Challenges facing employers, particularly in the service industry include high turnover rates in staffing and difficulties filling vacant positions. The service industry is a critical part of the social fabric of the province and is necessary in supporting industry and public service sectors. While critics to minimum wage increases may argue that raising the minimum wage will negatively impact employment rates, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2007) highlights that there is “no compelling evidence to suggest that raising the minimum wage would result in significant job loss” (p. 8).

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. This is crucial given the recent survey published by the Canadian Payroll Association (2013) which showed that 54% of employees in Atlantic Canada are living pay cheque to pay cheque. Income is a key determinant of health. As health care expenditures rise in this province it is important that the income gap is addressed. 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.

The NLASW 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.

### **Child Care Investments**

According to a report by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (2009) to inform the NL *Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy*, youth see access to child care and early child development services as integral in supporting families in this province. Retaining and attracting youth to see Newfoundland and Labrador as a province of choice is important given some of our provincial demographic issues (i.e., aging population, out-migration).

Access to affordable and high quality early learning and childcare is an important factor as families consider having more children and make choices about where to live and work. Young working families need access to child care to ensure full participation in the workplace. Currently, childcare spaces in the province are limited. It is therefore important that government continue to enhance and expand access to regulated child care through the *10 year Child Care Strategy* that will meet the needs of children and families now and into the future. Recommendations to consider include:

- Advance the regulation of wages for early child care educators
- Continue to increase the number of regulated child care spaces for children of all ages to meet the needs of children, families and communities throughout the province

- Integration of child care with the kindergarten year
- Lower access fees for child care programming
- Increase in child care subsidies and thresholds

## **Conclusion**

The NLASW recommends that government continue to focus on investments in social and health policy, program development and service delivery, in the same regard as economic planning and development, as the development of a population growth strategy is considered. It is anticipated that a population growth strategy will encompass and build on existing provincial strategies that aim to improve the health and well-being of the people of this province. Yet, these strategies can only be as successful as the level of economic and human resources committed to them. This is where government must provide leadership in ensuring investments to support the public service sector, focusing on recruitment and retention of our young educated people, implementing a competitive minimum wage policy, and enhancing child care services. It is also important that government continue to invest in rural development, health care and education to ensure that NL remains vibrant and healthy.

As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in the development of a population growth strategy for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

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