

## Pre-Budget Submission



Presented to: Honorable Cathy Bennett  
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 1550 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 counselling, social policy analysis, collaboration, research, health promotion and community capacity building.

As an organization, the NLASW is committed to advancing health and social policy to ensure the well-being of the citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations for the 2016 provincial budget and long term provincial planning.

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

The NLASW has participated in the provincial pre-budget consultation process for over twenty years. Each year, the NLASW brings forth recommendations for policy considerations and financial investments. These recommendations are framed within the social determinants of health, as it is recognized there are a number of factors that contribute to a healthy population.

In recent years, NLASW has prepared policy submissions to inform provincial strategies and policy directions pertaining to poverty reduction, long term care and community supports, inclusion of persons with disabilities, early childhood learning and child care, youth retention and attraction, population growth, minimum wage review, and mental health and addictions service delivery. These documents can be accessed on the NLASW website at [http://www.nlasw.ca/social\\_policies.html](http://www.nlasw.ca/social_policies.html). Collectively, the recommendations highlighted in these policy submissions demonstrate the investments and policy decisions necessary to enhance the health and well-being of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians across the lifespan. While current provincial

economic indicators are concerning, the NLASW recommends that the provincial government continue to focus on investments in social policy, program development and service delivery. To do otherwise, would create additional health and social costs in years to come.

This brief addresses the following priority areas for government consideration:

- 1. Education, Safe and Caring Schools & Social Work**
- 2. Health**
- 3. Seniors**
- 4. Child, Youth and Family Services**
- 5. Poverty Reduction**
- 6. Early Childhood Development**

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

The K-12 education system in Newfoundland and Labrador is not immune to the impact of challenges faced by many children and youth in our province. These issues include poverty, exposure to violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health concerns; all having an impact on student academic achievement. In a national survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2012), teachers identified mental health as a concern in the classroom. This finding is not surprising. According to Kutcher, Venn and Szumilas (2010) "approximately 15 to 20 percent of children and adolescents suffer from some form of mental disorder – one in five students in the average classroom" (p.44). Poverty has also been identified by teachers as an area for continued advocacy given the impact it has on teaching and learning (Canadian Teacher's Federation, 2015).

A report by Senators Kirby and Keon (2006) titled *Out of the Shadows At Last* recommended the establishment of school based teams that included social work to address mental health concerns in schools. Nationally and internationally, school social workers are a vital and integral part of the education teams. In fact, most jurisdictions in

North America, including Canada, have social workers incorporated within the education system. While there have been some initiatives connecting social workers with schools in the Newfoundland and Labrador education system, the impact of the integration of social work services in schools has not been fully realized.

Social workers can assist students to maximize their academic potential by providing or engaging in:

- Assessment, screening, and intervention
- Counselling and therapy for individual, families and groups
- Education and support for school staff and parents
- Referrals and linkages with community agencies
- Community development programming
- Resource development
- Mental health promotion

The integration of social workers in the provincial K-12 education system is consistent with the Liberal's *Five Point Plan for a Stronger Tomorrow* to work with community partners and schools to ensure coordinated and seamless approaches to mental health and addictions. The school environment is a natural place for service delivery given that children and youth spend a significant portion of their day in schools. As one of the largest providers of mental health care in the province, social workers in schools would complement existing school teams, including guidance counsellors and educational psychologists, in providing the necessary services, supports and programming to positively impact the school environment and improve student academic achievement. This is a collaborative approach that is working well in other jurisdictions. In a statement released by the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists and the School Social Work Association of America, it was noted that "essential components to the education team are school counsellors, school psychologists, and school social workers who help students overcome individual barriers to learning. The presence of each of these

personnel, and improved student access to the assistance they provide, are essential to ensuring school and student success”.

As part of the 2016 budgetary review process, the NLASW recommends that government and the Department of Education explore the role that social workers can have in schools in Newfoundland and Labrador and develop a plan for timely implementation. For more information on the role of social work in schools, please visit [http://www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Position\\_Statements/social\\_workers\\_in\\_education\\_system.pdf](http://www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Position_Statements/social_workers_in_education_system.pdf) to review the background paper prepared by the NLASW.

## Health

The delivery of health care in Newfoundland and Labrador is challenging due to a number of factors which include geographical barriers, high rates for obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, aging population, out-migration, poverty, and the rising costs of health care delivery. Social workers understand that the health of a population is profoundly impacted by social conditions. As noted in the Liberal Five Point Action Plan “improving health outcomes in our province starts with embracing a holistic concept of health. It requires a greater focus on primary healthcare as a philosophy and a service delivery model”. The NLASW concurs with this policy direction and recommends that any health care reform continue to incorporate the social determinants of health and advance primary health care.

Social work services are an integral component of primary health care. As an organization, NLASW is represented on the Primary Health Care Advisory Committee and the working group focused on inter professional practice considerations. It is imperative that primary health care move forward to ensure more economical health care delivery that provides the right services, at the right place, at the right time, and by the right health care professional. Examples of important primary health care services would include enhanced access to palliative care services in the home, increased accessibility to primary health care team members in managing chronic diseases,

greater rehabilitation and respite for seniors while residing in their own homes, and heightened accessible health care for those experiencing homelessness.

Mental health is another area that must continue to receive priority. It is recommended that government continue to support the work of the All Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions and focus on initiatives to increase accessibility to mental health care through the health care system and community based programs. In July 2015, the NLASW provided a written submission to inform the work of the All Party Committee. This document can be accessed on the NLASW website at [http://www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Social%20Policies/Enhancing\\_Mental\\_Health\\_and\\_Addictions\\_Services.pdf](http://www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Social%20Policies/Enhancing_Mental_Health_and_Addictions_Services.pdf). Recommendation highlights from this report include:

- Enhanced accessibility to mental health care services and reduced wait times
- Integration of social work in the K-12 education system
- Investments in social programming and safe and affordable housing for those with complex mental health needs
- Services to support those with addictions and problematic substance abuse

Health care is a core government service. It is therefore imperative that NL maintain a strong public sector in the delivery of efficient and cost effective health care services in the province. An alternative to cuts in the health care system is a commitment to focus on primary health care and early intervention strategies that will provide cost savings to government in the long term. This is necessary if we are to achieve sustainability in the health care system.

## Seniors

NL has an aging population. It is estimated that by 2036, NL will have the highest proportion of seniors per population (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). Short and long term investments focused on enhancing the health and well-being of older adults are needed.

It has been argued that health care costs will increase given our aging population. However, as noted by Sherri Torjman (2012) with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy “It is not aging per se that is driving cost increases. Rather, higher expenditures are linked primarily to the rising incidence of multiple chronic illnesses”. While government is tasked with reducing health care costs, Torjman goes on to say that the “most profound levers for change include reduced poverty, active living and home care. Paying attention to these factors will lead to more significant health care reform than any of the discussions that keep focusing solely on the existing system”. The NLASW recommends that government consider these factors and invest in policy directions that will improve the health and well-being of seniors and create cost savings in the long term. Enhanced access to home care for seniors is an important policy direction and is in keeping with the Liberal Five Point Action Plan to provide the necessary supports to help seniors remain in their homes and communities and create a home support program that is flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of seniors. Enhancing access to home support, will allow more seniors to stay in their home and avoid institutional care. This is a cost savings benefit for government.

For seniors that do require more structured care and support, it is recommended that government continue to increase capacity for portable subsidies for personal care homes, expand respite and protective care residencies throughout the province, and increase access for more affordable assisted living for seniors.

Other areas where investments will create costs savings to government through a multi-year approach include expanded access to palliative care, including home based palliative care; enhanced coverage of medications and other medical supports for seniors living at home; and improved access to allied health professionals.

## Child, Youth and Family Services

The Department of Child, Youth and Family Services was created in 2009 and the transition of CYFS staff from the health authorities to the new department was completed in 2012. The creation of this department was the result of several reports and reviews of the child protection system in Newfoundland & Labrador. Child, Youth and Family Services has a considerable mandate which requires a department of government to focus upon the complex and challenging area of the protection of children and youth. Historically, funding cuts have had a detrimental impact on service delivery in the child protection program and this has been well documented. Reducing human resources, program supports, and training opportunities for professionals working in this system would have similar impacts.

## Poverty Reduction

Newfoundland and Labrador, through the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, has made considerable progress in reducing poverty in this province. However, as noted in the 2014 poverty reduction strategy progress report, the number of people in extreme low income, as measured by the Labor Market Basket Measure, has not decreased at the same rate as low income overall. The depth of poverty is not improving. In addition, the economic gap between the rich and poor continues to increase (Vital Signs, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2014). While it is recognized that the economy is facing difficult challenges with low oil prices, the commitment to poverty reduction must be sustained and enhanced.

In addition to the social costs, poverty is also linked with high health care costs. Raphael (2010), as cited in Campaign 2000 (2014) states: “thousands of accumulated studies have come to the same basic conclusion: The incidence of poverty is a severe – if not the most severe – threat to the health and quality of life of individuals, communities, and societies in wealthy industrialized societies such as Canada” (p. 6). According to research completed by Lightman, Mitchell and Wilson (2008) “every

\$1,000 increase in income leads to substantial increases in health. For instance, an annual increase of \$1,000 in income for the poorest twenty percent of Canadians will lead to nearly 10,000 fewer chronic conditions, and 6,600 few disabilities every two weeks” (p. 2). In light of high health care costs, it is imperative that government continue to focus on poverty reduction through a health care lens.

Many individuals facing extreme low income have complex needs. These needs include homelessness and inadequate housing, mental health and addictions, limited education, food insecurity, and lack of employment opportunities. Addressing these priority areas is imperative to advancing the poverty reduction strategy. The NLASW recommends that the province continue to invest in affordable and accessible housing, particularly for those with complex mental health needs. Research commissioned 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).

A review of the minimum wage policy is another area that must be a priority in alleviating and preventing poverty. According to Campaign 2000 (2015), referencing Statistics Canada (2011), “37% of children in poverty have one parent who works full-time, full-year” (p. 9). While it has been argued that higher minimum wages would negatively impact employment levels, research completed by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2014) does not support this philosophy. In fact, the authors of the report published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives concluded that “stronger minimum wages can be an important and effective tool in boosting earnings for low-wage workers, promoting greater equality across employed persons, stabilizing or improving the total labour income share of GDP, and reducing poverty” (Brennan &

Stanford, 2014). The NLASW recommends that government continue to advance a minimum wage policy that is competitive and helps to move people out of poverty. Annual increases to the minimum wage that are indexed to inflation or tied to the average wage increase for the province, whichever is higher, would be the ideal option.

According to Campaign 2000 (2015) social assistance incomes throughout Canada are inadequate causing “hunger, housing instability, stigmatization, discrimination, and poor health outcomes” (p. 8). The NLASW recommends that government continue to investment in social programs and supports for those experiencing poverty, and increase social assistance rates to adequately meet the needs of individuals or families requiring this support.

### **Early Childhood Development**

Increasing access to regulated, accessible and high quality child care for families in Newfoundland and Labrador has many short and long term benefits and is an important population growth policy. Affordability continues to be a major issue. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2015) recently released a report on child care fees in Canadian cities. This report, authored by MacDonald and Klinger, noted that St. John’s has the second highest median cost for infant care (under the age of 18 months) in the country. It is recommended that the provincial government explore options that will create more affordable child care options for families in this province (e.g., increased subsidies for child care spaces, capped fees on child care rates with government top ups, enhanced focus on after school programming). This is also in keeping with the Liberals Five Point Plan.

### **Summary**

The NLASW looks forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in meeting the needs of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Decisions and investments must be made that will affect change in the

short, medium and long term. It is recognized that the province is facing economic uncertainty and the deficit is blooming. However, an austerity budget is not in the best interests of the people of this province. Any cuts in the areas outlined in this brief will result in higher financial costs in years to come. Therefore, instead of applying a funding formula that reduces cuts equally across departments, the province can find efficiencies in the system by investing more strategically in early intervention initiatives and the social determinants of health.

As a province we must not cut social programs or to stop the gains that have been made in our work towards building a healthy and prosperous province. The NLASW offers the following alternatives to reductions in spending:

- Examination of the various tax structures and the impact on provincial revenues to support social programming and development and reducing income inequality;
- Indexing the minimum wage to keep more people out of poverty;
- Long term visioning and recognition of the impact of investments in early intervention and prevention on reducing/stabilizing health care costs; and
- Working with the federal government to increase investments through the Canada Social Transfer.

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