

Pre-Budget Submission

March 2015



Presented to: Honorable Ross Wiseman
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 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 2015 provincial budget.

Profession of Social Work Priorities for Funding

The NLASW has a long history of participating in the provincial pre-budget consultation process. Each year, the NLASW brings forth recommendations for policy considerations and financial investments to enhance the health and social well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). These recommendations are framed within the social determinants of health, as it is recognized that there are a number of factors that contribute to a healthy population. These include social and economic factors such as education, employment and working conditions, income, housing, food security, and experiences in early childhood (Raphael, 2004).

NL has demonstrated great leadership in social and economic development. As a profession, social workers have supported the social policy directions taken by government, including the development of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, *Long Term Care and Community Supports Services Strategy*, *Early Childhood Learning Strategy*, the *Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities*, *Ten Year Child Care Strategy*,

and *the Population Growth Strategy*. The NLASW participated in the consultation process for each of these strategies. Collectively, these strategies address the health of the people of this province across the life span. Therefore, it is important that these strategies continue to be strengthened with human and economic resources.

Government has a fiscal and social responsibility to the people of NL. While it is recognized that government must make tough choices when preparing a provincial budget with both a high debt and an anticipated deficit, the NLASW reaffirms its message that government must continue to focus on investments in social policy, program development and service delivery in growing a healthy and prosperous province. This brief addresses the following priority areas:

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

Poverty Reduction

NL has gained momentum in reducing and alleviating poverty. The 2014 progress report on the provincial poverty reduction strategy stated that NL now has the second lowest poverty level in the country. While this is a considerable achievement, there is still tremendous work to be done. According to Campaign 2000 (2014) “prosperity has not solved persistent poverty” (p.4). Provincially, as outlined in the 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).

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). It is therefore important that poverty reduction remain a key priority for government in the 2015 fiscal year.

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. 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). A report produced through the Homeless Hub supports a housing first strategy for addressing homelessness.

A review of the minimum wage policy is another area that must be a priority in alleviating and preventing poverty. It has been argued that a stronger minimum wage would negatively impact employment levels. However, research conducted Brennan & Stanford (2014) with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives examined the relationship between minimum wages and employment in all ten Canadian provinces between 1983 and 2012 and found no consistent connection between higher minimum wages and employment levels. The authors of the study 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”. 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.

Continued investment in social programs and supports for those experiencing poverty, and ensuring that social assistance rates are able to adequately meet the needs of those requiring this support is important. A recent report by Food Banks Canada (2014) showed that the number of individuals assisted by food banks in the province in 2014 was slightly up from 2013. This report also demonstrated that the greatest number of people accessing food banks were in receipt of social assistance (71.4%), with 37.7% being under the age of eighteen. As a province, we must and can do better for those living in poverty.

Social policy is health policy, and with the rising cost of health care, it is recommended that government continue to focus on solutions that improve health through initiatives such as the poverty reduction strategy. 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). This research is significant in light of the rising cost of health care in this province. In addition to cost savings in work productivity, higher tax incomes, and reduced strain on the criminal justice system, it makes economic sense to continue to invest in the alleviation, reduction and prevention of poverty in our province.

Health

The delivery of health care in Newfoundland and Labrador is challenging due to a number of factors including: 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 know that the health of the population is profoundly impacted by social conditions. Therefore, it is recommended that any health care reform incorporate the social determinants of health. This is the path for moving forward and addressing the high costs of health care in NL. It is also imperative that NL maintain a strong public sector to ensure the efficiency and cost effectiveness of health care delivery in this province.

Current efforts are underway to enhance primary health care. In moving this agenda forward, all primary health care providers need to be involved in developing the vision and model for accessible health care delivery in the province. Examples of primary health care successes might include access to palliative care services in the home, accessibility to primary health care team members in managing chronic diseases, rehabilitation and respite for seniors while residing in their own homes, and accessible health care for those experiencing homelessness.

Mental health is another area that must continue to receive priority and investments (financial and human resources). 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. As one of the largest providers of mental health care, social workers have a good understanding of the issues impacting on mental health. Accessibility to mental health services, at the right time, in the right place, and by the right health care professional is critical as we move forward as a province in meeting the mental health needs of the residents of this province.

Safe and Caring Schools & Social Work

In 2014, the NLASW recommended that the Department of Education examine the staffing complement within all provincial schools and consider the value of having social workers directly employed in schools across the province. 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 certainly 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 addressing issues relating to transitions, anxiety, grief and loss, bullying, and low self-esteem. Social workers are 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.

As part of the 2015 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 implementation.

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). This statistic is quite startling. Population aging, combined with outmigration, will have a financial impact on the province. A new Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development was created; a continued focus on this population is important and it is recommended that government continue to invest in the health and well-being of older adults and seniors.

Increased access to community support services, including home care, will have a positive impact on seniors. Enhanced access to home support will allow more seniors to stay in their own homes and delay or even avoid institutional care. This is a cost savings benefit for tax payers. 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, continue to expand respite and protective care residencies throughout the province, and increase access for more affordable assisted living for seniors.

Additional investments are also needed to ensure the development of a strategy to address rising dementia and Alzheimer diseases; expanded access to palliative care, including home based palliative care; enhanced coverage of medications and other medical supports for seniors living at home; training for home care workers; and improved access to allied health professionals.

Child, Youth and Family Services

It is essential 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, including the foster care strategy, must remain a priority.

Child care is also an area where additional investments are necessary. While the number of regulated child care spaces has significantly increased, there is still a shortage of accessible, affordable and high quality childcare spaces in the province to meet the growing demands of families. According to a report by Macdonald and Friendly (2014) with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the cost for infant child care in St. John's is the second highest in Canada. The high cost of child care is a barrier to gainful employment for many individuals, particularly women. It is recommended that investments in regulated child care continue in 2015 and that government explore options for affordable child care that meets the needs of families throughout Newfoundland and Labrador (e.g., subsidies for child care spaces, capped fees on child care rates, enhanced focus on after school programming).

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. The province is facing economic uncertainty, however now is not the time to cut social programs or to stop the gains that have been made in our work towards building a healthy and prosperous province. 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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