

**PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATION
RECOMMENDATIONS**

2022-2023



FROM THE
**NEW BRUNSWICK ASSOCIATION
OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

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The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) is an organization representing more than 2,150 members provincially. Its role is the promotion of excellence in social work practice and protection of the public.

Social workers are committed to supporting the well-being of all individuals and protecting the most vulnerable in our society. Social workers provide vital services to the citizens of New Brunswick, working in a variety of fields such as healthcare, mental health and addictions, child and adult protection, long-term care, education, non-profit organizations, policy, and more. Social workers are on the frontline every day, working with some of New Brunswick's most vulnerable populations and forever striving for a better, more equitable society where every citizen can reach their full potential.

The provincial government has the great responsibility to identify provincial priorities and allocate funds accordingly in the annual budget. As the voice of the social work profession in New Brunswick, the NBASW has prepared a document for the 2022-2023 government budget, highlighting some key priorities for New Brunswick social workers and the people they support.

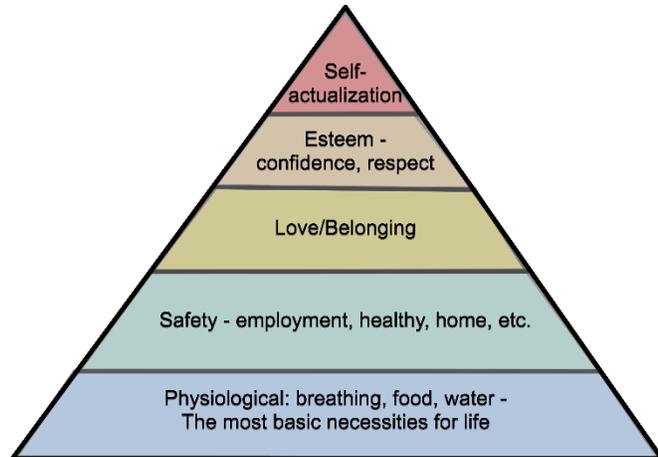
How can resiliency be built into government systems so that New Brunswickers can continue to access important services even during periods of significant disruption like we have experienced since the onset of the pandemic?

To promote resiliency in society, citizens must have access to the vital services they need, when they need them. The government must focus on reducing poverty and expanding access to safe, affordable housing, along with other systems that allow people to thrive and fully engage as citizens, including access to food, transportation, housing, and affordable childcare. [With New Brunswick having agreed to implement the \\$10-a-day childcare plan](#), the provincial government must do its part to ensure there are sufficient licensed childcare facilities in the province to meet the demand for services, while also providing employment supports and skills training opportunities to parents who are looking to enter or reenter the workforce.

As a result of low incomes and increasing food prices and housing costs, more New Brunswickers are being forced to rely on foodbanks and other community supports to meet their basic needs. With housing and rental prices continuing to skyrocket, it is critical that the provincial budget addresses this need and allocates the appropriate funds to supporting housing initiatives along the housing continuum and budgets for the construction and maintenance of affordable housing units around the province. With New Brunswick being one of the new provinces in Canada with no rent control legislation and with the province seeing that [largest increase in rent costs country-wide](#), the province must immediately implement rent control legislation, ensuring that policies are in place to adequately protect renters. If this is not done in a timely manner, the province will continue to see a rise in poverty, homelessness, reliance on social assistance programs, and the negative health outcomes of living in poverty. Access to safe and secure housing is a fundamental requirement; only once people's fundamental needs are met and stability is

attained can people begin to reach their full potential, as represented in [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#).

The foundational needs, such as access to stable employment, nutritious food, secure housing, quality health services, and more, are all social determinants of health; non-medical factors that influence health outcomes and have an important influence on health inequities. Supporting New Brunswickers to attain and retain safe and affordable housing, would enhance population health outcomes.



While the social assistance reform package that was introduced in September 2021 made some positive changes to the provincial social assistance program, such as raising the amount recipients can earn before benefits are reduced and no longer factoring in certain payments (such as child support payments) in the rate calculation, it failed to increase social assistance rates with social assistance rates in New Brunswick continuing to be some of the lowest in Canada and failing to meet the basic needs of recipients, as highlighted in [New Brunswick's 2021 Child Poverty Report Card](#). The NBASW echoes the [New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice](#) in calling on the provincial government to include an increase of \$100 per month (\$1,200 per year) for all social assistance recipients in the provincial budget. The budget should include sustained funding for poverty reduction programs, supporting and sustaining grassroots initiatives at a community level.

There must be increased investment in social services, recognizing that social services are preventative measures that ultimately reduce the cost of healthcare services. Research titled the [Effect of Provincial Spending on Social Services and Health Care on Health Outcomes in Canada](#) found that even if the government reallocated a small portion of funding from health to social services there would be an improvement in population health outcomes without changing the government's overall spending. As the research states, "redirecting resources from health to social services, at the margin, is an efficient way to improve health outcomes". As the [World Health Organization states](#), social determinants of health can be more important than health care or lifestyle choices in influencing health, accounting for 30-55% of health outcomes. The NBASW encourages the government to review healthcare spending and consider whether a reallocation to prevention and social services is feasible at this time, in light of the ongoing pandemic.

The government must increase the number of permanent social work positions within social service delivery programs, to ensure citizens have access to health professionals who are specifically trained to recognize and address personal and systemic barriers, providing New Brunswickers with wraparound services. The NBASW further recommends that the Department of Social Development streamlines their hiring processes and begins to make permanent positions available to new hires, similar to hiring processes within other government departments. This must be done to ensure that an adequate supply of social workers are recruited and retained within DSD, to provide the vital services that are mandated through the Department.

What supports need to be put in place to help businesses minimize the economic disruption the pandemic continues to cause?

With the public health restrictions needed to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses have been required to close or limit the number of patrons served at various points throughout the course of the pandemic. This has resulted in loss of revenue and financial hardship for many businesses, especially small businesses. The provincial budget should reflect the hardships faced by the private sector and expand financial support programs, such as the [NB Small Business Recovery Grant](#) and the [NB Self-Employed Lockdown Fund](#), to support small businesses that have been ineligible to receive funding, including independent and self-employed small business owners that gross less than \$30,000. Businesses will further be supported through the implementation of the recommendations found throughout this paper, recognizing that having a physically and mentally healthy population and having programs and social services in place to support peoples participation in the workforce will stimulate the economy and help sustain businesses throughout the province.

What steps need to be taken to build a resilient healthcare and senior care system that is resident focused, accessible, and adaptable to pandemic related disruptions?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the [Department of Health provided Zoom for Healthcare](#) accounts at no cost for a limited period of time to public and private health professionals, including social workers, to allow them to provide secure telehealth services to clients. During the global stress and uncertainty associated with the pandemic, access to mental health services remains more important than ever. The NBASW encourages the government to continue providing Zoom for Healthcare to all health professionals, so that citizens continue having the option to access to secure and reliable telehealth services. This program must be continued even after the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing the important role telehealth service delivery plays in expanding access to counselling and other health services. Also, as will be further discussed, investments must be made to support internet infrastructure in rural communities around the province, if virtual care is to be an available option for all New Brunswickers.

The government must continue to recruit and retain health professionals to meet the healthcare needs of New Brunswickers, recognizing that mental health is a vital component of overall health and wellbeing. Social workers have been on the frontline since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing vital services to New Brunswickers. Social workers, like other health professionals, have experienced high rates of exhaustion and burnout during this time. Social workers must be adequately supported to enhance their personal wellbeing so they have the capacity to remain in the profession throughout their careers and can continue providing high quality services to clients. Retaining professionals to the province is key in ensuring there's an adequate workforce supply to meet population demands. Currently, the NBASW is leading the development of a social work recruitment and retention strategy action plan. While specific action plan items will be identified as the work progresses, it is evident that implementing a wellness strategy for social workers will be key in retaining social workers in New Brunswick. The NBASW urges the government to allocate funds to the timely implementation of a social work wellness strategy to ensure there is a sufficient workforce to meet the demand for service, now and for years to come.

Just as it is a critical time to recruit and retain medical personnel in this province, it is equally important that the government ensures all New Brunswick citizens have access to equitable health services and invests in programs that prevent the need for future medical intervention. The [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an extremely negative effect on people's mental health and has resulted in an over-all increase in substance abuse, with global stress, unemployment, underemployment, lack of social connection, and lack of or reduced access to services exacerbating mental health and addiction issues. Since the pandemic began, there has been an international increase in substance use and drug overdoses. A strategy must be developed to mitigate the dangers associated with drug use. Supervised consumption sites are an effective means of reducing the harms associated with drug use, as they reduce the spread of infectious diseases by providing sterile equipment and providing a safe space for people to use drugs, having medical personnel on hand to respond to medical emergencies and drug overdoses, and providing a means of connecting service users with other community resources. As [Health Canada](#) states, "Supervised consumption sites and services save lives and benefit communities". In response to the ongoing opioid epidemic, the government should implement supervised consumption sites across New Brunswick, as a key harm reduction strategy.

Mental health has a direct impact on all aspects of life, influencing how people respond to stressful situations, relate to others, and make choices. The [Statistics Canada Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth](#) found that youth ages 15-24 have experienced the greatest decline in mental health since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that the government recognizes this impact and makes the necessary investment to ensure that all citizens, including youth, have timely access to mental health services. The government must ensure earmarked federal dollars are spent on mental health and the NBASW encourages the government to fund positions for additional mental health social workers around the province, to reduce waitlist times and ensure mental health services are accessible for all residents of New Brunswick.

The new One-at-a-Time Therapy program has so far been extremely effective in reducing waitlists, with the [government stating](#) that it's already reduced the provincial waitlists for mental health and addiction services by 46% since its implementation in February 2022. The program is currently available to people 16 years and up. To meet the mental health needs of younger populations, the government must invest in expanding the program by removing the age limits currently associated with One-at-a-Time Therapy. This change must be made to remove barriers in children and youth accessing preventative mental health services. Social workers can provide social work services to individuals of any age based on informed consent. Persons of any age who have the capacity to provide informed consent for services can access social work services, as outlined in the NBASW [Standards Regarding the Capacity of Minors to Consent to Social Work Services](#) and the NBASW's newly adopted [Guideline on Assessing the Capacity of Minors](#).

Throughout the pandemic there has been a need for enhanced and innovative community-based services, to reduce the number of New Brunswickers who depend on the hospital system to receive care that could otherwise be managed at home. As highlighted in [We are all in this together: Aging Strategy for New Brunswick](#), New Brunswick is both the fastest aging province in Canada and the province with the highest number of older adults, New Brunswick must be proactive in addressing the needs of the older population. Social workers can play a key role in supporting New Brunswick's aging population to lead healthy lives with the greatest level of independence possible. A focus on a home first approach, with the goal of

avoiding or delaying institutionalization, can result in cost savings, while allowing older adults and individuals with a disability to continue living in their communities. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the need for enhanced safety measures and physical distancing, the need for solutions that allow people to remain at home and age in place is greater than ever.

The government must implement aging in place strategies and provide financial support for informal caregivers. Informal caregivers are the unpaid people providing support to older adults in New Brunswick, often they are friends and family members. Informal caregivers are the hidden pillar of the healthcare system; by delaying entry into a hospital, nursing home, or special care home, informal caregivers save costs and increase institutional capacity while allowing older adults to continue living in their communities. [Seniors in Transition: Exploring Pathways Across the Care Continuum](#) explains that, by delaying entry into an institutional setting by just one month, the system could serve 1,000 more people within existing capacity. Informal caregivers must be adequately supported in caring for their loved ones at home, through both training and financial benefits. First Nations communities are leaders in this and have doing this type of work within their families and communities, with programs such as the Assisted Living Program in place to support individuals in supporting their loved ones.

What is needed to support and strengthen the province's education systems to support a healthy and adaptable learning environment?

During the closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world have had to adjust to the “new normal” and physically distance themselves to reduce the spread of the virus. Fortunately, technology has allowed for many to continue working and learning from home and has allowed for the continuation of services through online platforms. However, there are some ongoing barriers to working and learning from home. The lack of high-speed internet access in many rural areas of New Brunswick continues to be a barrier for residents trying to work and attend school and meetings online. As [Waiting to Connect](#) a Council of Canadian Academies report found, the ongoing connectivity gap maintains and perpetuates inequalities and disproportionately affects marginalized populations in rural and remote areas, such as Indigenous communities. In a day and age where high-speed connection is critical for successful personal, professional, and educational functioning, high-speed internet access must be provided to rural residents of New Brunswick. Having access to fast and reliable internet will enhance community development in rural regions by removing technological barriers that may be preventing some from relocating more rurally. High speed internet access in rural and remote areas of the province is key to the delivery of services and to economic development. Private investors are required to make high-speed internet available province-wide and the government should ensure adequate governmental incentives are in place to motivate the private sector to make the necessary investments.

In addition to lack of high-speed internet in rural areas of the province, access to reliable technology is a key barrier to implementing a blended education system. Poverty is a pervasive and ongoing problem in New Brunswick. Using 2019 data, the [New Brunswick's 2021 Child Poverty Report Card](#) found that over 21% of children in New Brunswick are living in poverty, with many of these children living far below the poverty line. That is over 30,000 children, with Indigenous children, immigrant children, and children from single-parent families being disproportionately represented in this figure. Since the figures in the 2021

report are based on pre-pandemic data, it is believed that far children in New Brunswick are currently experiencing poverty. Childhood poverty affects children's development, academic achievements, and has life-long consequences for those that experience it. For blended learning education models to be successful, programs must be in place to provide low-income individuals with the technology they need to succeed and with the corresponding technological literacy skills that are necessary to effectively utilize the technology. This must be done while also ensuring that all citizens of New Brunswick have access to their basic needs, a livable income, nutritious food, secure housing, and other social supports.

Another key consideration in implementing an effective blended education model is recognizing that home is not a safe place for all New Brunswick children. It is crucial that social work is recognized as an essential service and that vacant social work positions are filled immediately to ensure adequate staffing. As previously mentioned, streamlining hiring processes and having permanent social work positions made publicly is key to achieving this goal. Child Protection social workers must be given the tools necessary to fulfill their critical role of protecting the most vulnerable children of New Brunswick and caseloads should be realistic and allow for social workers to devote time to working with clients to enact lasting change.

It is important that the provincial government develops a budget that meets the needs of the citizens of New Brunswick. The NBASW appreciates the opportunity to present these recommendations and hopes to work with the provincial government to implement the recommendations presented above. In order for New Brunswick to address collective challenges and emerge stronger as a province, the government must provide the necessary supports to citizens, by investing in infrastructure and wraparound supports that will result in a better future for generations to come.