

August 2023



Recommendations for the Provincial Long- Term Care Sector

Prepared by

New Brunswick Association
of Social Workers

Submitted to

Office of the New Brunswick
Seniors' Advocate



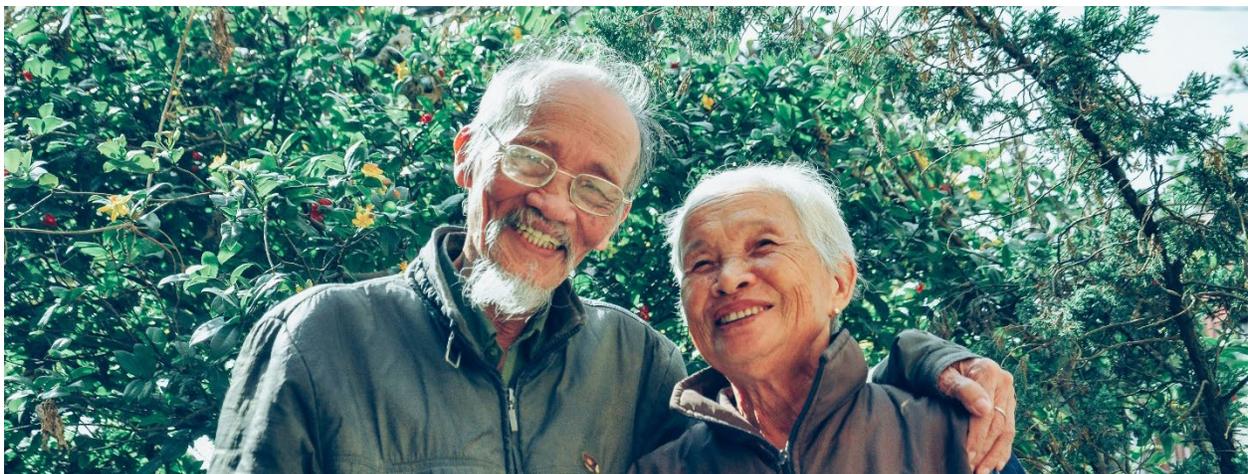
Recommendations for the Provincial Long-Term Care Sector

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) is an organization representing more than 2,250 members provincially. Its role is the promotion of excellence in social work practice and the protection of the public. Social workers serve older adults in a variety of settings in New Brunswick and recognize the importance of having a long-term care sector that is supportive and meets the needs of New Brunswickers.

The NBASW was contacted in early 2023 by the Office of the Seniors' Advocate and asked to submit a brief regarding the provincial long-term care sector. The Office of the Seniors' Advocate is undertaking a systemic review of New Brunswick's Long-Term Care sector, to assess the adequacy of government policy, planning, and practices in relation to long-term care to make recommendations for improvements.

Social workers are committed to supporting the well-being of all individuals and protecting the most vulnerable in our society. In preparing its response to this consultation, the NBASW circulated a survey to its members, seeking their thoughts on the provincial long-term care sector and what improvements they feel should be made to the system to better support New Brunswickers. The survey received 331 responses, giving it a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. With representation having been received from around the province, the survey responses serve to inform the NBASW's recommendations and survey findings are integrated throughout the recommendations below.

Social workers work hard every day to support the well-being of older adults and people with disabilities, across programs and organizations. The role of social workers can often be overlooked and the Association wishes to emphasize how critical their roles are and thank the social workers of New Brunswick for the amazing work that they do to support the psychosocial well-being of New Brunswickers, every day.



Before getting started, it's important to first acknowledge that older adults are not the only ones who rely on provincial long-term care services. The discussion and recommendations below for system improvements apply equally to those with disabilities and to any others who may utilize the range of long-term care services that exist.

We also want to recognize the scope of this work. Since the Office of the Senior's Advocate is undertaking a high-level, systemic review of the province's long-term care sector, the NBASW's recommendations will aim to reflect the scope of the review.

Supporting Informal Caregivers

With New Brunswick being one of the oldest and most rapidly aging provinces in Canada, it is critical that the Government of New Brunswick develops aging-in-place strategies and provide financial support for informal caregivers. Informal caregivers are the unpaid people providing support to older adults and individuals with disabilities in New Brunswick, often they are friends and family members. Recent statistics find that one in four Canadians aged 15 years and older assume the informal caregiver role. That's 7.8 million people, with women accounting for 54% of all caregivers and 64% of those reporting spending 20 or more hours per week on caregiving.¹

Informal caregivers are increasingly recognized for the important role they play in society and in the economy. In addition to improving the quality of life for care receivers and lowering the economic burden for families, informal caregivers also reduce costs to governments and health services.² 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. In fact, it has been found that by delaying entry into an institutional setting by just one month a system with 30,000 residential beds could serve 1,000 more people within existing capacity.³

Often, informal caregivers are unable to work due to the responsibility of caring for their loved ones. This can put financial strain on families, particularly women, during vulnerable times. Formalized processes for informal caregivers must be implemented and must include education, training, psychosocial support, emotional support, respite care services, and financial benefits. Having workplaces that are flexible and accommodating and that offer caregiver leaves would also help caregivers remain employed while navigating caregiving responsibilities.

¹ Government of Canada (2022). Differences in the characteristics of caregivers and caregiving arrangements of Canadians, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/220114/dq220114c-eng.pdf?st=Y2s2zjtj>

² Ibid.

³ Canadian Institute for Health Information (2017). Seniors in transition: exploring pathways across the care continuum. Retrieved from <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/seniors-in-transition-report-2017-en.pdf>

Over half of the social worker survey respondents have assumed an informal caregiver role in their personal lives. Survey respondents felt that providing access to respite care services (daytime and overnight), providing financial compensation to informal caregivers, and implementing caregiver leave in workplaces (time off with pay or reduced hours with pay) are some of the top ways to support informal caregivers in the current system.

As a major provincial employer and provider of public services, the Government of New Brunswick has an opportunity to implement supportive policies and practices that provide wrap-around support to informal caregivers. Informal caregivers must be adequately supported in caring for their loved ones at home, particularly when there is a shortage of beds in residential facilities, as is the current reality.

It is not realistic to expect someone to be able to take on a caregiving role while balancing other responsibilities for an extended period, without breaks and support. Providing respite care for informal caregivers is key to preventing caregiver burnout. There must be further investments made to support adult day centers that meet the needs of seniors and respite beds around the province.

Support for informal caregivers also includes education and support for families of children and youth with disabilities and other mental health needs. Just as clients benefit from access to mental health services and learning various techniques and strategies that support mental health and well-being, families equally benefit from educational and supportive services.

Allowing People to Remain at Home and Age in Place

When asked whether adequate supports are provided to people using in-home care services, 53% of social worker respondents felt that adequate supports are sometimes provided while 28% felt that adequate supports are rarely or never provided. Respondents saw financial barriers, a lack of formal supports and services to assist with daily activities of living, and a lack of informal caregivers/supports as being the top three barriers in place within the current system.

Investments must be made to ensure access to affordable and accessible housing for all New Brunswickers, including older adults and those with disabilities. For families who are caring for their loved ones at home, renovations must often be made to ensure the residence is safe and accessible for all. There should be easily accessible and sufficient subsidies provided to cover the costs of renovations and devices that are needed to keep seniors at home and properly cared for.

Recognizing the shortage of nursing home and special care home beds in the province, there needs to be serious investments made in home care. Not all older adults have loved ones who can be their caregivers at home. These individuals must have timely access to home care assessments and services in their own homes. These services must be affordable and must meet



the needs of clients. This includes having access to affordable, high-quality, after-hours care. Survey respondents recognize that the cost of services is often too high for those who don't qualify for financial assistance. It must be recognized that the longer people are waiting to access the services they need, the sooner they will reach a crisis point and potentially end up in a hospital requiring a higher level of care.

Lack of transportation is often cited as a barrier to individuals remaining at home, as those without access to transportation have difficulties accessing necessary services and participating in the community. Investments must be made to bolster accessible and affordable public transportation methods around New Brunswick. Expanding the bus system and investing in more accessible modes of transportation, such as kneeling buses, would aid in making public transportation more accessible. In the survey, social workers also identify that transportation options for those with disabilities are particularly insufficient and it is often difficult for clients living outside of town to find transportation to access necessary services. Recognizing the unique struggles that come with being a largely rural province, innovative public transportation methods, such as ride share programs, should also be provided.

Supporting Access to Community Services

Social workers recognize the important role that community services play in supporting people to live at home and age in place. Community programs that provide meal deliveries, life skills training, social skills training, employment counselling, tax services, and more, are recognized for the important services that they provide. Beyond these practical services, community groups and events that bring people together must also be recognized for the important roles that they play.

Being able to participate in social events and remain socially connected is a vital component of individual health and well-being. We know that social support and community involvement are an integral part of the healthy, independent aging process. People must have access to community services that provide vital services and allow them to remain socially engaged, just as community services must receive the necessary support to continue operating.

Implementing Regulated Paraprofessionals into the System

Presently, home support services consist of non-professional assistance with personal care needs. It is recognized that access to high-quality, consistent homecare services within the province is a big issue. To ensure a baseline level of care is received by all clients and to ensure that those providing services have a standard level of education and training, there is a need for regulation within the home-care sector.



Currently, the NBASW is in the process of introducing a new regulated paraprofession, called social work technicians, to the province. Social work technicians will be regulated paraprofessionals, specially trained to provide support to the social work profession, who help to implement the portions of social worker case plans that fall within the social work technician scope of practice. In their roles, it is expected that social work technicians will provide hands-on services that enhance the social functioning and well-being of clients.

As regulated paraprofessionals, social work technicians will have met the registration criteria set in place by the NBASW and will be required to engage in continuing professional education and adhere to the Code of Ethics, standards, and guidelines that are put in place by the Association. There will also be an accountability mechanism provided by the Association's complaint and discipline process. Providing services by regulated paraprofessionals will protect clients and will ensure that they receive high-quality services.

To ensure there is a sufficient workforce to meet the homecare needs of the population, there need to be significant investments made in home care services. Ensuring workers are properly compensated and valued for the important work that they do is an important component in recruiting to and retaining individuals in the sector.

Continuing the Long-Term Care Social Work Assessment

Social Development's long-term care services refer to a range of personal support, physical, social, and mental health services required by individuals who, because of long-term functional limitations, need assistance to function as independently as possible. To provide appropriate long-term care services at the appropriate time and in the appropriate place within the overall continuum of care, a range of services may be provided to individuals, including home support services or placement in a residential facility.⁴

For those wishing to access the Department's long-term care services, a standardized assessment and uniform eligibility criteria are used to ensure that all seniors aged 65 and over have the same access to services they require. Social workers are the professionals responsible for doing the standardized assessments that determine the type and level of care required by seniors requesting services. The social work assessment determines how the applicant is doing living in their own home, what supports they have available to them, and what kind of help they may need to function optimally. To complete the assessment, social workers may need more information from other professionals that are involved with the individual. As part of this assessment, individuals are also required to have a "Physical Examination and History" form

⁴ Department of Social Development (n.d.). Long-term care services for seniors. Retrieved from https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.10115.Long-Term_Care_Services_for_Seniors.html

completed by a doctor or nurse practitioner. Once the assessment is complete, the Department can determine whether the individual is qualified to move to a special care home or nursing home and the social worker will provide the possible options available.⁵

Social workers work from a person-in-environment perspective that is unique to the profession. Social workers are regulated health professionals who are specially trained to understand, identify, and help people navigate personal and systemic barriers and overcome challenges, working effectively with individuals, families, and communities. The social work perspective is a vital component of the long-term care assessment, as social workers work with individuals to identify the strengths and challenges that they're facing and involve them in the development of a path forward that meets their needs and ensures their safety and well-being.

At times, the assessment process has been criticized for being lengthy. When this has been looked into, there seems to be a bottleneck in waiting on the physician's component of the paperwork (the medical assessment) to be completed. The social worker assessment component has not been found to be the cause of these delays. Going forward, social workers must continue to be the professionals responsible for the long-term care assessment process.

While people typically need higher levels of care as time goes on, there is the possibility of people's health improving and them needing lower levels of care. Implementing a reassessment process would ensure that everyone has access to the proper level of care to maximize their independence, while also ensuring that their needs are met. The initial assessment process and any future reassessment process should be streamlined and made as simple as possible.

Enhancing Long-Term Care and Disability Support Services

The province's long-term care services and disability support programs must be properly resourced and must provide adequate support to service users. The government uses a Standard Family Contribution Policy to determine the financial amount that the government will cover in the provision of long-term care services, including in-home services and residential services. Under the long-term care and disability support programs, the government assists families by assessing the need for services and accessing such services. In some instances, the government assists with the cost of these services when the client requiring long-term care services is financially unable to pay the full costs.

Often, it has been noted that the financial subsidy that is provided is not sufficient to meet the needs of New Brunswickers. In a time where the cost of living and inflation is at an all-time high, the government must ensure that programs meet the needs of the people they are designed to

⁵ Lafrance, M., Erb, A., Durkee-Lloyd, J., Greason, M., Bigonnesse, C., Jackson, E., Doucet, S., Luke, A. & Lake, K. (2023). *Aging in New Brunswick: a user's guide*. Second Edition. Retrieved from <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/sd-ds/pdf/Seniors/aging-in-nb.pdf>

serve and allow service users to live with dignity. At this time, contributions do not leave enough income at home when a spouse is in a residential facility.

It is also important that the province's policies regarding co-pay are made equitable across the residential care continuum. Government contributions should consider the global cost of living in the facility, including any additional fees established by adult residential services, and the government should also expand health card criteria. Too often, people have the funds to cover their premium but don't have any money left over each month for co-pay after the payments are made to fill all prescriptions. If they don't have the funds to cover the premium, they are no longer eligible for a health card. The high costs of coverage and co-pays may leave them without enough money remaining at the end of the month to pay for health-related costs and other basic costs. The cost barriers associated with accessing adult residential facilities must be addressed within revisions to the long-term care system. An equitable and accessible system must be developed across the long-term care continuum.

Considering Adult Protection

Adult protection is offered through the Department of Social Development and provides services to seniors and adults with disabilities who are victims of abuse or neglect. When reviewing the province's long-term care sector, it is vital that the adult protection program not be overlooked. Investments must be made to New Brunswick's adult protection program to ensure that social workers have access to the resources that are needed to properly serve clients.

Adult protection works in tandem with and relies on the long-term care program, disability support services, and the health system. It is equally vital that the province's long-term care program is properly resourced and is effective in meeting people's needs. Often, when people are unable to access the services they require or are delayed in accessing them, they may become involved with adult protection. New Brunswickers must be knowledgeable about the services that are available to them, must know when to access these services, and must have timely access to the services when they're needed, to prevent situations from escalating and becoming adult protection matters.

Bolstering the Role of Social Work Across the Long-Term Care Sector

Survey respondents feel that providing a continuity of care (including follow-up transitional services), adopting a person-centered care approach across systems, and ensuring efficient collaboration and communication between services/professionals are some of the best ways to support individuals who are transitioning to residential long-term care services, people with disabilities, and families. Social workers play key roles across departments and organizations and



bolstering the role of social workers, across the system, would provide greater services to clients and their families while facilitating increased collaboration.

To provide adequate psychosocial support and education for older adults and their loved ones, social workers must be employed in the agencies that work with and support these individuals and their families. A huge gap and area of need are employing social workers in residential long-term care facilities across New Brunswick. Social workers are uniquely qualified to offer support through transitional periods, help clients cope with grief, meet the psychosocial needs of both residents and their families, help people prepare for aging, provide support to palliative care in nursing homes, and more. They may also educate the clients on the importance of appointing a power of attorney, financial planning, and wills, and support clients through these processes, reducing the need for public trustees to be appointed in these matters later on. For older adults across the continuum of care, all systems that are involved with them must adopt a collaborative, person-centered approach to caring for them. Social workers can play a key role in developing and actualizing this collaborative process.

Nearly all survey respondents believe that those in residential long-term care services would benefit from having social workers on staff. Respondents feel that some of the top ways social workers can help improve New Brunswick's long-term care sector is through helping residents and their families with the transition process, providing ongoing psychosocial support to residents and their families during their stay in a long-term care facility, working on multi-disciplinary teams to develop care plans, and helping individuals and their families navigate services. Social workers also would have a role in implementing programs and services aimed at improving emotional and social well-being, providing assessments and re-assessments, and providing grief counselling.

To allow long-term care facilities to determine the proper staffing skill mix for their facility, the province should shift its funding model for care homes to a basket funding model where each home would have the capability of hiring the professionals necessary to meet the comprehensive care needs of residents. Depending on the needs of each home, they should be able to engage in staffing arrangements that are tailored to their specific needs, such as having a social worker shared between two smaller homes.

Recognizing the current labour shortage being experienced in the province, it is important that all health professionals can practice their profession's specific scope of practice and are being used to their fullest potential within systems. To address the social work labour shortage, the NBASW is leading a five-year Social Work Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2023-2028). The Strategy's steering committee is composed of representatives from various government departments, health authorities, schools of social work, colleges, unions, and more; all committed to ensuring there are enough social workers to meet the needs of the public. Throughout the strategy, significant actions are being taken to bolster the provincial social work workforce. By regulating social work technicians, developing new provincial schools of social work, and creating



new pathways from college to university, strategic actions will provide new paraprofessionals while increasing the number of social workers province wide. With social workers being uniquely trained and qualified to lead care planning, help people navigate systems, and enhance the psychosocial well-being of clients and their families, bolstering the social work role across systems is key in improving the provincial long-term care sector.

Increasing Collaboration Between Systems

When transitioning between systems, organizations and departments need to have a greater willingness to provide people with services that fall within their organizational mandate, regardless of the other programs and services they are utilizing. People with disabilities and older adults may require services from multiple organizations and departments. As an example, mental health needs do not disappear just because someone is aging or has a disability. People need to be able to access whatever services they need to bolster their independence and well-being, without being concerned that the provision of one service will come with the loss of another, as is too often the case within the current system. This need extends to individuals placed within long-term care families. Once people are placed, it seems that the services and supports that were provided to them up until that point stop. Service continuity is important to support the transition process and meet people's needs. It's important to acknowledge the interconnected nature of programs and services. It is vital that silos be broken and citizens have access to wrap-around services, regardless of where they fall on the care continuum.

Improving Access to Residential Services

Wait times continue to be a barrier for those who need placement in a residential long-term care facility. New Brunswick's population continues to age and, with not enough placement options available, the need for residential services only continues to increase. There is an urgent need to introduce more special care homes to the province.

There is also a specific need for more residential placement options for young adults. The lack of placement options in the province often results in creating specialized placements or putting individuals in residential options that are not best suited to their needs. Investments must be made to ensure there are quality placement options in the province that meet the needs of young people who require residential care and maintain their connection to community.



Conclusion

New Brunswick's long-term care sector is vast and encompasses a wide range of departments, organizations, and services for a demographic that can vary greatly. In this brief, the NBASW has provided some key recommendations from the perspective of provincial social workers. The Association hopes that these recommendations are duly considered and incorporated into the Office of the Seniors Advocate's review of the provincial long-term care system. Social workers are a part of the long-term solution for a stronger system. Enhancing the role of social workers, across organizations, would support those with disabilities, older adults, and families as they navigate life changes, supports, and systems. Social workers support the psychosocial well-being of New Brunswickers and are vital to a happier, healthier New Brunswick.