



New Brunswick Association of Social Workers  
2021-2022 Pre-Budget Consultation Recommendations

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## **2021-2022 Pre-Budget Consultation Recommendations**

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) is an organization representing more than 2,100 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. For this reason, the NBASW has prepared a document for the 2021-2022 government budget, highlighting some key priorities for New Brunswick social workers and the people they support. Social workers provide a vital service to New Brunswick, working in a variety of fields such as healthcare, mental health and addictions, child and adult protection, 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.

### **What have we learned from the pandemic and how can we optimize the use of our resources in delivering dependable public health care?**

The government must continue to recruit and retain health professionals to meet the healthcare needs of the province. 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 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. 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 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.

To further ensure the accessibility of mental health services, there needs to be a provincial mental health and addiction crisis phoneline that is staffed by qualified mental health professionals, such as social workers, on a 24/7 basis. While a crisis line is important for providing New Brunswickers with accessible mental health and addiction crisis services, the system must be accompanied by an on-call system to deal with the 20% of calls that will require face-to-face interventions, including support from police officers during the appropriate interventions.

The NBASW believes that the cost for a province-wide on-call mental health service would be minimal, due to the nature of the service and the demand during the hours for which the various Mobile Crisis Units are not open. The standby rate would be \$3 an hour and would require nine social workers to cover the full province. During instances that police officers require assistance for a face-to-face intervention from a qualified mental health social worker, they would be available to intervene in person and would cost the system two hours at the overtime rate. This is not a new model or concept in New Brunswick. In fact, the Child Protection and Adult Protection on-call model is structured similarly, providing after hours telephone screening and, when required, a social worker who is on call to intervene face-to-face. The NBASW believes most of the in-person response cases would be dealt with within two hours.

With an on-call mental health response model available, police interventions such as wellness checks, mental health calls, family violence disputes, and addiction issues must involve mental health professionals who are specifically trained to de-escalate and respond to these types of emergencies and other crises. Having mental health professionals, such as social workers, respond to wellness checks with police would allow for social workers to address mental health crises, connect people with services, provide follow-up, and enhance public services while providing long-term cost-saving measures. In addition to implementing a standardized, province-wide response model where social workers and police co-respond to wellness checks, all police and healthcare professionals should receive cultural competency training to increase the likelihood that Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals have access to physically and culturally safe health and emergency services.

### **How can private sector investment be stimulated such that it will support a stronger, more resilient economy?**

The lack of high-speed internet access in many rural areas of New Brunswick has been identified as a huge barrier for residents trying to work and attend school and meetings online. 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.

It is important for the government to recognize the continued need for formalized pay equity legislation in New Brunswick. As the Common Front for Social Justice's *Minimum Wage: Information Document* states, "the Employment Standards Act recognizes the principle of equal

pay for work of equal value, it does not take into account that due to historic and systematic discrimination, many jobs occupied mainly by women pay less than jobs of equal value occupied by men". Statistics Canada data from 2019 found that men continue to make more than their female counterparts, with the wage gap between women and men being 7.4%. The government should implement pay equity legislation for private sectors. In focusing on enhanced gender equality within New Brunswick, the government should take steps to ensure that health services that are provided within private clinics are equitable and that citizens have access to the services they need when they need them.

### **What tools and resources are needed to support blended learning in our education system?**

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.

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. In fact, the Saint John Human Development Council found that over 21% of children in New Brunswick are living in poverty, with many of these children living far below the poverty line, a number that is expected to rise with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. That is over 30,000 children, with Indigenous children, immigrant children, and children from single-parent families being disproportionately represented in this figure. 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, in addition to 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. 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.

## **Where should government focus its attention in building vibrant and sustainable communities?**

To create vibrant and sustainable communities, 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. The Saint John Human Development Council identified housing and the rising costs of food as some key areas of concerns in the *New Brunswick's 2020 Child Poverty Report Card*, stating that in the Saint John region alone there are 1,125 people on the waitlist of housing, with nearly half of these people being families with children.

To build vibrant and sustainable communities there must be increased investment in social services. 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". The NBASW urges 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 NBASW further recommends that the government increases the number of 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.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen the 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 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 is greater than ever.

It is important for the government to develop 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. Currently, more than eight million Canadians are family caregivers. As the *Caregivers' Guide* states, "it is no longer a question about if someone will assume the role of caregiving, rather it is when". 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. The 2017 report *Seniors in Transition: Exploring Pathways Across the Care Continuum* explained 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 services can be moved online to reduce costs and increase flexibility for New Brunswickers?**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health provided free Zoom for Healthcare accounts to health professionals, including social workers, to allow them to provide secure telehealth services to clients for a period of one year. During the global stress and uncertainty associated with the pandemic, access to mental health services remains more important than ever and the NBASW is pleased that the government has decided to extend this program until 2022. In recognizing the important role telehealth service delivery plays in expanding access to counselling and other health services, the NBASW encourages the government to continue investing in this service for health professionals, so that citizens continue having the option to access to secure and reliable telehealth services even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Where should government prioritize its efforts in protecting the environment and addressing the impacts of climate change?**

With climate change being an ongoing reality of currently structured systems, it is important to balance increased revenue with the responsibility of being environmentally sound and responsible. It is critical that the government build and enhance its relationship with Indigenous peoples and communities, to ensure decisions are culturally and environmentally sound and in line with the principles of Truth and Reconciliation, as outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada *Calls to Action* (2015). The NBASW believes that this commitment must not only focus on recognizing land rights and environmental concerns but also acknowledge Indigenous expertise in the delivery of social services within their territories.