

New Brunswick Pre-Budget Consultation 2019-2020

Recommendations from the
New Brunswick Association of Social Workers



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Introduction

This report has been prepared by New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) staff, in collaboration with the NBASW Social Action Committee. As New Brunswick's regulatory body and professional association of the social work profession, the NBASW represents over 2,000 members province-wide. The NBASW strives to be a professional organization that reflects the values of social work, provides ethical leadership, and instills public confidence.

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 front-line every day, working with some of New Brunswick's most vulnerable populations.

The NBASW aims to reflect the priorities of its members and their clients through the recommendations presented in this report. This report also highlights some of the important areas of need that the government has identified, as well as provides recommendations to fill some of the gaps that remain unaddressed.

What do you most want government to consider when restoring sustainability to our public finances?

The provincial government outlined its platform and priorities in the *Speech from the Throne*, which was presented on November 20th, 2018. As stated in the *Speech from the Throne*, the government plans to actualize a balanced provincial budget by March 2020, at the latest. While a balanced budget is a commendable endeavour, the balance between managing costs and providing high-quality programs and services is a delicate one. It is imperative that a balanced budget is not achieved through budgetary cuts that impact New Brunswick's most vulnerable populations. The NBASW is supportive of the government's decision to launch an interactive pre-budget process and hopes it incorporates feedback from public stakeholders when deciding how cuts will occur and where funds will be reallocated.

The NBASW is supportive of the government's plan to stimulate research-based and green-economy jobs. It is important to balance increased revenue with the responsibility of being environmentally sound and responsible. In the *Speech from the Throne*, the government identifies the priority of building and enhancing working relationships with Indigenous Peoples of New Brunswick. The NBASW believes that this commitment must not only focus on recognizing land rights and environmental concerns but also acknowledges Indigenous expertise in the delivery of social services within their territories.

The NBASW believes that fiscal sustainability will occur as a result of strategic investment in preventative measures. Research titled the *Effect of Provincial Spending on Social Services and Health Care on Health Outcomes in Canada* has found that social services are a good way of

addressing the social determinants of health and are thus a “form of preventative health spending and changes the risk distribution for the entire population”. Investing in social services improves population health outcomes and saves costs in the long-term. Social workers can play a fundamental role in supporting these initiatives, as they are employed in a vast variety of sectors and have a deep understanding of how the socioeconomic environment affects individuals. A fiscally sustainable New Brunswick is one where citizens have access to the resources they need to prevent or reduce future reliance on health and social systems.

What is the best way to energize the private sector?

The private sector has a major role in creating jobs and prosperity for New Brunswick. Many social workers in the New Brunswick offer counselling through private counselling services. In order to support social workers in private practice, it is critical that the draft legislation presented by the NBASW is supported by the provincial government. Within the modernized NBASW legislation, there is an amendment that provides the conditions and incentives for social workers in private practice to form professional corporations. This, in turn, provides a structure that enables tax incentives for these private entities. By providing the proper incentives for professionals, such as social workers, to form professional corporations, these private entities can provide services to the public while reducing pressures on the public system.

What do you most want government to consider about our public education system?

The NBASW commends the government for the emphasis it is placing on education. The NBASW hopes that the education system in New Brunswick is updated to provide all children with a strong foundation in all types of literacy, including financial literacy, and instills in them a thorough understanding of important concepts, such as that of sexual consent. It is the government’s responsibility to ensure all children receive a comprehensive education. To achieve this, it is imperative that the curriculum used in schools is culturally appropriate from an Indigenous perspective and that Indigenous children see themselves reflected in school curriculum. All New Brunswick children should graduate with knowledge and understanding of Canada’s history of oppression and colonization. The provincial government must ensure that Indigenous history is standard in provincial curriculum and honors Indigenous stories. For these teachings to be truly effective, all teachers must be culturally competent and receive the proper training to pass truthful and representative knowledge down to their students. The government must continue to work towards truth and reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples of New Brunswick.

While the desire for every child to succeed in school is there, the NBASW urges the government to take into consideration the personal factors that can often influence children's literacy rates. According to the *2018 New Brunswick Child Poverty Report Card*, 22.8% of children in New Brunswick are living in poverty, with many of these children living far below the poverty line. That is over 31,000 children, with Indigenous and immigrant children being disproportionately represented in this figure. If the government is truly committed to improving education outcomes, it must first ensure that all citizens of New Brunswick have access to their basic needs, a liveable income, nutritious food, and secure housing.

Along the same line, it is also critical that the government ensures that each and every child in New Brunswick is safe from harm. George Savoury's *Review of the Effectiveness of New Brunswick's Child Protection System* highlights some of the key barriers child protection social workers face in fulfilling their role. It is critical that the government increases funding to child welfare through the Department of Social Development and follows through with the recommendations brought forward by George Savoury. The NBASW supports in part the recommendations outlined in this report and urges the government to implement them in a timely manner. It is crucial that social work is categorized 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. Furthermore, it is critical that the government is supportive of the modernized NBASW legislation, as it provides legislative tools that address some of the recommendations that are referenced in the Savoury report. For example, the new legislation expedites the process for new social work candidates to receive their social work registration. This means that social workers will be allowed to enter the work force earlier than they are currently able to, thus addressing staff shortages that may occur.

In the *Speech from the Throne*, the provincial government committed to updating the existing *Family Services Act (FSA)*. The *Review of the Effectiveness of New Brunswick's Child Protection System* further emphasized the need for new FSA legislation, as well as for specific child welfare legislation. While working on an updated FSA, it is important that the government implements the interim legislation brought forward by George Savoury. When updating and developing legislation, it is imperative that it is evaluated through various policy review lenses and made to be inclusive and reflective of today's society.

The NBASW urges the provincial government to provide support to First Nations communities in the development of new First Nations child welfare legislation, in collaboration with the Federal government. The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network's *Our History, Our Stories: Personal Narratives & Urban Aboriginal History in New Brunswick* highlights the 2016 census finding that "in Atlantic Canada five out of six persons who self-identify as Indigenous live off-reserve", and therefore it is not solely the federal governments responsibility to develop Indigenous focused policies.

Furthermore, the government must ensure that funds are provided to ensure all its workers are culturally competent by providing them with cultural competency training. This education is crucial; everyone has a role to play in making New Brunswick a safe and welcoming place for all. As the Association of over 2,000 social workers across New Brunswick, the NBASW should also be closely involved in the development of new provincial legislation. This is particularly important for the updated FSA and specific child welfare legislation, as these pieces of legislation have a direct effect on social workers and their clients.

What are the most important considerations for social assistance reform?

In the *Speech from the Throne*, the provincial government committed to social assistance reform. For reform to be effective, it is crucial that the government consults those with lived experience and incorporates their feedback in system changes. All New Brunswickers must have access to basic physiological needs, such as housing and food security. Ensuring all residents of New Brunswick have their basic needs met, whether it be through social assistance or employment, should be top priority for any government. At this time, social assistance and minimum wage do not guarantee that people's most basic needs are met. For this reason, the NBASW would like to emphasize the need for a liveable wage rather than a minimum wage, in addition to an increase in social assistance rates.

It is important that amendments promote individuals' capacity to participate in the labour market and achieve self-sustainability. Allowing for recipients to retain a greater portion of their income while receiving benefits will encourage job participation and help to end the 'welfare cycle'. While allowing social assistance recipients to retain a greater portion of their income is critical to helping them become self-sufficient, it is also important that social assistance reform provides comprehensive support to New Brunswickers that are unable to work and provides them with the means to live in dignity.

It is key that the government retain programs that allow New Brunswickers to access health benefits while working and no longer receiving income assistance. *Social Assistance in New Brunswick: Origins, Developments, and the Current Situation* identifies that New Brunswickers are able to retain government health cards for three years after they finish receiving income assistance. Programs such as these must be retained, as they provide incentive and support to New Brunswickers looking to participate in the workforce.

Thorough social assistance reform must include extending programs that make childcare accessible and affordable and increasing the number of licensed child care facilities in the province. Access to affordable childcare is critical to reducing the number of children living in poverty and encouraging parental labour market participation.

If the government hopes to achieve a pathway to the middle class for all residents of New Brunswick, it is also important that the government recognizes the importance of housing first initiatives. As *Paving the Road Home: Measures in Support of a Plan to End Homelessness in Fredericton* states, “fact-based evidence is overwhelming that a strategy known as Housing First cannot only reduce but eliminate chronic homelessness, and that in fact, it is cheaper to fix the problem than ignore it and settle for the status quo... it (housing first) represents economic savings in the long term”. The NBASW urges the provincial government to work closely with the Community Action Group on Homelessness to ensure housing for all New Brunswickers is made a priority.

With Fredericton’s emergency out-of-the-cold shelter set to close in the coming months, it is imperative that the provincial government acts fast in finding housing for all New Brunswick residents. Every citizen of New Brunswick deserves to have their basic needs met; however, since addresses are required in order to qualify for social assistance, homeless people in New Brunswick are unable to receive the funds required to meet their basic needs. Furthermore, there is little hope of someone being able to hold down a job if they are constantly wondering where they will have to sleep at night. As the Community Action Group on Homelessness states, “housing first – the rest will follow”. With housing a priority, investments should also be made to updating current public housing infrastructure to ensure inhabitants have a safe and dignified place to live.

What matters most to you when considering ways to reduce poverty and provide opportunity for all New Brunswickers?

It is important that the government recognizes 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”. Furthermore, the report found that as of 2017, the wage gap between women and men in New Brunswick was 7.4%. It is important that governments implement pay equity legislation for both public and private sectors.

A population that remains underemployed across Canada and represents a huge area of untapped potential are people with disabilities. According to 2017 statistics reported in the *Canadian Survey on Disability*, one in five Canadians have at least one disability, with the term disability encompassing physical, intellectual, developmental, learning, auditory, and visual impairments as well as mental illness and disabilities relating to flexibility, dexterity, pain, and memory.

Statistics Canada has found that while 80% of Canadians without disabilities are employed, only 59% of Canadians with disabilities have employment. The report states that “among those with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years who were not employed and not currently in school, two in five (39%) had potential to work. This represents nearly 645,000 individuals with disabilities”. These findings show that Canadians with disabilities are significantly underutilized in the labour market and represent huge untapped potential. In its effort to support jobs, the NBASW urges the government to implement programs and services that ensure that the citizens of New Brunswick who have a disability are adequately supported to participate in the workforce. The inclusion of individuals with disabilities to participate in the workforce presents an opportunity to address labour shortages, increase productivity, and provide greater financial independence to a population that has historically been marginalized. The government should be a leader in modeling fair hiring practices by ensuring that people with disabilities are part of the government staff.

What aspects of public health care are you most concerned about?

The NBASW commends the government for the emphasis that it has placed on the importance of mental health services for the people of New Brunswick. The *Waiting Your Turn: Wait Times for Health Care in Canada, 2017 Report* found that, out of all the Canadian provinces, New Brunswick has among the longest wait time to access mental health services. The *New Brunswick Health System Report Card 2016* gave New Brunswick an overall grade of “C” and stated that “more timely access to primary care providers, mental health services and drug coverage would improve self-management and coordinated care for patients, improving quality of life and reducing hospitalization”.

The government’s commitment to improving mental health services must extend to addiction services, as addiction and mental health issues often occur co-morbidly. As the 2016 Health Profile titled *Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders in New Brunswick* states, “as with mental health disorders, substance use disorders can have biological, psychological and social components”. It is found that over 20% of New Brunswickers will experience an alcohol or drug use disorder in their lifetime. It is imperative that the government co-ordinate efforts to tackle addiction in the province by investing in mental health and addiction programs and developing provincial strategies to battle addiction issues. As *Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder in New Brunswick* notes, addiction issues “affect individuals, families, communities, schools, workplaces and the health-care system”. Investment in prevention and treatment would actualize in far-reaching improvements in each of these realms.

The provincial government recognizes that every citizen of New Brunswick should have access to safe and timely medical service when needed. Just as it is a critical time to recruit and retain medical personnel in this province, it is equally important that the government invest in programs and roles that prevent the need for future medical intervention. In addition to

ensuring the earmarked federal dollars are spent on mental health, the NBASW encourages the government to fund positions for additional mental health social workers around the province to reduce wait list times and ensure mental health services are accessible for all residents of New Brunswick. To fully ensure that the children and adolescents of New Brunswick have timely access to these professional services, the provincial government must also invest in school social workers. This can be done by funding further social work positions through Integrated Service Delivery.

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 government reallocated a small portion of funding from health to social services there would be an improvement in population health outcomes without changing 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 re-allocate existing funds to prevention and social services.

Since the provincial government has already recognized the importance of mental health, the NBASW also urges the government to expand mental health courts throughout the province. Mental health courts provide participants with individualized treatment plans and are a progressive alternative to punitive measures that do little to prevent recidivism. As *Multidimensional Evaluation of a Mental Health Court: Adherence to the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model* states, "MHC's have been endorsed as an innovative and cost-effective way of dealing with the problem of the overrepresentation of individuals with mental illness in the criminal justice system".

In recognizing the critical role that social workers play protecting and helping the public, it is important that government invests in a human resource strategy on how to recruit and retain social workers in New Brunswick. To be effective, it is important that this strategy brings together representatives from all healthcare professions. This must be done in a timely manner, to ensure there is sufficient interest in the field of social work to meet the needs of the citizens of New Brunswick.

What economic and fiscal challenges and opportunities are there on the horizon that we need to start prepping for today?

As both the fastest aging province in Canada and the province with the highest number of older adults, it is critical that New Brunswick is proactive in addressing the needs of the older population. Older adults make up 19.5% of New Brunswick's population, with this figure projected to reach 31.3% by 2031. *We are all in this together: An Aging Strategy for New Brunswick* identifies several areas of need when it comes to services for older adults. Many

seniors reside in hospital beds while waiting for a space in a care facility and it has been found that “within days of being placed in the hospital, a senior’s physical mobility and mental well-being are significantly decreased”.

There is a need for more innovative, community-based approaches to support people aging in place, for New Brunswickers across the continuum of care. Now is a critical time for the government of New Brunswick 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. It is critical that informal caregivers are adequately supported in caring for their loved ones at home, through both training and financial benefits.

With New Brunswick’s unique demographic, we have the opportunity to be a leader when it comes to aging and modeling what age-friendly communities look like. *We are all in this together: An Aging Strategy for New Brunswick* defines an age-friendly community as one where “seniors feel safe, valued, respected and are more engaged in their community. Age-friendly communities support the physical and mental well-being of seniors”. It is important that the government invests in programs and infrastructure that meet the needs of New Brunswick’s aging population.

To further ensure that all older adults in New Brunswick are properly cared for, the NBASW urges the government to commit to the introduction of social workers in all New Brunswick nursing homes. The psychological wellbeing of older adults is often an area that lacks discussion and consideration. Mental health issues do not disappear with age. As a government that has committed itself to the promotion of mental health services in New Brunswick, employing social workers in nursing homes would fill a huge area of need and represents an area of untapped potential. Social workers are uniquely qualified to offer support through transitional periods, help clients cope with grief, and meet the psychosocial needs of both residents and their families.

Conclusion

In summary, the NBASW presents the following recommendations to the provincial government in preparation for the 2019-2020 budget.

Recommendation for restoring sustainability to public finances:

- That the government does not achieve a balanced budget through cuts to social services.

Recommendation for energizing the private sector:

- That the government supports proposed NBASW legislation that will energize the private sector by allowing social workers in private practice to form professional corporations.

Recommendations for education and child welfare:

- That the government ensures the standard school curriculum instills children with knowledge of Canada's history of oppression and colonization and that Indigenous stories are honored in the curriculum.
- That the government ensures all its employees, including teachers and social workers, receive cultural competency training that is appropriate from an Indigenous perspective.
- That the government focuses on ensuring every child in New Brunswick is free from harm and has all their basic needs met.
- That the government increases funding to the area of child welfare and implements appropriate recommendations brought forward by George Savoury in the *Review of the Effectiveness of New Brunswick's Child Protection System* in a timely manner.
 - That the government categorizes social work as an essential service and ensures vacant social work positions are filled immediately.
- That an investment to have more social workers in the school system is made to provide support to teachers, families and children and youths who require psychosocial intervention.

Recommendations for social assistance reform:

- That the government ensures that social assistance programs meet the basic needs of New Brunswickers and are effective in breaking the cycle of generational welfare.
- That the government retains programs that allow people to hold government health benefits while in the workforce.
- That the government supports housing first initiatives and makes eradicating homelessness in New Brunswick a priority.
- That the government increases the number of licensed child care facilities in the New Brunswick and expands affordable daycare programs throughout the province.
- That the government makes strategic investments to improve current public housing infrastructures.

Recommendations for reducing poverty and providing opportunity for all:

- That the government implements pay equity legislation in both private and public sectors and supports a liveable wage, rather than a minimum wage.
- That the government continues to implement programs and services that ensure those with disabilities are adequately supported in the workforce.

Recommendations for public health care:

- That the government improves health outcomes and saves health-care costs by redistributing and/or increasing funding to preventative social services.
- That the government invests in more positions for social workers working in mental health and addiction to reduce wait times in the province.
- That the government implements a human resource strategy to ensure there is sufficient interest in the field of social work to meet the needs of the citizens of New Brunswick.
- That the government makes Mental Health courts available throughout New Brunswick.

Recommendations for economic and fiscal challenges to start preparing for:

- That the government implements aging in place strategies and acknowledges the important role that informal-caregivers play by providing them with formalized training and financial compensation.
- That the government invests in a pilot study by providing funding available to nursing homes to be able to hire social workers to provide psychosocial interventions and support to residents and families.

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 these recommendations. As stated in the *Speech from the Throne*, “we have a chance to turn our small corner of the world into a shining example for the world”. Let this be done largely through investments in preventative measures that result in a better future for generations to come.

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