

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Pre-Budget Submission

February 2010

Presented to: Honorable Tom Marshall

Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1300 professional social workers in this province. The mandate of the NLASW is to ensure excellence in social work. As a profession, social work is committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families and communities through intervention and counseling, social policy analysis, collaboration, research, health promotion and community capacity building.

Profession of Social Work Priorities for Funding

In 2009, Newfoundland and Labrador continued to experience fiscal prosperity at a time when most Canadian economies are recovering from economic recession and turmoil. While the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador continues to flourish in 2010, we recognize that as a province, we have a responsibility to address the needs of our citizens through continued investment in legislation, policies, social programs and services that have a direct, positive impact on the lives of children, families and communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

As a profession, social workers support the policy directions taken by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in the areas of poverty reduction, healthy aging, mental health and child, youth and family services. We recognize the importance of Government's responsibility to implement a balance between social spending and debt reduction. Finding this balance is essential to achieving long-term, sustainable advances of current social policy initiatives. In budget 2010, social workers recommend that Government continue to hold investment in social policy, programs and services in the same regard as economic planning and development.

The following are priority areas identified by the NLASW Board of Directors:

- 1. Poverty Reduction**
- 2. Long Term Care and Community Support Services**
- 3. Mental Health Care**
- 4. Child, Youth and Family Services**

Poverty Reduction

The NLASW supports Government's commitment to reducing poverty through the Newfoundland and Labrador Poverty Reduction Strategy. Although 30,000 fewer people are living below the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) than in 2003, poverty continues to impact the lives of children, adults and families in Newfoundland and Labrador. Statistics indicate that in 2009, 15.7% of the provinces population experienced unemployment (Statistics Canada, 2009). Further, according to a report by the Canadian Association of Food Banks, 14% of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who accessed a food bank in 2009 were in receipt of Employment Insurance; while 71% of food bank consumers were in receipt of social assistance. In comparison to 2008, this province experienced a 10% increase in food bank use in 2009. Last year, 30,014 people received assistance from a food bank because they could not afford to purchase food (Hunger Count 2009, p. 35). These statistics are alarming, especially during a time when the province is experiencing great economic success. Contrary to historical economic trends in Canada, whereby the income gap would narrow during good economic times and widen during recessions, the opposite is occurring across Canada. This demonstrates that as the province continues to grow in prosperity, the gap between the rich and poor also is continuing to grow.

The NLASW commends Government on actions taken through the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy to reduce poverty in this province. It is critical to develop long-term, sustainable policy, programs and services that will lift children, adults and families out of poverty instead of making poverty simply more manageable. The NLASW recommends that Government:

- Continue to enhance and increase investments through the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy that are necessary to prevent, reduce and eliminate poverty.
- Improve access to existing and new programs and services while removing barriers and disincentives to enter the work force.
- Continue to enhance and increase access to affordable early child learning and childcare programs and services. Social workers support initiatives to build and

strengthen programs and services to optimize child development outcomes and promote a successful transition to school.

- Continue to enhance and increase access to affordable housing. This includes investing in infrastructure and supporting community programs that address housing and homelessness throughout all areas of the province.

Long Term Care and Community Support Services

Newfoundland and Labrador has a growing population of older adults. According to the Provincial Healthy Aging Policy Framework, over the last 30 years, Newfoundland and Labrador's population has aged faster than any other province in Canada (p. 10). In 2007, 13.9% (69,000 people) were over the age of 65. Further, it is estimated that 20% (102,000 people) of the province's population will be over the age of 65 by the year 2017. Social workers recognize that as the population of older adults, specifically those with complex needs, continues to grow, the need for enhanced policies, programs and services that will support seniors will also increase.

It is recognized that there is a lack of appropriate community support services, particularly home care services, for seniors throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Social workers practicing in community care programs are often seen as the "gate keepers" to access community support programs, by being the first contact between a senior in need and the community support services program. Social workers are concerned with the insufficient staffing complement of social work positions in community care programs. Social work positions are few, while people needing service are many. Inadequate community supports can often lead to the premature admission of an older adult or an adult with a disability into a long term care facility. This can have a devastating effect on individuals as they are separated from their families and for some, removed from their home community. According to the Provincial Healthy Aging Policy Framework, community supports are required to preserve seniors' independence (p. 24).

It is also recognized by social workers, that communities and long term care facilities are experiencing an increase in clients with complex medical, cognitive and behavioral needs that require protective and specialized care services. Long term care

and community care legislation, policies, programs and services are needed to preserve the privacy, comfort and dignity of older adults and adults with disabilities within care facilities and those who remain in community.

The NLASW commends Government on actions taken through the Provincial Healthy Aging Policy Framework to promote all aspects of healthy aging. It is important to make continued investments in the goals and objectives outlined in this policy directive. The implementation of these recommendations will help our province ensure that seniors have access to the best and most appropriate services at the appropriate time and place. The NLASW recommends that Government:

- Increase funding to community care programs that will allow for the provision of increased social work positions.
- Enhance funding for home support services. It is essential that seniors wanting to remain in their own homes are given the necessary supports, under a healthy aging framework.
- Enhance provisions for specialized services for older adults with complex medical, cognitive and behavioral needs within existing and new long term care facilities and community.
- Develop and implement a provincial strategy for long term care and community support services.

Mental Health Care

One in every five Canadians will have a mental health problem at some point in their lives (CMHA). Therefore, improving and enhancing mental health services must be recognized as a priority area. A Provincial Policy Framework for Mental Health and Addictions Services in Newfoundland and Labrador titled *Working Together for Mental Health* was released in October 2005. It stated that “*although it is accepted that the general health of a population is largely determined by the social and environmental conditions of the community, that same realization about mental health has been slower to be acknowledged*” (p.1). This concern continues to exist. It is also recognized that one’s mental health is impacted by social stressors such as unemployment, poverty,

homelessness and violence. Therefore the connections between the Mental Health Framework, the Healthy Aging Framework, the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Violence Prevention Initiative are obvious.

Working Together for Mental Health focused on five major policy directions: (i) Prevention and early intervention, (ii) Consumers and significant others, (iii) Bridges for better access, (iv) Quality mental health and addictions services and (v) Demonstrating accountability and measuring progress. Full implementation of these strategic directions in all areas of this province is required.

Since social workers are a key profession in the provision of mental health & addictions services in this province, this profession has been able to monitor the progress of the strategy over the last five years. Access to and availability of mental health services varies greatly throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Recommended areas for further consideration in the 2010 provincial budget include:

- Enhancing prevention and early intervention including additional resources to address the stigma associated with mental illness
- Enhancing the provision of home and community supports including, addressing the continued shortage of affordable housing for clients of the mental health system in all regions of the province.
- As the provincial government moves forward to review the infrastructure of facilities, the provincial hospital dedicated to the care and treatment of mental illness, the Waterford Hospital should be on the priority list.

Child, Youth and Family Services

The creation of the new Department of Child, Youth and Family Services in Budget 2009 was a significant step towards addressing the systemic problems which have existed in this vital program area. The long term sustainability of the new department to address the issues that it is intended to address must remain a priority. The Child, Youth and Family Services Clinical Services Review (2008) stated *“The child protection system, like many of the children it serves, has been the victim of neglect*

over many years” (p.3). This statement should guide current and future budget decisions.

Two immediate priorities of the Child, Youth and Family Services Department that the social work profession recommends include:

- The development of a continuum of residential services for youth including a strategy to attract and sustain new foster homes
- The development of a plan to recruit and retain social workers in the Child, Youth and Family Services field of practice. Several reports have recognized that the high turnover of social workers in the program has had a profound and negative impact upon the delivery of services to children and families. Stabilization of the workforce through the development of a co-ordinated, province wide recruitment and retention strategy was a recommendation of the Child, Youth and Family Services Clinical Services Review.

Summary

The NLASW is encouraged by policy directions taken by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in budget 2009 in the areas of poverty reduction, healthy aging, mental health and child, youth and family services. It is essential that Government reaffirms its commitment to protect social programs and services while strengthening the economy. Significant funding to address poverty, enhance long term care and community support services, to improve mental health care and to strengthen child, youth and family services must be priorities for the 2010 provincial budget. It is by building on our strong foundation that we will continue on the path to a prosperous and healthy province.

References

Canadian Mental Health Association (2010). *Understanding Mental Illness*. Retrieved on February 4, 2010 from http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3&lang=1.

Department of Health and Community Services. Aging and Seniors Division (2007). *Healthy aging policy framework*. St. John's, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Department of Health & Community Services. Child, Youth and Family Services (2008). *Clinical Services Review*. St. John's, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Department of Health and Community Services (2005). *Working Together for Mental Health: A Provincial Policy Framework for Mental Health and Addictions Services in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment. Poverty Reduction Division (2009). *Empowering People, Engaging Community, Enabling Success: First Progress Report on the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. St. John's, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Food Banks Canada (2009). *Hunger Count 2009*. Toronto, ON. Food Banks Canada.

Statistics Canada (2009). *Latest Release from the Labour Force Survey*. Retrieved on February 4, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/subjects-sujets/labour-travail/lfs-epa/t100108a3-eng.htm>. Government of Canada.