

New Brunswick Pre-Budget Consultation 2018-2019

**Recommendations from the
New Brunswick Association of Social Workers**



October 2017

Introduction

In preparation for the release of the 2018-2019 provincial budget, the New Brunswick government has requested input from stakeholders and the public. The following document was prepared by the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) staff, in collaboration with the NBASW Social Action Committee. The NBASW is the regulatory body and professional association representing close to 1,900 members provincially.

The Department of Finance published a *2018-2019 Pre-Budget Consultation* document, reporting on the Province's progress in reducing its deficit while maintaining a focus on the priorities of jobs, education and health care. The document also provides an overview of the Province's sources of revenue and main areas of spending. The recommendations provided in this document have been structured in response to the four questions posed by the Department of Finance in their pre-budget consultation document.

What are your thoughts on the fiscal progress made to-date?

The NBASW would like to commend the provincial government on its commitment to reducing the provincial deficit while maintaining social programs that are important to New Brunswickers. The *2018-2019 Pre-Budget Consultation* document states that:

“Health and Senior Care, and Education represent the two largest expenditure areas for the province. Combined, they represent approximately 57 percent of our spending. Including spending on Social Services, two out of every three dollars are spent on Health and Senior Care, Education and Social Services.”

The NBASW believes these investments in health and senior care, education and social services are a crucial investment in maintaining a population that is productive, and physically, emotionally and mentally well. The NBASW is supportive of a gradual deficit reduction strategy that protects social programs.

The provincial government has reported a drop of more than \$480 million in the deficit since 2013-2014. This is encouraging, however, the balance between managing costs and ensuring high quality services and programs to the public is always a delicate one. It is crucial that cost-cutting measures are not implemented at the expense of our most vulnerable citizens.

Based on current progress, the provincial government is predicting a balanced budget by the year 2020-2021. A balanced budget, including the elimination of debt servicing costs is encouraging, as it will allow these resources to be reinvested in social or other programs. When the time comes that a balanced budget is a reality, it will be crucial that New Brunswickers are consulted in

deciding how this money is allocated. In addition, sustainability planning that will protect the province from falling into debt again will be key.

Improved economic growth was cited as a key contributor in reducing the provincial deficit. The NBASW is very supportive of innovative opportunities to increase revenue in ways that are environmentally sound and responsible.

In October 2016, the federal government published a benchmark regarding carbon taxes to be introduced throughout Canada by 2018, including a pricing backstop to be imposed on provinces and territories that have not implemented their own systems by 2018. The NBASW is supportive of measures to protect the environment, while also encouraging the provincial government to reflect on how to implement a taxation system that will ensure that individuals with low-income are not the most heavily impacted. In keeping with the goal of promoting jobs, it will be crucial that barriers to employment are not created for individuals living in rural areas who may rely upon gasoline-fueled vehicles in order to participate in the workforce.

Increased home sales were referred to as an indicator of improved economic growth within the province. While it is encouraging that individuals are putting down roots in the province, the NBASW cautions that it is important for the province to consider the level of personal debt (credit market debt) being carried by New Brunswickers. For a community to thrive it must be financially well at an individual level as well as at a provincial level. Ensuring that New Brunswickers have access to programs that teach financial literacy is an important step in promoting financial wellness.

What do you see as next steps on our path toward fiscal sustainability?

The NBASW believes that a key to maintaining healthy, productive communities is to invest in prevention and early response, and believes that social workers can play a key role in supporting these initiatives. A fiscally sustainable New Brunswick is one where individuals have access to the resources they need in order to prevent or reduce future reliance on the health or social systems.

In the *2016 New Brunswick Health System Report Card* published by the New Brunswick Health Council, the province received a grade of “C” for accessibility when it comes to timeliness in accessing health services. The report card indicates that more timely access to mental health services would improve quality of life and reduce hospitalizations. With more than 1,900 social workers registered in the province of New Brunswick, social workers have the skills needed to support individuals who may be navigating mental illness or addictions.

Social workers can also play a key role in supporting New Brunswick’s aging population. With a holistic approach to support, social workers can assist older adults 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 to continue living in their communities. The 2017 report *Seniors in Transition: Exploring Pathways Across the Care Continuum*, explains that delaying placement in institutional settings by just one month, for individuals who can be served effectively in the community, can create significant capacity within the system to serve others. “Example: In a health system with 30,000 residential care beds and an average length of stay of 20 months, by reducing each new client’s length of stay by just 1 month, the system could serve nearly 1,000 more people within existing capacity”.

Recognizing the unique contributions that social workers can offer in prevention efforts, the NBASW encourages the provincial government to increase access to social workers through publicly funded programs including Mental Health, and commit to the introduction of social workers in all New Brunswick nursing homes. The NBASW also recommends the expansion of Mental Health courts throughout the province. In keeping with the theme of prevention, the availability of Mental Health courts throughout the province will assist in addressing the underlying mental health needs of New Brunswickers, rather than responding with a punitive system that does little to prevent recidivism.

Finally, ensuring that New Brunswickers have access to basic needs, such as a liveable income, nutritious food, and secure housing is crucial to prevention efforts. The NBASW urges the provincial government to commit to implementing reforms to the existing income assistance system. These reforms should include policies that allow individuals to successfully transition into the workforce. Examples of policy reforms that facilitate and incentivize participation in the workforce include allowing individuals to retain more of their employment income while still receiving benefits, and providing greater access to affordable childcare. An increase in benefits is also essential to ensure the basic needs of New Brunswickers are met. In addition, focus should be placed on supporting housing first initiatives and the creation of accessible, affordable housing.

Are there opportunities that will complement our efforts in supporting jobs, education and health care?

A 2014 report published by Statistics Canada, *Persons with disabilities and employment*, cites that the employment rate of Canadians with disabilities was 49% compared to 79% for Canadians without a disability. This statistic reinforces the fact that individuals with disabilities are significantly underutilized in the labour market and represent huge untapped potential. In its efforts to support jobs, the NBASW encourages the provincial government to put additional focus on ensuring that individuals with disabilities are fully supported to participate in the workforce. In addition, the provincial government must lead by example in ensuring that individuals with all types of disabilities are employed as civil servants. This includes individuals with physical and mobility disabilities, intellectual and development disabilities, learning disabilities, individuals

with a mental illness, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, people who are blind or have low vision, and individuals with disabilities related to flexibility, dexterity, pain or memory.

The full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce presents an opportunity to address labour shortages, increase workplace productivity and provide greater financial independence to a population that has historically been marginalized.

The Province of New Brunswick has identified the sale of recreational cannabis as a potential source of revenue. Recognizing the well documented risks associated with cannabis use, it is crucial that accessible education about the risk of cannabis use and information about lower-risk cannabis use, be delivered to youth and the general public. The NBASW recommends that the Province implement an educational campaign about recreational cannabis use, and invest in school social workers to assist in delivering this crucial programming.

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

According to the 2017 *We are all in this together: An Aging Strategy for New Brunswick* “In New Brunswick there are 147,929 seniors which is equal to 19.5% of our population. By 2038, with the current trend, it is expected that 31.3% of the New Brunswick population will be seniors”. To adequately prepare for the aging demographic, the province must invest in physical and human resources.

Investment in accessible, affordable housing not only allows older adults to age in place, thereby reducing the need for institutionalization, but can also meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Applying universal design principles (design that is useful to people with diverse abilities) when planning for all provincial services will be increasingly important as the population ages. The World Health Organization in their 2016 report *Multisectoral action for a life course approach to healthy ageing: global strategy and plan of action on ageing and health*, identified the development of age-friendly environments as one of five key strategic objectives. New Brunswick’s focus on the development of age-friendly communities will continue to be an important step to promoting wellness.

The other key ingredient in supporting individuals to remain in their communities is the provision of reliable, skilled, support workers. Social workers are often involved in developing support plans for older adults or individuals with disabilities. These support plans frequently rely on the use of support workers to assist individuals with daily activities, from personal care and household tasks, to the development of life skills. Social workers rely upon the services provided by support workers to ensure the safety, health and social inclusion of New Brunswickers. Despite the crucial nature of this position, recruiting and retaining skilled support workers continues to be a challenge in New Brunswick. The 2011 report *Human Service Workers: A report regarding their*

working conditions, identifies low wages as a barrier to recruitment and retention of workers, and identifies this issue as potentially leading to some agencies no longer being able to provide services. The NBASW calls on the provincial government to invest heavily in support workers, including providing higher hourly wages for support workers.

Equally important are informal caregivers, the unpaid people providing support to older adults in New Brunswick. Informal caregivers are the hidden pillar to the healthcare system, without which the healthcare system could not function. The 2015 document, *A Policy Framework to Guide a National Seniors Strategy for Canada*, published by the Canadian Medical Association references estimates that “unpaid caregivers provided 10 times more hours of home care than paid caregivers in 2007- around 1.5 billion hours, provided by nearly 3.1 million people”. Investing in supports that assist informal caregivers to continue in these roles is vital. While sufficient service hours, including respite is essential, research conducted by social work students in St. Thomas University’s Bachelor of Social Work program has shown that emotional support paired with assistance in navigating service systems are central to allowing informal caregivers to continue in their support capacity. Social workers, particularly those working in community-based capacities are well positioned to provide this support to informal caregivers. The NBASW recommends that the provincial government formalize support for informal caregivers, including providing access to assistance in navigating service systems.

Conclusion

In summary, the NBASW presents the following recommendations to the provincial government in preparation for the 2018-2019 budget:

- That the Province ensure that the introduction of a carbon taxation system does not create barriers to employment or most significantly impact those with low-income.
- That the Province ensure New Brunswickers have access to financial literacy resources that promote financial wellness at an individual/family level.
- That the Province increase access to social workers through publicly funded programs including Mental Health, and commit to the introduction of social workers in all New Brunswick nursing homes.
- That the Province expand Mental Health courts to be available throughout the province.
- That the Province to commit to implementing reforms to the existing income assistance system and support Housing First initiatives.
- That the Province put additional focus on ensuring that individuals with disabilities are fully supported to participate in the workforce, including ensuring that individuals with all types of disabilities are employed as civil servants.

- That the Province implement an educational campaign about recreational cannabis use, and invest in school social workers to assist in delivering this crucial programming.
- That the Province invest in accessible, affordable housing; apply universal design principles to all provincial services, and continue to support the creation of age-friendly communities.
- That the Province invest heavily in support workers, including providing higher hourly wages for support workers.
- That the Province formalize support for informal caregivers, including providing access to assistance in navigating service systems.

The NBASW appreciates the opportunity to offer these recommendations to the provincial government and would be pleased to work with the Government of New Brunswick to implement these recommendations. The NBASW believes that collaboration is key in creating a healthy, happy and vibrant New Brunswick.

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