



Provincial Election Document

Recommendations from the New Brunswick
Association of Social Workers



AUGUST 2020



The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) is an organization representing more than 2,000 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 upcoming provincial election, highlighting social issues that are important to New Brunswick social workers and the people they support.

This document is intended to:

- Inform all candidates and political parties of key social issues.
- Provide recommendations that will allow political parties to make meaningful platform commitments and address these issues.
- Offer NB social workers a guide when discussing these social issues with their local candidates.

For more information visit www.nbasw-attsnb.ca

Affordable, accessible housing

For many New Brunswickers, having a secure home is a cornerstone of building a stable life. Yet according to the New Brunswick Non-Profit Housing Association, 29,565 New Brunswick households do not have a safe, affordable place to call home. The COVID-19 pandemic has put many people out of work, likely increasing the number of homeless and precariously housed populations in the province. With the ongoing pandemic, an increasing number of unemployed and underemployed individuals, an increasing population of older adults, and the second highest rate of disability in Canada, affordable, accessible housing is a critical need in this province.

It is also important that the government recognizes the importance of housing first initiatives. It has been found that the Housing First strategy can eliminate chronic homelessness while being more cost effective than systems currently in place to address homelessness. As the Community Action Group on Homelessness states, “housing first – the rest will follow”.

The NBASW calls for:

- Investment in provincial housing first policies.
- Greater investment in the creation of additional affordable housing units, with requirements that a percentage of new constructions be accessible.
- Significant increases in the number of available portable rent subsidies to allow individuals the flexibility to live in neighbourhoods close to their work, health care and community services, and natural support networks.
- A commitment to explore a provincially funded home-sharing program to address the housing needs of older adults, individuals with a disability and individuals with limited income.
- Strategic government investments to improve current public housing infrastructures.

Home Support

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. 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. It is critical that informal caregivers are adequately supported in caring for their loved ones at home, through both training and financial benefits.

The NBASW calls for:

- Significant investment in home support workers, including providing higher hourly wages for support workers.
- Implementation of aging in place strategies and acknowledgement of the important role that informal caregivers play by providing them with formalized training and financial compensation.

Income Assistance & Poverty Reduction

All New Brunswickers must be provided the resources to meet their basic needs. Ensuring that citizens have access to a livable income, nutritious food, and secure housing is crucial to prevention efforts. Barriers that perpetuate cycles of poverty must be removed and government assistance programs must allow people to meet their basic needs and live fulfilling lives.

According to *New Brunswick's 2019 Child Poverty Report Card* from the Saint John Human Development Council, over 30,000 children in New Brunswick are living in poverty, with New Brunswick having the fourth highest child poverty rate of Canada's 10 provinces. While steps have been made in recent years to increase social assistance rates and daycare subsidies, further increases are needed to lift individuals and families out of poverty.

It has been widely recognized that women's employment gains have been set back years by the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to lack of available childcare. However, it must be noted that, even before the pandemic, the government grossly underspent on childcare programs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's benchmark for childcare spending is one percent of gross domestic product (GDP). This means New Brunswick should be spending approximately 300 million on childcare as opposed to the 125 million, or 0.4 percent of GDP, it currently spends.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of universal basic income has been used in the form of Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) payments from the Federal Government. During this time, CERB payments have given Canadians who were laid off or unable to work emergency funds for the necessities of daily life, sparking renewed interest in the concept of universal basic income. With universal basic income being the ideal, it must be noted that an individual on extended social assistance in New Brunswick currently receives \$697 per month, while the monthly CERB payment is \$2,000. This major discrepancy needs to be addressed with increased social assistance rates while the province works with the Federal Government to develop a reformed social welfare system that is based on the principals of universal basic income.

The NBASW calls for:

- The Provincial Government to negotiate with the Federal Government to develop a new social welfare system that is based on the principles of universal basic income.
- Reforms to the existing income assistance system including:
 - Increased income assistance rates until which time a basic income framework is developed and implemented.
 - Policy reform to allow individuals to retain more income while still receiving benefits.
 - Introduction of a modernized process for accessing Extended Benefits (social assistance for individuals with a disability) including a transparent process for appeal.
 - Policy reform to allow individuals receiving social assistance to live together and share resources, without financial claw backs.
- Greater access to supports that allow for participation in the workforce including:
 - Inclusive, affordable childcare.
 - Workplace supports for individuals with a disability.

Wellness Checks & Mental Health Services

In order to provide people with mental health services when they need it most, police interventions such as wellness checks, mental health calls, family violence disputes, and addiction issues should involve 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, it is critical that mental health social workers are available to respond to mental health emergencies throughout the province on a 24/7 basis through mobile crisis units.

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. The safety measures and physical distancing that came along with the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to remain in place for an extended period of time. To ensure citizens continue having access to secure and reliable health services when needed, the government should expand the program and ensure New Brunswick health professionals are able to renew their Zoom for Healthcare accounts through the Department of Health.

Mental health is critical at all stages of life. The psychological wellbeing of older adults is often an area that lacks discussion and consideration. Mental health issues do not disappear with age and, with the physical distancing necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and people being separated from loved ones for extended periods of time, the need for mental health support is greater than ever. 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. Supporting older adults as they navigate the stress and isolation that may come from the “new normal” it is key to enhancing well-being during these uncertain times.

The NBASW calls for:

- Implementation of a province-wide model where social workers accompany police in responding to wellness checks and other non-criminal interventions.
- Commitment to standardizing and expanding mobile crisis units to provide emergency intervention services on an ongoing, 24/7 basis.
- Commitment to the expansion of Mental Health Courts throughout the province.
- Commitment to extend the government funded Zoom for Healthcare program for all registered health professionals, including social workers.
- Increased access to social workers through publicly funded programs including Mental Health, and a commitment to the introduction of social workers in all New Brunswick nursing homes to provide psychosocial interventions and support to residents and families.



Internet Services

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 from home and allowed for the continuation of services through online platforms. However, 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 personal and professional meetings online. In a day and age where high speed connection is critical to successful personal and professional 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.

The NBASW calls for:

- Provision of high speed internet in all rural and remote areas of New Brunswick.

Primary Health Care Services

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. 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 government must continue to recruit and retain health professionals to meet the healthcare needs of the province. Further, ensuring that all New Brunswickers have equitable access to health services is key in supporting peoples mental and physical well-being. The need for equitable access to services extends to all marginalized communities and includes peoples’ need to physically and financially accessible reproductive services, as well the need for those in the LGBTQ+ community to receive proper care and gender affirming treatment.

Just as it is a critical time to recruit and retain medical personnel in this province, it is equally important that the government invests in programs 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.

The NBASW calls for:

- Commitment to ensuring all New Brunswickers have access to equitable health services and that the government commits to removing barriers to these services.
- Investment in more positions for social workers working in mental health and addiction to reduce wait times in the province.