

HEAL



Organizations for Health Action

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

August 2023

Recommendations

1. That the federal government provide funding and leadership to implement a regionalized, data-informed, and accountable national Health Human Resource Plan to meet Canadians health needs and support our healthcare workers.
2. That the federal government, working in partnership with all levels of government, fund sustainable, evidence-based mental health services to meet the growing demand for timely access to care, and formally recognize mental health parity in legislation.
3. That the federal government, working in partnership with all levels of government, increase investments in community, home and residential care to meet the needs of aging Canadians. These investments must ensure personal needs and choice in the delivery of care and services at the right time, in the right place and by the right provider.

Introduction

Canada's healthcare system, while embodying fundamental values such as universality and equity, has been significantly strained over the years. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the existing gaps and shortcomings, exposing vulnerabilities that require immediate attention and remedial measures. As we look towards the future, it is crucial that we learn from these challenges and proactively invest in the necessary reforms to ensure the long-term success and resilience of our healthcare system.

Collaboration between all levels of government is essential to ensure that our healthcare systems are adequately supported.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has reported significant health inequalities among various population groups, including Indigenous peoples, sexual and racial minorities, immigrants, and individuals with functional limitations.¹ It is imperative to address these disparities and ensure that prevention and treatment are accessible to underserved communities. Support and incentives must be provided to prioritize the provision of healthcare services in these communities, addressing the unique challenges they face and working towards achieving health equity.

It has become clear that the healthcare system we built decades ago cannot deliver on the healthcare services we need today. Increased funding, innovation, and systemic reform are all needed to ensure that Canadians' health needs are met now and into the future. This submission aims to outline key recommendations that, if implemented, will enhance the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of healthcare services for all Canadians.

The government can support the health of all Canadians through the following recommendations.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/science-research-data/key-health-inequalities-canada-national-portrait-executive-summary.html>

Addressing Canada's Health Human Resource Crisis

The strain of staff shortages within Canada's healthcare system has become a pressing issue experienced by each province and territory, leaving no Member of Parliament untouched by the healthcare crisis in their respective constituencies.² In order to effectively meet the evolving healthcare needs of Canada's diverse communities, it is imperative to establish a national Health Human Resource Plan.

The proposed national health human resource plan emphasizes the importance of being data-informed and accountable. By utilizing accurate and comprehensive data, policymakers can make informed decisions to address workforce shortages and meet the evolving needs of Canadians. This data-driven approach involves collecting and analyzing information on demographics, distribution, and skills to strategically deploy professionals where they are most needed. Accountability mechanisms ensure that resources are utilized effectively, and improved healthcare access and outcomes are managed, monitored, measured, and reported. This promotes transparency, trust, and flexibility, fostering a more responsive and equitable healthcare system.

A component of a health human resource plan is a recruitment and retention strategy. Providing opportunities for career advancement, professional development, and mentorship programs can be highly attractive to healthcare professionals. A supportive work environment that prioritizes work-life balance, recognizes achievements, offers benefits and incentives (such a healthcare or pension plans), and fosters a positive team culture can enhance job satisfaction and retention rates.

Prioritizing wellness initiatives to address trauma and burnout among healthcare workers is crucial for the long-term viability of the healthcare system. Healthcare professionals have been tirelessly working on the frontlines, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased levels of burnout and mental health challenges. By implementing comprehensive wellness programs, providing mental health support, and creating a supportive work environment, healthcare professionals can be better equipped to deliver quality care while maintaining their own well-being.

Recommendation

1. That the federal government provide funding and leadership to implement a regionalized, data informed, and accountable national Health Human Resource Plan to meet Canadians health needs and support our healthcare workers.

² <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/nurses-are-burning-out-from-the-covid-19-pandemic-but-supports-can-help-experts-say-1.5737663#:~:text=As%20nurses%20experience%20high%20levels,workers%20cope%20with%20burning%20out>

Investing in Mental Health Parity

Canadians' mental health was, and continues to be, profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. With a high prevalence of mental health concerns even before the pandemic, it should come as no surprise that health systems continue to struggle to provide adequate services today. Addressing these issues would have saved lives well before the pandemic occurred and could save lives moving forward if done properly. In their Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health, Statistics Canada reported that one in four Canadians have screened positive for symptoms of depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder, up from the previous one in five.³ A survey by the Angus Reid Institute for the CBC showed that 54 percent of Canadians said their mental health had worsened during the past two years of the pandemic.⁴

The continued mental distress reported by Canadians serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing need for the federal government to support mental health services across Canada. The long-term mental health impacts of the pandemic should be of concern, especially for Canadians with severe physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, or sensory impairments who have been disproportionately affected. The government must prioritize addressing these concerns and ensuring that comprehensive mental health support is accessible to all.

Currently, there is no parity in how Canada funds mental and physical health care. Even though the long-promised Canadian Mental Health Transfer has failed to materialize. This is extremely disappointing given that a substantial portion of mental health care is provided within communities by providers whose services are not covered by public health plans. To effectively address the current mental health crisis and support Canadians in the long run, it is crucial for governments to shift from provider-based to patient and service-based mental health systems.

An integrated approach is necessary to address the interconnected nature of mental health and physical well-being. Moving towards patient and service-based mental health systems would involve reimagining mental health care delivery to prioritize individual needs and ensure comprehensive coverage. This shift would require coordinated effort to fund access to a wide range of mental health services, including early intervention, crisis support, counseling, therapy, and specialized treatments, and would be recognized through the introduction of a new piece of federal legislation that would complement the Canada Health Act.

Recommendation

2. That the federal government, working in partnership with all levels of government, fund sustainable, evidence-based mental health services to meet the growing demand for timely access to care, and formally recognize mental health parity in legislation.

³ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210927/dq210927a-eng.htm>

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/canada-mental-health-crisis-covid-19-pandemic-1.6382378>

Supporting Seniors Care

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on seniors in Canada. This challenging time highlighted the importance of ensuring that all healthcare professionals are adequately trained to provide earlier, more effective, and compassionate care to Canadian seniors.

According to the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI), long term care and retirement homes were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 where residents received less medical care, had less contact with family and friends and had higher rates of death than was the case pre-pandemic.⁵ Canada's National Institute on Ageing (NIA) reported that 90% of COVID-19 deaths have happened amongst older people.⁶ "This has exposed the fact that Canada spends far less than the average OECD country on long-term care home spending. Underspending and underfunding these homes have led to a high percentage of deaths happening in these settings," said Dr. Samir Sinha, NIA Director of Health Policy Research.

The pandemic highlighted that home and community care, and services are essential for the safety of Canadian seniors. By allowing hospitals to discharge clinically stable patients to a safer care setting, such as their own homes with appropriate support, seniors can remain at home longer and the strain on hospital resources can be reduced. It would provide alternatives and alleviate strain on long-term care facilities for frail seniors and vulnerable populations who are especially impacted by COVID-19 and other viruses.

Home and community care services can improve the overall quality of care for seniors. It enables personalized, person-centered care that respects the preferences and needs of individuals in the comfort of their own homes. Home and community care approaches promote independence, autonomy, and a higher quality of life for seniors, while also addressing their unique healthcare requirements. By prioritizing home and community care, we can create a healthcare system that better meets the evolving needs of our aging population while supporting their health, safety, and sense of community.

Recommendation

3. That the federal government, working in partnership with all levels of government, increase investments in community, home and residential care to meet the needs of aging Canadians. These investments must ensure personal needs and choice in the delivery of care and services at the right time, in the right place and by the right provider.

About

HEAL, Organizations for Health Action, is a coalition of over 40 national health organizations dedicated to improving the health of Canadians and the quality of care they receive. Our members are professional associations of regulated health care providers and organizations of health charities that provide a range of health care services across Canada. To learn more, please visit www.healthaction.ca.

⁵ <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/impact-covid-19-long-term-care-canada-first-6-months-report-en.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.nia-ryerson.ca/2022-news/2022/3/30/cbc-news-a-closer-look-second-anniversary-of-the-global-covid-19-pandemic>