

Strengthening Family Life for Vulnerable Children and Youth

NSCSW Submission to Budget Talks 2018



Who We Are

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) exists to serve and protect Nova Scotians by effectively regulating the profession of social work. We work in solidarity with Nova Scotians to advocate for policies that improve social conditions, challenge injustice and value diversity.

Learn more about the College at <http://nscsw.org/about/>

Assessment of Need

Assessing this year's budgetary needs is particularly critical to vulnerable children, youth and families in Nova Scotia as the Child Youth and Family Supports (CYFS) Division of the Department of Community Services (DCS) continues to face challenges in their ability to effectively deliver child protection services. While Nova Scotia's fiscal health is sound, the health of so many of its communities and community members have been put at risk.

The following list highlights the issues social workers, community organizations and recipients of services continue to raise about this essential service:

- High caseloads are impacting the social worker's ability to provide quality case management and deliver programs that demonstrate improved outcomes for Nova Scotia children, youth and at-risk families.
- Changes in society, family and structures, along with the complexity of needs faced by Nova Scotians have significantly impacted social worker workloads. The CYFS's current Child Welfare Policy on caseloads is over two decades old and does not reflect requirements to adequately respond to the needs of Nova Scotia's most vulnerable population.
- Social workers report being stressed and overwhelmed in an organization that is in constant change. There is ongoing turnover and recruitment issues which directly impact the continuity of services to our most vulnerable population.
- The transformation of CYFS led to changes to the Child and Family Services Act. The changes have increased pressure on vulnerable families. There were over 80 amendments made to the Act including an expanded definition of a child in need of protective services, including youth 16-19 years of age and tightened court timelines. Social workers and community organizations reported their concerns with the legislative changes prior to implementation. Their concerns included increased caseloads, the readiness of staff and community organizations to implement the changes and the ability of families to make necessary changes given the tighten court timelines.
- There is a lack of departmental direction and policy to improve culturally competent CYFS service delivery to clients, and/or children, of African Nova Scotian descent.

- Significant changes to the Access and Transportation services which were aimed at being more child focused, operationally flexible and financially sustainable have fallen short of the intended outcomes. Social workers and community organizations both report changes in the approach to Access and Transportation services were predominantly grounded in cost saving initiatives rather than principles of effectiveness. This has resulted in issues in the arrangement of visitation for families, resulting in already traumatized persons losing low wage work time, and sometimes losing jobs.
- Front line social workers face insufficient administrative support. They are required to spend an unreasonable amount of time completing paperwork, administrative tasks, and are required to function as resource organizers rather than social workers focused on case management and direct service delivery.
- Front line social workers entering child protection do not receive the significant mentoring and support they require.
- There is an overall lack of community supports such as housing, food security, income security, childcare and access to meaningful income.
- Lastly, there is a lack of community voice and oversight of the system.

We've assessed that the current service delivery for child protective services is compromised by inadequate resources placed into this system to accommodate the demands of the amended Child and Family Services Act, the ever-increasing complexity of intersecting issues faced by vulnerable Nova Scotia families and a lack of community resources. This has resulted in a disorienting level of service which puts Nova Scotia's most vulnerable citizens at risk.

It's evident by the lack of front line social work resources invested by the government that the initial analysis of the projected changes lacked a robust impact and structural analysis. It was projected that the transformation would be cost neutral which indicates a significant lack of understanding of the complex needs of vulnerable families.

Front line social workers go above and beyond their duties to try and hold the system together. They are trained to engage with the most vulnerable in our society. They have the knowledge and skills to competently perform assessments, interventions, negotiations, mediations, advocacy, and evaluations. They are trained in inter-professional practice, community collaboration and teamwork. Social workers work in solidarity with vulnerable populations to address intrapersonal issues and to empathetically connect with clients on the impacts of structural issues affecting their lives.

Statistics released in the fall of 2017 by FOIPOP (Peddle, Stuart; 2017, September 18), show the significant stress the system is facing. There was a striking rise of social worker short-term illness hours, from 16,513 in the fiscal year 2013-14 to 26,105 in 2016-17 and an increase of nearly 10,000 hours. This corresponds with the increase of child protection referrals during that time which increased from 10,078 to 11,028 per year, **an increase of 10%**.

The Need to Act

In January 2018, the Honourable Jane Philpott, Minister of Indigenous Services for the Government of Canada held an emergency meeting on Indigenous child welfare, declaring that

“the current situation resembles the horrors of Canada’s residential school system that forcibly removed young Indigenous people from their families and communities” (Crawford, Blair, 2018 January 26th).

Child welfare representatives from all provinces and indigenous stakeholders came together to discuss the problem. At that meeting our colleague Cindy Blackstock noted that a solution to this issue was written in a federal report on child welfare 51 years ago:

“The provision of child and family welfare services shouldn’t be restricted to the narrow definition of investigating allegations or evidence of neglect of children, but recognition to the prevention of families’ deterioration and professional services given to strengthen and maintain family life” (Crawford, Blair, 2018 January 26th).

This is a solution that does not only apply to Indigenous children, but all vulnerable children and youth in Nova Scotia. Our province has consistently failed to truly understand the structural issues that impact child and youth welfare. The additional stressors of income and food insecurity, our society’s continued colonial and racist bias, and our continued lack of understanding of trauma profoundly impacts the safety of children and youth. Through increasing inequality these stressors become more complex which leaves the concerns of the most vulnerable citizens to go unnoticed. This erodes trust, increases anxiety and illness for all which has a lasting impact on a range of social issues (Wilkson and Pickett, 2010).

To address Nova Scotia’s responsibilities to our most vulnerable children and youth and to ensure the atrocities of Canada’s colonial and racist past are not repeated we believe that crucial investments are needed to support vulnerable children and youth. **The investments below are designed to strengthen family life for vulnerable children in order for children to remain in their homes.**

Staffing Needs

To alleviate the significant stressors on the system we ask that overall staffing levels be increased by 10% to handle the demands and to bring stability to the system.

To do this we ask for:

- An additional **\$2.8 million** to immediately hire 33 new social workers with an initial focus on relieving the caseload crisis in the Central Region stemming from jurisdictional boundary issues and inadequate resources (i.e. The child protection coverage in the Fairview/Clayton Park area that has been problematic for some years).
- An additional **\$500,000** to increase the total number of Family Support Workers by 10.

- An additional **\$250,000** to build and implement core training modules for all incoming social workers to complete before they are assigned a caseload. This training would include the core recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the forthcoming recommendations from the inquiry into the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children.

Please note that the Child Youth and Family Support Division needs to complete a fulsome review of caseloads to determine more accurate assessment of needs.

Child Youth Advocate Office.

Child and youth advocacy offices play a crucial role in the protection and provision of services to vulnerable children and youth. In Canada, currently there is no federal body to protect and promote child and youth rights. In its absence, it has become the mandate of the province's child and youth advocate offices to protect these rights (MacLean and Howe, 2009). Currently, there are 8 child and youth advocate offices in Canada. Nova Scotia is one of the only provinces without this crucial organization. To remedy this gap in service we propose:

- That the province commits an annual operating budget of **4 million** to build a Child and Youth Advocate Office. The assessment of 4 million is based on operating costs of the Manitoba Child Advocate office.
- The Executive Council proclaim a mandate for a Child and Youth Advocate to ensure that children and youth rights are respected, valued, and that their interest and voice regarding services delivered by the provincial government are heard. In addition, the mandate would include public education, conflict resolution, conducting independent reviews and making recommendations to government on programs and services delivered to children and youth.

Community Supports

The intended outcomes of the changes and transformation process to CYFS were to keep children in their homes and provide support before a family is in a crisis. The assumption was made that all families have timely access to relevant and quality resources to address child protection concerns. However, as the [2017 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia](#), and the Auditor General's [Report on Mental Health Services](#) point out, these services are too often unavailable. The analysis of transformation needs did not explore the complexity of the adverse effects related to poverty in Nova Scotia.

Poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor in the occurrence of child abuse or neglect as it is caused by many interlocking factors. However, there is a clear relationship between family socio-economic circumstances and the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Scholars and researchers have continued to describe this relationship in a number of ways, either through a **direct** effect through material hardship or lack of income to support themselves, or an **indirect** effect through parental stress and neighbourhood conditions (Waters et Al, 2016).

Disadvantaging socio-economic circumstances may operate as acute or chronic factors.



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Evidence suggests that these direct and indirect impacts of poverty also interact with other factors affecting parenting to increase or reduce the chances of child abuse and neglect including:

- parenting capacity (e.g. mental and/or physical illness, learning disabilities, (lack of) prior education, shame and stigma);
- family capacity for investment (e.g. to secure care, respite or better environmental conditions);
- negative adult behaviours (e.g. domestic violence or substance use, perhaps provoked or exacerbated by family stress);
- positive adult and child behaviours that promote social support and resilience; and
- external neighbourhood factors (e.g. the social and physical environment) (Waters et Al, 2016).

These interactions between poverty and other contributory factors are complex and frequently circular. For example, poverty increases the risk of mental illness and mental illness increases the likelihood of poverty. Parental substance use accompanied by poverty is more likely to lead to contact with child protection services than substance use in a position of affluence (Waters et Al, 2016).

The conception of poverty as a contributory causal factor is supported by evidence from experimental or quasi-experimental studies in the US that raising the income of families in poverty had a statistically significant impact in reducing child neglect and abuse rates (Gubits et Al, 2015; Waters et Al, 2016).

Nova Scotia's child protection systems pay insufficient direct attention to the role of poverty in child abuse and neglect. To change this, we propose that the Nova Scotia government invest in the following areas as outlined below by the **Canadian Center for Policy Alternative's Nova Scotia Alternative Budget 2017**.

Income Supports

Disadvantaging socio-economic circumstances that may operate as acute or chronic factors are related to income insecurity. Income security is directly related to food insecurity. Currently both Employment Services and Income Assistance and current tax benefits do not provide enough income support for vulnerable families. The current system for income support stigmatizes; it robs recipients of their dignity is mired in bureaucracy and based on exclusion, on ensuring that those in need receive the minimal amount of support after producing mounds of evidence. It forces families to rely on charities to help meet their basic needs (NSAB 2017).

We propose that the government of Nova Scotia:

- Invest **\$20 million** to increase income assistance and combine the "personal" and "shelter" allowances (providing maximum shelter allowance to all eligible households);

- Invest **\$16 million** to decrease the earnings claw-back allowing ESIA benefits to retain the first \$500/month of earnings plus 70% of the remainder (an increase from \$150 and 30% respectively). *(It is noted that the Department of Community Services has made some progress towards this goal).*
- Provide an additional **\$6 million** to the Nova Scotia Child Benefit to increase the benefit amount and lower the income eligibility threshold.
- Tackle energy poverty by setting up a Universal Service Program (**\$35 million**) designed to limit total home energy costs to 6% of income to cover heat and baseload electricity for low income households and ensure no Nova Scotian is denied heat or electricity due to inadequate income. This investment also reduces the need for the Heating Assistance Rebate Program by at least half (**-\$6 million**).

Housing

Housing is crucial to protect children and youth in Nova Scotia. Vulnerable families who face income insecurity spend an increasing proportion of their income on rent (including heat), leaving little for food. Data from the Halifax Census Metropolitan Area show that 25.4% of all households spend 30% or more of household income on housing and 11.8% (one in eight) spend 50% or more on housing costs (NSAB, 2017). In partnership with the National Housing Strategy we ask that the government of Nova Scotia provide housing for vulnerable families fleeing abusive situations. We also ask the government to:

- Build affordable, non-profit housing (**\$30 million**).
- Secure the **\$400,000** grant for the HRM Housing Support Workers and invests an additional **\$50,000** to that initiative and an additional **\$800,000** to support hiring 13 new housing support workers outside of HRM and in existing housing-related non-profit organizations (**total of \$1.25 million**). Some positions would be dedicated to supporting off-reserve Aboriginal people and African Nova Scotians.
- Invest **\$300,000** in a fund to retrofit housing units with enhanced security measures to serve as transitional housing in rural Nova Scotia.
- Funding of **\$1.8 million** to non-profit organizations operating transitional and permanent housing including supportive housing to ensure residents have appropriate supports that may include programming and/or staff.
- Increase funding by **\$3 million** to existing housing programs including Home Ownership and Repairs, and Public Housing Subsidies.
- Invest **\$2 million** for rent supplements targeted to non-profit (supportive) housing providers allowing as many as 500 more units to be subsidized by up to \$300/month each.

Mental Health Care

The Auditor General's recent report to House of Assembly indicated that our province lacks an overall plan to address mental health issues. Timely access to mental health services are also becoming increasingly more difficult for families to access.

We ask that the government of Nova Scotia, in addition to the **8.6 million** added to the budget in October of 2017, invest in the following:

- Provide core funding for Community Health Centres currently established in Nova Scotia represented by the Nova Scotia Federation of Community Health Centres by investing **\$500,000.00**.
- Create a five-year plan to establish 10 new community-governed not-for-profit community health centres and dedicate **\$40 million** in one-time infrastructure and start-up funding.
- Address gaps in Mental Health and Addictions services by opening the provincial mental health and addictions strategy for real community consultation and double the initial funding to **\$5.2 million**.
- Double the funding for peer support development to **\$1 million**.
- Change community grants program to a core funding support program for community agencies to **\$2 million**.

Justice

Our approach to justice needs a complete rethink. Traditional approaches to justice are ineffective when dealing with chronic offenders suffering from and with families who suffer from addictions and mental health issues or who turn to crime for economic survival. The alternative courts, such as the Domestic Violence Court in Sydney, and Mental Health Court in Halifax, as well as the Court Monitored drug treatment program are examples of systems that work well, but we need more (NSAB, 2017). The comprised court times under the amended CFSA has also created capacity issues for families seeking legal aid.

We ask the Nova Scotia government to:

- Expand Drug Treatment Court to 3 additional sites (**\$1.5 million**).
- Invest **\$2.5 million** in alternative justice programs, allocated on evidence-based best practices for crime prevention initiatives, and governed by quality standards. This will contribute to the expansion of Restorative Justice for adult offenders across the province.
- Expand Family Violence Court to two additional sites (**\$1.2 million**).



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- Invest in Nova Scotia Legal Aid services (**\$5.05 million**).
- Expand Mental Health court to additional sites (**\$1.2 million**).

Immigration

We witnessed how, with the recent case of Abdul Abdi, immigration and citizenship issues add an additional layer of complexity for vulnerable families in Nova Scotia. The province must invest in immigration as a social justice strategy (NSAB, 2017). We propose that the Nova Scotia government:

- Increase the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration staff and resources (**\$3.9 million**).
- Expand settlement services to all newcomers regardless of their status or where they live in the province. Include temporary foreign workers, international students, and accompanying spouses and include language proficiency, social integration, and labour market readiness (**\$7.9 million**).
- Invest in public outreach and education concerning the benefits of immigration and for employers to transition more workers to permanent status (**\$160,000**).
- Better meet the needs of refugee claimants to support 100 refugee families who were under private sponsorship (**\$1.14 million**).
- Remove eligibility and waiting period barriers for claimants to receive income assistance (**\$600,000**).
- Invest **\$860,000** in housing for refugee claimants, providing safe shelter and offering access to a shelter allowance (similar to that received by other individuals who are able to work).
- Invest in Refugee Health Clinic to assist in expansion of services (**\$230,000**).
- Core funding to the Halifax Refugee Clinic for legal representation (**\$170,000**), as well as provide additional support for immigration related issues via Nova Scotia Legal Aid.

Conclusion

The College's primary mandate is to protect public. As social workers, we see how the current system is creating more harm than it is preventing. The recommendations we've made are a starting place for further analysis and action.

The child protection system needs greater oversight. The College is committed to ensuring Nova Scotians receive the services of skilled and competent social workers who are

knowledgeable, ethical, qualified, and accountable to the people who receive social work services. To achieve this goal, we will continue to address the concerns within Nova Scotia's child protection systems in Nova Scotia and continue to collaborate with stakeholders to suggest solutions.

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