

November 20, 2020

Open Letter to Premier Brian Pallister

Social Workers Call for Government Action in Response to COVID-19

Dear Premier Pallister,

Social work is founded on a long-standing commitment to uphold the right of people to have fair access to resources, services and opportunities to meet basic human needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted serious gaps in federal and provincial social policy, services and supports, which has had significant negative impacts on the most vulnerable, including the elderly and those who are oppressed, marginalized and/or living in poverty.

Over the last several months, social workers have seen the growing strain people have experienced in order to meet their fundamental needs for housing, food, health and safety, particularly among marginalized groups. In considering the social determinants of health, social workers have observed the broad range of changing personal, social, economic and environmental factors in response to COVID-19 and the related impact on Manitobans, in part due to the lack of funding and support provided to health, education and social services.

This pandemic has validated research that poverty is the most influential determinant of health and well-being. As social workers, we are observing Manitobans struggling to cope with poverty, inadequate, unsafe and crowded housing situations, homelessness, reduced access to shelters and safe isolation sites, reduced access to food security programs and barriers to maintaining and securing employment. As Manitobans are faced with increased anxiety, uncertainty, financial and emotional strain, isolation, addiction and mental health issues, they are experiencing reduced access to programs and services and long wait lists, further exacerbating the growing crisis for individuals, families and communities, and for the health and social services systems overall.

It is through the lens of social workers on the frontlines providing essential services to support Manitobans through this pandemic that the Manitoba College of Social Workers stands in solidarity with our colleagues in health, education and social services and provides the following recommendations to the Government of Manitoba:

1. Strengthen income and employment supports
2. Increase supports to food security programs
3. Increase access and support to affordable housing, shelters and safe isolation sites
4. Improve funding and access to mental health, addiction and protective services
5. Increase support to health care professionals and invest in the health care system
6. Increase support to educators, the provincial education system and early childhood education

The College commends the government for recent short-term funding announced for disability services, child-care and child welfare sectors. Social workers call on the government to act quickly to identify long-term solutions that include meaningful investments in health, education and social services. Manitobans are looking to their government for leadership. The time is now.

Manitoba College of Social Workers

Recommendations for Government Action in Response to COVID-19

1. Strengthen income and employment supports
 - Establish a basic guaranteed income program as a long-term poverty reduction strategy
 - Streamline Employment and Income Assistance eligibility and processing times
 - Suspend cut-offs to Employment and Income Assistance
 - Suspend increases to basic utilities (i.e. hydro)
 - Increase Social Assistance rate to reflect current cost of living
 - Include internet/telephone as basic need in order to ensure Manitobans have access to critical information and support
2. Increase supports to food security programs
 - Ensure food security options are evenly distributed and accessible
3. Increase access and support to affordable housing, shelters and safe isolation sites
 - Expand eligibility criteria for Rent Assist
 - Reinstate freeze on rentals increases and evictions
4. Improve funding and access to mental health, addiction and protective services
 - Increase funding to health and social services organizations to allow social workers and health care professionals to provide trauma-informed, responsive services with targeted funding for those providing services to marginalized groups
 - Provide funding to ensure Manitobans have access to online/telephone support services
 - Increase support and access to domestic violence/elder abuse programming
 - Authorize extensions of youth in care and increase support to Independent Living Programs
 - Fund outreach/navigation programs to assist Manitobans to access supports and services
5. Increase support to health care professionals and invest in the health care system
 - Ensure social workers, physicians, primary care providers, nurses and other health care professions have access to the resources and supports needed to respond to the health needs of Manitobans
 - Increase access to home care and pharmacare supports
 - Protect elderly by acting immediately to address the crisis in personal care homes, including a review of long term care standards
 - Provide additional funding to families caring for elderly family members
 - Increase funding, resources and support to families providing care to seniors
6. Increase support to educators, the provincial education system and early childhood education
 - Allocate federal education funding to ensure students in Manitoba have access to quality education including adequate staffing, mental health resources and public health support
 - Provide resources for families to support home learning/blended learning
 - Increase investment in early childhood education to ensure families at all income levels have access to care that includes adequate staffing, services and programs