



**MINISTER
OF FAMILIES**

Legislative Building
Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA
R3C 0V8

DEC 07 2020

Manitoba College of Social Workers
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To whom it may concern,

The College of Social Workers does important work regulating the social work profession in our province, and I appreciate the College sharing its perspective on Manitoba's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Manitoba's Deputy Premier and Minister of Families, your letter was provided to me for a response.

This virus has created hardships that our province has not endured for a generation. Some of our most vulnerable citizens, including Manitobans with disabilities, homeless individuals and low-income working families, have experienced these hardships disproportionately.

In recognition of that fact, our government is responding with important programs and supports for vulnerable people throughout our province. I would like to articulate those supports in response to each of the concerns raised in your letter.

Strengthen income and employment supports

I want to assure you that our government is committed to supporting low-income families and seniors during this difficult time for our province. That is why early on in the pandemic we joined Ontario and many other provinces in treating the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) like earned income for existing Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) clients while allowing new EIA clients with disabilities to collect the CERB as well as EIA if eligible.

I am pleased to advise that we are now also treating the new federal income support programs – the Canada Recovery Benefit, the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, and the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit – as earned income for existing clients and all existing as well as new clients in the disability category of EIA. This will allow them to keep more of their income benefits than they otherwise would under provincial social assistance while retaining needed health benefits under the Rewarding Work Health Plan.

Under this policy, EIA does not consider the first \$200 of the federal recovery benefits against a person's EIA benefits. Additionally, 30 per cent of the remaining federal recovery benefit is exempt. If an EIA file closes due to these federal benefits, the household will also continue to be eligible for up to 24 months of EIA prescription drug, dental, and optical coverage under the Rewarding Work Health Plan. Put simply, the decision to treat the new federal recovery benefits as earned income will help put more money in Manitobans' pockets, maintain health benefits, and provide more support for people with disabilities.

Our government recognizes that this unprecedented public health crisis has resulted in financial hardship for many Manitobans, which is why we continue to invest in programs and supports to help our most vulnerable during this difficult time. We have invested \$4.6 million for Manitoba's Disability Economic Support Program, which provided a \$200 one-time payment to all Manitobans with a disability receiving EIA benefits, and \$45 million in the Seniors Economic Recovery Credit, which provided a \$200 one-time payment to all Manitoba seniors.

Our government believes in the inherent value and dignity of work, which is why we are committed to improving our current EIA system to provide Manitobans on social assistance with more opportunities for job training and employment. Through targeted investments, we have decreased the number of Manitobans in the General Assistance category of EIA by over 1,000 people this year. We are also partnering with Economic Development and Training on several new innovative programs to divert people on EIA into work, including partnerships with the disability community to help Manitobans with disabilities find meaningful employment.

While our government is focused on improving job training and employment for Manitobans on social assistance, we also recognize that some Manitobans cannot work and require additional supports. That is why we continue to work toward the creation of a new Dignified Income Support Program for Manitobans with severe and prolonged disabilities, with another round of consultations on the design of that program launching soon. We also continue to invest substantially in social assistance, providing the EIA program with 25% more than the previous government - \$476 million in 2019/20 compared to \$383 million in 2015/16.

Increase supports to food security programs

Our government recognizes that food security is a challenge for too many Manitoba families. We also recognize that government is not the answer to every problem. It takes strong communities and strong families to provide nutritious meals to our children.

That is why our government has invested over \$4 million in the Home Nutrition and Learning Pilot Program, which launched in June 2020. The Home Nutrition and Learning Pilot Program is run by community organizations throughout our province, including Andrews Street Family Centre and Ma Ma Wi Chi Itata Centre in Winnipeg,

Samaritan House in Brandon, and the Bayline Regional Roundtable and Food Matters Manitoba in the north.

Together, these organizations provide nutritious breakfast food and fun recipe materials to 3,400 children so they can learn to prepare healthy meals with their families at home. The program has been praised by the Manitoba Teachers Society and community organizations across Manitoba, and we look forward to opportunities to extend the program further in the months ahead.

In addition to this excellent initiative, my colleague the Honourable Blaine Pedersen, Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development, has announced \$3.5 million for the Canadian Agricultural Partnership and Manitoba's Northern Healthy Foods Initiative to address food insecurity challenges in rural and northern communities during the pandemic.

Increase access and support to affordable housing, shelters and safe isolation sites

Our government is committed to improving access to safe shelter space and affordable housing during this unprecedented public health crisis, which is why we continue to make significant investments in expanded homeless shelter operations. Since the beginning of the pandemic, our government has invested nearly \$3.5 million in expanded shelter operations in Winnipeg and Brandon to better support homeless Manitobans. Main Street Project, Salvation Army, Siloam Mission, Resource Assistance for Youth, and Samaritan House in Brandon have all received additional support as a result of this investment.

In addition to expanding existing shelter operations, our government has invested in our Alternative Isolation Accommodation program, providing safe isolation space for homeless Manitobans at 14 sites across Manitoba. As of this week, there are now five sites operating in the City of Winnipeg, including a recently opened 138-bed facility to help vulnerable Manitobans who need to self-isolate due to COVID-19 exposure.

Since forming government in 2016, we have also invested over \$108 million in new social and affordable housing rental units, creating 713 new units for Manitobans who need them. In order to get 800 otherwise vacant units ready for new tenants, our government also recently invested \$31 million in maintenance and repair of Manitoba Housing's direct managed housing stock.

We are also committed to investing over \$225 million over the next 10 years in affordable housing for Manitoba families as part of the National Housing Strategy and continue to make significant investments in Rent Assist for low-income families who need help paying their rent. In fact, our contributions to Rent Assist have nearly tripled – from \$13.1 million in 2015/16 to \$36 million in 2019/20.

Improve funding and access to mental health, addiction and protective services

Over the past year, our government has announced 24 initiatives valued at more than \$42.8 million to improve mental health and addictions services for those most in need. These investments include \$2.1 million to Siloam Mission, Riverwood Church Community Inc. and Tamarack Recovery Inc. to develop 70 supportive housing units for those completing addictions treatment; \$3.5 million toward the capital construction of Bruce Oake Recovery Centre; and issuing a request for proposals to create community drop-in space for adults with addictions and mental health issues. As part of our COVID-19 pandemic response, our government has also provided \$4.5 million for a new online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Program.

We are also making significant investments in youth mental health throughout our province. These investments include \$1.4 million to expand the distribution of Thrival Kits; \$823,000 for the NorWest Youth Hub to fund additional counselling and psychologist appointments; \$621,000 to expand Project 11, a school-based mental health promotion program; \$1.6 million to expand the community schools program; \$4.2 million to enhance access to mental health assessments and treatment for children and youth; and \$4.4 million to enhance access to school-based mental health and addictions supports.

Increase support to health care professionals and invest in the health care system

Our government continues to make record investments in Manitoba's health care system. In fact, Budget 2020 invests \$648 million more than the previous government ever did in Manitoba's health care system.

Our government has invested \$2.8 billion as part of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including over \$500 million in personal protective equipment, \$280 million to safety upgrades to personal care homes, \$46 million to digital health initiatives, \$32 million to equipment and infrastructure upgrades at health-care facilities, and \$4.3 million in contact tracing support from the Canadian Red Cross.

Increase support to educators, the provincial education system and early childhood education

Our government has supported Manitoba's schools since the beginning of the pandemic, with \$100 million to support their safe reopening this school year alone. As the Minister of Families and the mother of two children myself, I also understand the importance of ensuring that our child care sector is safe and supported during this challenging time, which is why our government has made significant investments in child care as we respond to this unprecedented public health emergency. These investments include:

- Nearly \$90 million in provincial operating grants;
- Over 1.6 million individual personal protective equipment items, including masks for all workers;
- \$3 million for the Pandemic Staffing Support Benefit to cover overtime, staff replacement and sick leave costs for the child care sector;
- \$1.4 million from the Risk Recognition Program for over 1,000 eligible child care workers;
- Over \$15 million through a one-year extension of the bilateral agreement with the federal government;
- \$2.4 million in the Covid-19 Response Grant to help child care centres with Covid-related costs;
- \$8.5 million in start-up grants administered by the Winnipeg and Manitoba Chambers of Commerce to create over 800 new spaces;
- \$11.5 million for a new Child Care Sustainability Trust; and
- \$4.7 million for the new Child Care Centre Development Tax Credit to create up to 682 spaces in workplaces throughout our province.

In total, Manitoba's Budget 2020 invests \$181 million in the child care system in Manitoba - almost \$20 million more than the previous government invested in child care. Since forming government, we have also created nearly 2,500 new spaces through our capital program.

These investments reflect our broader commitment to create an early learning and child care system that better meets the needs of Manitoba parents. In the coming months, our government will be consulting with parents across our province on how we can further improve our child care system so it works better for them.

Thank you for taking the time to write to the Premier with your concerns. I can assure you that our government will continue to stand up for vulnerable Manitobans as we fight this pandemic together.

Sincerely,



Honourable Heather Stefanson
Deputy Premier & Minister of Families