

POSITION STATEMENT

with respect to

HEALTH CARE

NOVA SCOTIA ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	3
CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS TO THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM	4
NSASW POSITION IN RESPECT TO HEALTH CARE PRIORITIES	
• Access	5
• Prevention and Health Promotion	5
• Primary Care	6
• Pharmacare Coverage	6
• Rehabilitation	6
• Mental Health Services	7
• Home Care and Community Supports	8
• Long Term Care	10
• End-of-Life Issues	10
• Human Resource Requirements	11
• Roles of Federal and Provincial Governments in Health Care	11
• Priority to Service Restoration and Enhancement over Tax Reduction	12
CONCLUSION	13

INTRODUCTION

The Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers (NSASW) represents all social workers in Nova Scotia. Of its nearly 1500 members, approximately 400 are employed within the health care sector. By virtue of that involvement those members have a direct knowledge and a unique perspective on what occurs within health care. They are greatly concerned about the health care system, not only in terms of how it affects them and their work, but also in respect to how it impacts on all Nova Scotians.

Members of the Association also have a broader interest in health care as the profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. Social workers are expected to actively participate with others to create new, modified or improved services, resources, opportunities or systems that are more equitable, just, and responsive to people who use them.

As there are multiple influences affecting the health of Nova Scotians, it is important that health care planning and delivery be based on a comprehensive approach. There has been a growing recognition of the determinants which contribute to the health of individuals. According to the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health¹, the evidence indicates that the key factors which influence population health are:

- income and social status
- social support networks
- education; employment/working conditions
- social environments
- physical environments
- personal health practices and coping skills
- healthy child development
- biology and genetic endowment
- health services
- gender
- culture

It is worth noting that these determinants primarily relate to socio-economic and socio-environmental factors rather than disease or strictly medical issues. Since these factors fall predominantly within the realm of their special competence and experience, social workers have a particular role to play as advocates for justice, equality and quality service in health care as in other areas which significantly impact the well-being of individuals and society.

¹ Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health *Strategies for Population Health: Investing in the Health of Canadians*. Ottawa: Health Canada, 1994

The Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers supports the move towards the use of the Population Health Model by the District Health Authorities as a basis for future service delivery.

To facilitate the implementation of quality health care for all Nova Scotians, there must be an increase in resources and a focus on prevention, rehabilitation and community based services which are accessible and equitable. The NSASW strongly supports the meaningful contribution of consumers to the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of the health care system so that outcomes are assessed according to consumer identified needs.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK TO THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Historically, social workers have had a unique first-hand vantage point in seeing how the "Determinants of Health" impact on clients' health. Professional training employs a systems approach with a focus on the "person in their environment" which brings a broadened view of the treatment of the individual and enhances the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Social workers:

- bring skills in counseling, communication, collaboration, case management, problem solving, and policy development, which can be utilized across different health care sectors and in work with individuals, families, and groups.
- develop partnerships with community and agencies and facilitate access for clients and families to appropriate resources.
- are skilled in advocacy, both interceding to make the system work better for clients as well as advocating for improved policies and procedures which promote a more effective use of agencies and resources.
- seek to remove the structural or societal barriers of poverty and/or oppression in striving to alleviate their impact on individual clients and families.
- facilitate transitions to ensure continuity of care. This serves to benefit not only the clients but also the broader system, resulting in increased client satisfaction and improved cost effectiveness.

NSASW POSITION IN RESPECT TO HEALTH CARE

PRIORITIES Access

- **The NSASW recommends**
 - **that access to health care services be given high priority in health care planning.**
 - **that access be ensured to an adequate supply of health care services,** and that there be concerted efforts to minimize barriers resulting from geography, social circumstances, racial or cultural background.
 - **that financial assistance for transportation and related costs such as accommodation, meals and child care be provided for those to whom this presents a barrier.** While we recognize that not all health services can be offered in every- area, we believe the goal should be to provide services as close to people as reasonably possible. Where it is not feasible to offer services close to all who need it, it is important that there is reasonable provision made for minimizing access barriers.

Prevention and Health Promotion

- **The NSASW recommends that increased priority be given to prevention and health promotion.**

It is an important challenge to give priority to preventive strategies when higher profile treatment services demand immediate support. There is congruence between the Determinants of Health and the practice of social work. Social workers take an active role with other professionals to encourage preventive practices and health promotion in such areas as income assistance, nutrition, housing, employment and education. It is by addressing health promotion and preventive practices, as represented in the "Determinants of Health", that we will improve the overall health of our citizens, utilize our resources more effectively and ensure the sustainability of the health care system.

Primary Care

- **The NSASW supports a comprehensive primary care model for the initial delivery of health care services. Such a model should include social workers and other health care professionals as well as physicians.**

Primary care in the community refers to the individual's or family's initial and continuing contact with the health care system. Primary" care services include health promotion and disease prevention, acute episodic care, continuing care, education and advocacy.

The Association sees Primary Care as the cornerstone of the health care system and an area with the potential for significant improvement. This is an area where the expertise of social workers clearly would be beneficial.

Pharmacare Coverage

- **The NSASW recommends that government develop a more comprehensive pharmacare program which moves toward a national framework of coverage.**

Social workers recognize that the present system is fragmented and know that due to inequalities of access consumers often have difficulty paying for medications some of which may be life sustaining. Needless and costly hospitalizations and procedures may be the outcome of this inequality. The cost is high in terms of personal, financial, familial and medical resources and could be prevented if these medications were provided when needed.

The solution to this problem lies in developing a single comprehensive program for covering the costs of medications for all those in need who do not have the ability to pay. A new program also should include a less restrictive criteria for the approval of pharmacare coverage for new medications. Cooperation of stakeholders and government departments is essential.

Rehabilitation

- **NSASW supports rehabilitation as an essential component of the health care system.**

The World Health Organization defines health as being "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"². In accordance with this

² *Health Promotion Glossary*, World Health Organization, 1998

definition, rehabilitation focuses on restoring an optimal level of functioning and well-being. It also may include building knowledge and skills, provision of specialized residential, vocation and leisure resources, and advocacy to ensure the development of needed services and change community attitudes. As such, rehabilitation is an important goal of the health care system which is relevant to those persons dealing with issues related to physical and mental health.

Mental Health Services

- **The NSASW believes mental health services deserve a more prominent place in the health care system than it currently occupies. There have been numerous studies on the mental health system recommending needed changes; it is time to act.**

The most recent report on mental health services in Nova Scotia reviewed 36 previous reports on mental health in Nova Scotia in the past decade. The report clearly reflects the view of the NSASW when it states,

The title of the report captures a strong theme found in the previous reviews and reports, the written submissions and the interviews; that is, that it is high time to take action, and that there has been enough talk and more than enough analysis of problems. There is instead a universal desire for changes that will develop more effective services, healthier citizens and stronger communities.³

Almost two years later, this is even more true.

The Association particularly supports action in the following areas identified in the Bland/Dufton report:

- **the need for increased consumer participation in the decision making process, planning, evaluation and delivery of mental health care**

Meaningful consultation is an important, but often overlooked, component on any good public service.

- **the provision of a full-range of mental health services and supports in the community ...**

Services to children and youth across the province and to people of all ages in rural Nova Scotia are among the most pressing needs. The report makes several recommendations in respect to

³ Bland, Roger and Dufton, Brian, *Mental Health: A Time for Action*, 2000, p. 5

services for children and youth including, "Get on with implementing the recommendations from the report *A New Step Forward*"⁴. The importance of ensuring equal access to services across the province and the need for a co-ordinated approach to service delivery through the development or strengthening of interdepartmental partnerships also is emphasized in the report. It is significant that the call is for "supports" as well as "services". The importance of providing supports such as appropriate housing, income assistance and employment support is reinforced by the "Determinants of Health".

- **better communication and co-ordination of services amongst government departments, mental health providers, community agencies, and consumers**

The NSASW supports government initiatives in moving towards more effective inter-departmental cooperation such as through the Children and Youth Action Committee (CAYAC) and urges prompt action.

- **the need for recruitment and retention of mental health care professionals...**

More mental health professionals are required to staff an adequate mental health service. Recruiting and retaining these professionals will be a challenge which will require creative initiatives.

It is the Association's view that the skills of social workers together with their unique perspective in viewing the "person in their environment" make them a valuable resource which should be well represented on mental health teams.

Home Care and Community Supports

- **The NSASW recommends that Home Care and other Community Support Systems be significantly strengthened.**
- The Home Care program needs to be comprehensive and responsive to the unique needs of individuals. Resources should be targeted as much as possible to the provision of direct services which are offered in a timely manner. If a person cannot get the services within a reasonable time, the outcome of his or her recovery will be affected and will place an additional burden on the family. It is of concern that the Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP) Report Card on Home Care 2001⁵ shows that no overall improvement in home care funding,

⁴ *A New Step Forward*. Department of Community Services, Province of Nova Scotia, 1998.

⁵ Parent, Karen and Anderson, Malcolm, *Home Care by Default, Not by Design*. Canadian Association of Retired Persons, 2001

programs or policies has occurred since 1999. Indeed, the report comments that home care is significantly more under funded, undervalued and overstressed than it was in 1999.

- NSASW joins with CARP to urge that Home Care be built on the values of its citizens by involving them in the process that develops principles and guides service delivery. Service delivery systems need to be developed with meaningful input from consumers and after considering Best Practice evidence.
- The vitally important role of caregivers in Home Care must be taken into account through:⁶
 - **Recognition:** The work of caregivers has been largely unrecognized and invisible. The work of informal caregivers must be documented, affirmed, supported and recognized for their pivotal role in enabling Canadians with a range of conditions and disabilities to continue to live in their homes and communities.
 - **Partnerships:** Family caregivers must be included as key partners in the development and administration of policies which have an impact on care recipients and caregivers.
 - **Supporting Caregiver Needs:** There must be development of programs to address the specific and real needs of caregivers themselves as caregivers may have problems that have a serious effect on their own health and well-being.
 - A New **Policy Paradigm:** There is a need to focus on developing a new policy paradigm for care, in which caregivers are full partners in the health care system.
- **The NSASW supports the conclusion of the report on Community Based Options (7) that there is a pressing need for improved community and residential services for persons with physical and mental challenges which are in accordance with their individual needs and aspirations.**
- To achieve this end, a-restructured system is needed which promotes shared authority for decision making between government and community groups, closer to the person affected, within a system that encourages innovation.

⁶ Adapted from: *"The Principles of the Canadian Caregiver Coalition"*, The Family Caregivers Association of Nova Scotia Network Newsletter. Vol. 1, No. 4 - Fall 2001.

⁷ Kendrick, Michael, *An Independent Evaluation of the Nova Scotia Community Based Options Community Residential Service System, 2001.*

- Consumers will benefit if government departments such as Health and Community Services make a commitment to work together to provide a clear understanding of their mandate and agreement to collaborate when confusion over ,departmental responsibility arises.

Long Term Care

- **The NSASW supports**
 - **Long Term Care being available as part of the continuum of insured health care where residents are responsible to pay only the room and board portion of their care.**
 - **the person's right to have an individualized care plan that recognizes and endeavours to meet emotional and psychological needs as well as physical needs of each person.**
 - **the right of people requiring care to be immediately placed, whenever possible, in their community of choice.**
 - **the expansion of a range of flexible community based options geared towards meeting individual needs.**

End-of-Life Issues

- **The NSASW recommends that increased attention and resources be devoted to the provision of integrated interdisciplinary end-of-life care.**

Considerable effort is expended by the health care system to ensure that Nova Scotians facing critical health problems receive the best health care available. At the same time there is a growing recognition that a very small proportion of these people receive integrated, interdisciplinary end-of-life care.

This Association believes there is a need for the health care system to give greater attention and a higher priority to the varied and complex issues confronting individuals and families as they face the end of life. Various interdisciplinary groups have identified the following as some of the key issues needing to be addressed:

- recognition of end-of-life care as a core service with increased resources
- equitable access
- an interdisciplinary approach
- added supports for caregivers and families

- increased professional education
- increased public education in respect to end-of-life services and issues

A number of professionals in social work, medicine, law, nursing and spiritual care believe that if they work more effectively together they can do a better job of minimizing the pain, anguish and distress that the end of life often brings to individuals and their families. Our Association shares this view and strongly believes that social workers have a key role to play in successful end-of life programs.

Human Resource Requirements

- **The NSASW recommends that, in consultation with the professional associations, government develop an implementation plan for insuring an adequate supply of social workers, physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals.**

Nova Scotia is not alone in facing a shortage of health care professionals, but we believe it is important that our province do its part in creating a solution. The human resources within the health care system should be located at all levels of care and in all communities across the province. They also should reflect the cultural diversity of the community.

In determining staffing needs for the future, it is important that the vital role which can be played by social workers in a comprehensive and effective health care system not be overlooked.

Roles of Federal and Provincial Governments in Health Care

- **The NSASW recommends that the federal and provincial governments develop a more cooperative approach to supporting the health care system based on a strong role for the federal government both in respect to principles and a return to providing a higher proportion of the health care budget.**

We agree with the Interim Report of the "Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada" when it states, "Canadians want both levels of government to stop the corrosive and unproductive long distance hollering and finger-pointing that currently passes for debate on how to renew the health care system. They see both levels of government as bearing responsibility for the problems affecting the system and for finding solutions to them." ⁸

⁸ Romanow, Roy, *Shape the Future of Health Care (2002)*. Interim Report, Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, p. 4.

The Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers supports a strong role for the federal government in upholding the principles of the *Canada Health Act* and returning to a higher proportion of funding in health care.

Moreover, this Association looks to the federal government to play a significant role not only in respect to principles but also with financial support.

Priority to Service Restoration and Enhancement over Tax Reduction

- **The NSASW recommends that the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia give priority to restoring and enhancing services, particularly in health, education and social services, rather than to reducing taxes.**

The fiscal realities of recent years have led to reductions or at least restrictions in investments in human services. This has been of great concern not only to our Association, but to a large proportion of the public.

The November 2001 federal budget revealed that money can be found for the things the government believes to be really important, although government priorities do not always fully reflect the priorities of citizens. It is interesting to note that in a recent EKOS poll⁹ only 7% indicated that they believe the November federal budget was focused on "improving the social well-being and quality of life" while 42% said it "should have focused" on this goal. Also, amongst the three choices, 48% ranked "social well-being" as most important to them, while 45% opted for "long-term economic well-being", and only 6% for "short-term economic well-being". This speaks to the value Canadians place on "quality of life" issues.

CONCLUSION

It is recognized that difficult challenges currently confront governments in respect to health care. At the same time, it is evident that quality health care is highly valued by Canadians both in terms of its contribution to our overall quality of life and as part of what makes Canada special.

This Association looks to both levels of government to provide effective leadership in bringing about the best possible health care system which will reflect the values and needs of Canadians.

It is troubling when governments declare that there is no choice about cutting health care budgets and services. While funding and sustainability are complex and difficult issues, we do have choices. As Roy Romanow says, "What we do to ensure fiscal sustainability depends on how we

⁹ *Economic and Public Security: The Evolving Public Landscape and Response to the Budget*. EKOS Research Associates, December 14, 2001

define the problem and the values we bring to the discussion." ¹⁰ He further states, "There is no absolute standard for what any country should spend on health care. The choice will reflect the history, values, and priorities of each." ¹¹

This Association believes that quality health care should have higher priority than tax cuts.

We are pleased that Roy Romanow's report recognizes that "there is an ever-growing body of evidence that factors such as education, income, poverty, and social exclusion have a significant impact on health outcomes." ¹² . As reflected throughout this Position Statement, the Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers concurs with Mr. Romanow when he states, "We need to strike a better balance between treating people when they are sick or injured and focusing on broader `health determinants' that address underlying causes of poor health and have the best potential for improving the overall health of Canadians." ¹³

Moving towards a sustainable high quality health care system is a huge challenge facing both levels of government. Canadians expect them to provide the leadership for such a task. They expect as well that governments will provide effective ways for citizens to be meaningful partners in this important endeavour.

10 Romanow, p.26

11 Ibid.,p.27

12 Ibid., p.33

13 Ibid., p.37