

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

CYFS 10-Year Child Care Strategy

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Written Submission

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Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

The NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1400 professional social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The vision of the NLASW is excellence in social work. As a profession, social work is committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families and communities through intervention and counselling, collaboration, research, health promotion, policy and program development, and community capacity building.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the profession of social work is diverse with social workers practicing in various settings. Social workers practice within hospitals, community care, long term care homes, adult and youth corrections, child welfare, addictions, mental health, community based centres, government departments and universities. Social workers are also self-employed in private practice and consulting businesses.

In the pursuit of excellence in social work, the NLASW is actively engaged in social policy analysis. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations into the development of a 10-Year Child Care Strategy for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL).

Early Childhood Learning Strategy – A Social Work Perspective

Child care is an important and timely issue. Currently, access to affordable, high quality child care is limited for many children and families, provincially and nationally. A report from Campaign 2000 (2010) indicates that only 20% of children between 0-5 years of age in Canada have access to regulated child care spaces, of which the quality is not always optimal. This lack of affordable, accessible, and high quality regulated child care, is concerning to social workers. So often, children are put at a disadvantage by the time they enter kindergarten, as opportunities for early learning, and social and emotional development, are not readily available or accessible.

While there have been significant investments in child care made over the past year, the supply is not currently meeting the demand. It is therefore timely that the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services is engaging in the development of a child care strategy to meet the needs of children and families in Newfoundland and Labrador now and into the future.

The strategic principles outlined in the discussion guide for the development of a 10-Year Child Care Strategy sets a beginning framework for the enhancement of child care programming in Newfoundland and Labrador. These investments are crucial to the overall health and well-being of children and families in this province. The World Health Organisation (2008) highlights that “investments in the early years provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within a generation.”

This written submission explores several areas that need to be considered in moving this strategy forward. These areas include the importance of community capacity building, horizontal policy analysis, the link between early learning and child care, poverty reduction, social work and child care, and evaluation.

Issues and Recommendations – The Next 10 Years

Community Capacity Building

According to a report by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (2009) to inform the NL Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy, youth see access to child care and early child development services as integral in supporting families in this province. Retaining and attracting youth to see Newfoundland and Labrador as a province of choice is important given some of our provincial demographic issues (i.e., aging population, out-migration).

Community involvement is therefore crucial to moving this strategy forward and addressing the principle of sufficiency and improving access. It is important that government continue to work with communities to increase access to affordable, high

quality child care and to find creative solutions that meet rural and urban needs and expectations.

Involving local experts such as community advisory committees is an important and necessary step in developing a comprehensive child care strategy. It is therefore recommended that the capacity initiative be expanded to meet the growing child care needs in rural and remote areas of the province and that community capacity building be added as a guiding principle for the strategy.

Horizontal Policy Analysis

While it is recognized that the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services is taking the lead on the development of a provincial child care strategy, a coordinated approach across several government departments is necessary. It is important that the development and implementation of a child care strategy intersect with, and support, other initiatives that are happening within NL (e.g. early learning and child care strategy, poverty reduction strategy, immigration strategy, and strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities) to ensure a seamless continuum of care and service delivery. In addition to adding community capacity building to the guiding principles of the strategy, it would also be important to include diversity and social inclusion. Social workers believe that these are some of the fundamental principles that should inform policy and program development

Early Learning & Child Care

Early learning and child care are not mutually exclusive, and both are considered key to healthy child development. In fact Friendly, as cited in Raphael (2004), describes early childhood education and care as a social determinant of health.

The 10-Year Child Care Strategy discussion guide highlights three main components of quality child care which include;

- Healthy and safe environments
- Developmentally appropriate programming
- Qualified Early Childhood Educators

Social workers support the proposed options for strengthening and supporting the early childhood educator workforce. One of the first steps is certainly to advance the regulation of wages for early childhood educators as a recruitment and retention strategy. Given the overall impact that high quality child care has on the health and well-being of children in this province, it is crucial that those working in this field receive appropriate pay and compensation. Without a vibrant and strong workforce, high quality child care programming will be compromised.

Another recommendation for consideration is the integration of kindergarten and child care. McCain et al (2011) highlight: “children need supportive caring adults to help them discover their surroundings from a safe place” (p. 50). This begins at the familial level and should continue throughout the early years and within child care programming. Having child care integrated within the kindergarten year will allow for more consistency and high quality programming that meets the developmental needs of children; while addressing the dilemmas that parents experience in the kindergarten year in trying to access child care and balancing employment.

As in other professions and fields, best practices in child care continue to evolve and develop. Therefore, it is recommended that government continue to enhance continuing education opportunities for early childhood educators that focuses on issues such as healthy child development, training for children with special needs and innovative programming as part of the 10-Year Strategy.

Poverty Reduction

In times of economic and fiscal growth, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to increase. A recent report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation

and Development (2011) demonstrates that “the average income of the richest 10% is now about nine times that of the poorest 10%”. This growing disparity is an issue that needs to be taken into consideration in the development of a Child Care Strategy. It is recommended that all programs and policies of a provincial child care strategy be analyzed through a “poverty lens” to ensure fairness, equality and inclusion in the provision of affordable, accessible and high quality child care.

Increasing access to available regulated child care means lower access fees. A family with one to two children under the age of five could be expected to pay anywhere from \$600 - \$1200 per month (based on a dollar figure of \$30 a day per child). One can only imagine how costly child care is for families requiring child care for more than two children, and for families with limited income. For many, this cost poses a barrier for participation in the workforce. As child care subsidy programs do provide support for many low income earners to access child care, it is recommended that the eligibility criteria for accessing subsidies be expanded to reach more low income families (e.g., for individuals looking for employment) and that the thresholds for subsidies be increased.

Social Work and Child Care

Social workers bring a valued perspective and understanding of the issues that impact on the health and well being of individuals, families and communities. These include social and economic factors such as early life, education, housing, food security, social exclusion to name a few (Raphael, 2004). It is through this understanding that social workers are positioned to inform the child care strategy. Social workers have the knowledge, skills and expertise to engage in policy and program development that meets the needs of children and families across the continuum from an inclusive framework.

Evaluation & Next Steps

It is recommended that an evaluation process be included in the strategy. How will we know we have been successful in creating and expanding access to affordable, accessible, high quality child care? Does the strategy clearly and sufficiently address child care issues for children under the age of five and for school age children? How effectively does early learning and child care integrate together? It would also be important to outline success indicators and how they will be measured. This is important in terms of fiscal and program accountability and in increasing community awareness.

Conclusion

The NLASW commends government on the commitment to develop a 10-Year Child Care Strategy for the province. The development of this strategy is important to the overall health and well-being of children and families in this province. While coordinated by the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, it is important that this strategy support and intersect with other on-going strategies and initiatives.

As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in meeting the child care needs of families in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador and in moving this strategy forward.

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