



PEI ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Comments for Hon. Carolyn Bennett, Canadian Minister of State for Public Health

Because of women's traditional role as caregivers . . .
Because of women's historical and ongoing economic inequality . . .
Because income is the first social determinant of health, and wealth is still a predictor of health in this country . . .

Women's equality is a public health issue.

The Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women submits that the best way to ensure improvements in public health in Canada is for the Government of Canada to invest in supports to caregivers of all descriptions. These caregivers, many of them women, support and maintain the health of Canadians from birth to death, in their families and their communities.

We are heartened to know that “the creation of the Public Health Agency of Canada marks the beginning of a new approach to federal leadership and collaboration with provinces and territories on efforts to renew the public health system in Canada and support a sustainable health care system.” Our recommendations underscore the importance of the work set out for this new agency.

MATERNITY AND PARENTAL BENEFITS

We strongly recommend that all departments of the Government of Canada seriously review the concrete, achievable recommendations presented Women's Network PEI's *Looking Beyond the Surface: An Indepth Review of Parental Benefits* Phase II Interim Report and, further, that they implement its recommendations.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

As the Government of Canada implements its National Childcare Agenda to provide improved access to early childhood care and education, we want the Government of Canada to take seriously its role in holding provinces responsible for ensuring that programs meet the QUAD principles. We hold that a quality, universally accessible, affordable, and development-focussed system of early childhood care and education will only exist when we invest in early childhood educators. Leadership will come from the teachers when they are well-trained and well-paid for their skilled work. Federal money delivered to Prince Edward Island should come only with strong recommendations about how the PEI childcare system needs to be improved to meet national standards.

FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL RELATIONS

As we have noted, we want the Federal Government to find ways to hold provinces accountable for commitments around caregiving and other public health programs; however, the Federal Government also has to establish programs responsibly and ensure that they are sustainable. There is a justified feeling in PEI that the federal government does not continue to support the programs they initiate. While there exist helpful programs and positive investments from the

Federal Government in caregiving and public health, there also needs to be responsibility at the federal level for seeing these programs continued in small and have-not provinces and territories. Holding provinces accountable for sustaining programs assumes that the provinces have the resources to do it.

Recent wrangling in PEI over the “Best Start” program illustrates what can go wrong between federal and provincial funders. This program to support mothers’ and babies’ health and development through the first 36 months of an infant’s life was initiated by the Federal Government. The program was to be cost-shared with the Province, with the Province picking up an increasing portion of the costs and eventually becoming wholly responsible for funding. During deficit cutting in 2004, the Province cut its portion of the funding. Responding to public protest, the Province has restored some of its funding to Best Start in the 2005 budget; however, we understand that even with this funding, the program will support families for just 18 months, not the full 36 months required for families to truly benefit from the best start.

CONSISTENT ACCESS TO PROGRAMS

Canada is one country, yet women across the country have unequal access to programs that support caregiving and health, especially as we look from province to province. The system for early childhood care and education in Prince Edward Island is funded almost entirely by parents; in Quebec, parents have access to \$7/day, government-supported childcare. Likewise, women require consistent access to basic health services, including abortion services. We want all Canadians to have consistent access to caregiving supports and other programs that benefit society’s health — regardless of where they happen to live. We lament the degradation of the principle of universality in our institutions, and we affirm the role of the Federal Government in applying national standards.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Public Health Agency of Canada must play a role in proactively sharing information for women and families about the programs and supports that are available to them across all departments of government. Women need to know about positive policy initiatives to support caregivers — such as the Compassionate Care program or the Child-Rearing Drop-Out Provision under the CPP. Given the heavy workload of most women — who often do two-thirds of household tasks on top of working in the paid labourforce — communications about policies and programs must actively reach women in a variety of ways and special effort must go into reaching vulnerable and marginalized women.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of our public health priorities. We welcome comments, questions, and feedback.

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