



National
Children's
Alliance

Alliance
nationale pour
les enfants

Brief to the Standing Committee on Finance

National Children's Alliance

November 2004

National Children's Alliance

331 Cooper Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 0G5

613-560-5843 ext 229

www.nationalchildrensalliance.com

dianne@nationalchildrensalliance.com

Members of the National Children's Alliance

Active Healthy Kids Canada
Adoption Council of Canada
Allergy Asthma Information Association
Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada
Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada
Canadian Association for Community Living
Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs
Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
Canadian Association of Food Banks
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
Canadian Association of Paediatric Health Centres
Canadian Association of Social Workers
Canadian Child Care Federation
Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children
Canadian Council on Social Development
Canadian Institute of Child Health
Canadian Living Foundation / Breakfast for Learning
Canadian Mental Health Association
Canadian Nurses Association
Canadian Paediatric Society
Canadian Parents for French
Canadian Parks & Recreation Association
Canadian Psychological Association
Canadian Public Health Association
Canadian School Boards Association
Canadian Teachers' Federation
Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
Child Welfare League of Canada
Children's Aid Society
Family Service Canada
Fédération des communautés francophone et acadienne du Canada
First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada
Foundation for Active Healthy Kids
Frontier College
Hospital for Sick Children Foundation
Kids Help Phone
La Commission Nationale des Parents Francophones
Laidlaw Foundation
Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
Métis National Council of Women
Movement for Canadian Literacy
National Anti-Poverty Organization
National Association of Friendship Centres
National Early Intervention Network
National Youth In Care Network
Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association
Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada
Pollution Probe
Safe Kids Canada
Save the Children Canada
Scouts Canada
Special Link: The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion
SOS Children's Villages Canada
Street Kids International
The Students' Commission
Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development
UNICEF Canada
United Way of Canada-Centraide Canada
Vanier Institute of the Family
YouCan
Youth Net/Réseau-Ado
YMCA Canada
YWCA Canada

Rationale

The National Children's Alliance

The National Children's Alliance brings together over 60 national organizations working collectively to enhance the well-being of children and youth in Canada. It is a model for collaboration among health, education, environment, literacy, recreation, disability, child care, social services, NGOs and community-based organizations for reaching consensus on a broad range of policy issues. Building on the strengths of the hundreds of thousands of people working on the front lines of our communities and their combined research capacity, the National Children's Alliance mobilizes cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approaches to impact policy development.

Since its inception in 1996, the National Children's Alliance has worked to:

- Promote the development and implementation of the National Children's Agenda;
- Develop policy recommendations;
- Facilitate dialogue on children's issues among all sectors;
- Engage provincial/territorial/regional constituent groups in working collaboratively on issues; and
- Strengthen its national networks of voluntary organizations and NGO's.

Foundation for Federal Action:

The Government of Canada has recognized the importance of both income support and services to the health and well-being of Canada's children and their families. Significant progress has been made on the implementation of the National Children's Agenda. This has been demonstrated through investments in the National Child Tax Benefit and parental leave as well as through transfers for service delivery in the Early Childhood Development agreement, the Multilateral Framework and the current commitment to child care. This is a solid foundation upon which to continue to build the investments needed to realize the full potential of the National Children's Agenda.

The recommendations contained in this report are consistent with the Government of Canada's commitments to children, youth and their families in:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991);
- National Children's Agenda (1999);
- Early Childhood Development agreement (2000);
- UN Special Session on Children "A World Fit for Children" (2002); and
- Multi-lateral Framework on Early Learning and Care (2003).
- National Plan of Action for Children: "A Canada Fit for Children" (2004)

The National Children's Alliance member organizations are encouraged by the commitment in the Speech from the Throne for a "truly national system of early learning and child care". The promised \$5 billion is an enormous opportunity for the implementation of these principles over the next five years. For the member organizations of the National Children's Alliance, the principle of universality is critical to ensure the inclusion of all children, regardless of ability, linguistic or ethnic background and geography. However, universality does not, in and of itself, provide the necessary foundation for inclusion or the indicators and measures that ensure *all* children are supported in a manner that optimizes their well-being and full participation. An explicit commitment to inclusion across all four key principles is anticipated in the upcoming discussions with the provinces and territories.

The announcement of a new Workplace Skills Strategy to include literacy is an important step in recognizing the direct link between literacy and employment. Literacy is more than a labour market issue and the desired results will not be achieved without a more holistic approach. This critical issues needs to be addressed horizontally across the federal government. There is a solid body of research that clearly demonstrates that literacy levels are linked to healthy outcomes for adults and children. This conclusion and a set of excellent recommendations are outlined in the June 2003 Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities titled "Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response". We encourage the federal government to focus on literacy as a cross-departmental key policy priority in the context of lifelong learning from birth throughout the life-cycle.

The emerging national agenda for Cities and Communities recognizes that policy-making in the 21st Century is much more complex. While physical infrastructure is recognized as an enabler of economic development, in a knowledge-based economy the contribution of social infrastructure is equally, if not more, important. The role of services is highlighted in the Speech from the Throne through expansion of partnership agreements. National leadership is an important lever, particularly in the foundation for healthy communities through the implementation of a National Housing Strategy. Adequate funding for housing is fundamental in order to make a difference for our most disadvantaged children.

Keeping the Promises

The public in Canada will be looking to the next federal budget for investments that improve the lives of children, youth and their families. Investing in health and social programs remains a priority for Canadians. Now that Canada has balanced its budget, it is critical that debt reduction does not come at the expense of our most vulnerable populations. In this brief the National Children's Alliance presents an integrated policy approach that includes income support, service delivery and monitoring progress.

The National Children's Alliance will continue to play a major role in the development and implementation of many of Canada's commitments to children. In our brief this year we are focusing our recommendations on:

- Social Infrastructure;
- Aboriginal children and youth;
- Accountability and Monitoring;
- Sustaining Families.

Recommendations

Building Social Infrastructure

The research findings are unequivocal that the determinants of health for children and youth are largely dependent upon the social context in which they grow up: in other

words, community matters. Family-enabling environments are required in order to provide much-needed support for parents and children, ensure positive and nurturing experiences to children and help parents cope with the stresses of raising children. Inclusion of all children, irrespective of ability, cultural group, socio-economic status or geography, is dependent upon vibrant communities that ensure each child has the opportunity to participate as an active member of society.

The 63 member organizations of the National Children's Alliance understand that vibrant communities contribute to inclusion of all children as active participants in society. Emergent research tells us that creating the environment for healthy child development depends upon community social infrastructure characterized by inter-sectoral collaboration, multi-disciplinary approaches, coordination of programs and services and vibrant support networks.

It is commonly understood that communities need physical infrastructure to enable economic development. In a knowledge-based economy, inclusive social infrastructure is essential to human development and therefore a necessary condition for economic growth. Social infrastructure encompasses the inter-dependent mix of places and spaces, programs and services, and networks of organizations and individuals, at all levels.

There is an opportunity for federal leadership through the "Cities/Communities Initiative" to promote a social agenda. The federal government has a long recognized role in creating enabling environments. Municipal and local governments are particularly sensitive to the social needs of their communities. Expanding the dialogue and the policy platform of the Cities/Communities agenda to include social infrastructure would allow governments to address pressing social issues.

Investing in the development of local inclusive social infrastructure could be achieved through a funded federal program that would support community social infrastructure initiatives. Funding for social infrastructure would include innovative and inclusive programs, services and network-building. Local leadership with citizen involvement in identifying and addressing solutions to urgent community needs would be a key component for success. Partnerships and multi-sectoral approaches that span local

governments and the voluntary sector would promote a high degree of co-ordination and could form the basis of criteria for funding.

“Public Spaces – Family Places” is an example of the type of initiative that could be funded through a “Community Social Infrastructure Fund”. Over the past two years the National Children’s Alliance has been working with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities out of a shared understanding of the importance of quality, safe and accessible recreation opportunities for children and youth. More than twenty-five percent of our children are not active enough to promote healthy growth and development. Research indicates that participation in arts and sports protects vulnerable children from emotional and behavioral problems. “Public Spaces – Family Places” would support development and maintenance of inclusive community play spaces, recreation opportunities and family-oriented community centres.

Investing in inclusive social infrastructure contributes to quality of life and economic development. For the National Children’s Alliance it is an opportunity to level the playing field for all of Canada’s children and youth.

Recommendation: That the federal government invest in community social infrastructure with a dedicated fund under the cities/communities agenda.

Aboriginal Children and Youth

In contrast to the lives experienced by other Canadian children and youth, Aboriginal children on and off reserve are more likely to experience poverty, health problems, maltreatment, literacy challenges, incarceration and child welfare issues. Although the latter represent less than five percent of the child population in Canada, they account for at least thirty percent of Canada’s children in care. Twice as many babies will be born prematurely, underweight or die within the first year of life. Three or four times as many babies will die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Three to four times as many children will die by injury, poisoning or violence. Five times as many of our Aboriginal young people will commit suicide. In five years (1996 – 2001) the number of Aboriginal children in care of the state increased by more than seventy percent. Canada has a crisis situation with our Aboriginal children and youth.

Community programs that support Aboriginal children, youth and their families are critical to their well-being. Research has demonstrated over and over again the effectiveness of responsive services and supports delivered by community agencies. Innovative programs such as the Yellowhead Tribal Services custom adoption program in Alberta or Manitoba's Child Welfare Initiative are celebrations of the success that can be achieved when funding is directed to local agencies. In Canada, we know that services for Aboriginal children, both on and off reserve, are underfunded. The priority that this Government has accorded to improving the lives of our Aboriginal peoples provides an opportunity for equalizing the investments targeted to Aboriginal children and youth. It is time to put resources into the hands of community agencies that already have the knowledge and expertise to make a difference.

Aboriginal children in Canada need access to community-based initiatives that are responsive, co-ordinated and integrated. Community agencies need funding to build upon their existing capacities in order to meet these needs.

What we are recommending is that the federal government launch "Caring Across Boundaries: An Aboriginal Children's Infrastructure Fund". The Fund would provide resources directly to community based initiatives. This fund would build upon existing capacities of established community services and supports wherever possible to:

- Build family and community capacity by targeting funding to partnerships and coordinated programming.
- Promote responsiveness to unique community needs by providing funding that is flexible. (to support diversity from preventive health to recreation)
- Improve access to community services for children, youth and families that are marginalized through new initiatives.
- Create linkages among health, education, social and community services with dedicated resources for front-line community coordination.

Research evidence is clear (for example see Chandler and Lalonde 1998). The introduction of responsive community services and supports improves the outcomes of children, youth and their families.

Recommendation: we are asking that the federal government create an Aboriginal Children's Infrastructure Fund, which would provide resources directly to community-based initiatives.

Ensuring Accountability

Over the past 13 years, Canada has committed to a number of a national and international agreements that have an enormous impact on lives of children, youth and their families, from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) to the Early Childhood Development agreement (2000). However, advances have been uneven and there has been inadequate progress in closing the gaps between our commitments and the reality of children's lives, particularly for Aboriginal, immigrant/refugee and poor children. The need for monitoring how children are living and how society is supporting them to flourish is critical in ensuring implementation of our international and domestic obligations to children.

There is enormous potential for a country as resource-rich as Canada to do better for all of its children: from early childhood through youth, to those living in poverty, to our aboriginal children, to newcomers and children with disabilities. In order to make a difference, we need to understand the complex influences on children's lives and the linkages among public policies, community services, supports to families and child outcomes. Accountability hinges on this understanding.

In the report of the Standing Committee on Finance in 2001 (*Securing Our Future, Nov. 2001, p. 108*) the committee accepted the recommendation of the National Children's Alliance for the provision of resources to support the work of the voluntary/NGO sector in monitoring and accountability. This has not yet been realized. The National Children's Alliance has been working for several years towards developing a framework for tracking the progress of Canada's children. Early childhood development was the first priority of

the Alliance and has the potential to become the test case for a comprehensive approach to accountability.

Over the past four years, through research and broadly-based consultation processes, including roundtables supported by background papers, the Alliance has engaged our members and others in a dialogue. These engagement processes included an initial focus on examining international models; consideration of various approaches for monitoring implementation of the early childhood development initiative; and finally, an understanding of the need for a more comprehensive approach involving “telling the story of Canada’s children”.

The Alliance concluded that what is needed is a comprehensive approach to accountability that goes beyond just monitoring and tells an inclusive story of Canada’s children that is empirically grounded yet speaks meaningfully to all stakeholders. We need an accountability framework based on a clear understanding of what we are trying to achieve, the research about how children reach their potential, the perspective from which we are telling the story and the implications of these stories for policy development, practice and advocacy. Any accountability framework must be based on our vision and goals for Canada’s children and youth – it must be broadly-based and include multiple perspectives. It must recognize multiple roles and responsibilities.

How Canada’s children are doing is a collective responsibility and the story of Canada’s children needs to be told in an inclusive way. This means:

- holistic approaches that provide an understandable narrative for this complex story;
- diverse sources of knowledge that cross a variety of policy areas and range from national data sets to individual case studies;
- collaborative model involving the network of a broad range of partners;
- the voices of children and youth.

In order to achieve our goals and objectives, and “bring meaning to all the accountability pieces”, a sustainable mechanism is needed. The development of a “Council” would

provide a sustainable mechanism to support a long term, cohesive approach to accountability.

The Council is envisioned as a distributed organization that is built on strong networks operating on a hub and spokes model. The Council would be designed to build the collective capacity of all sectors to play a key role in public accountability. The Council would serve as catalyst, facilitator, broker and connector.

The “Council” would be driven by the voluntary/NGO sector – it could build on the model of collaboration and operating principles successfully established through the National Children’s Alliance and other coalitions. These networks would need to be broadened to include partnerships with researchers and academics.

Initiatives that could be addressed include:

1. Accountability Framework – that includes the foundational set of questions and national level indicators
2. Clearinghouse for Data and Information – from local to national
3. Pan-Canadian Data Strategy – from qualitative to quantitative
4. National Reports – series of reports telling the “Story of Canada’s Children”
5. Accountability Tools – to enable and build capacity for community initiatives
6. Knowledge Transfer Networks – multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral
7. Resource Bank on Accountability – from expertise to information products

Recommendation: the federal government commit \$25 million over 5 years to support the creation of a Council that would provide a sustainable mechanism for accountability and monitoring.

Sustaining Families

Income security programs provide a foundation for ensuring social inclusion. Although parents have primary responsibility for their children, as a society we take responsibility for improving equality of opportunity through income redistribution.

The National Children's Alliance supports the **National Child Tax Benefit** as a key strategy for addressing child and family poverty. The federal government's ongoing investments in this program have proven to be effective in reducing poverty and supporting families with the costs of raising children. It is important that all children living in poverty are treated fairly by ensuring access to this important benefit regardless of the source of family income. Increasing the federal investment in the National Child Tax Benefit will continue to pay dividends to the health and well-being of Canada's children.

Recommendation:

Raise the National Child Benefit to a maximum of \$4,200 per child available to all low, modest and middle income families, without clawbacks for families on social assistance.

In the federal budget of 2000 **Parental Leave Benefits through Employment Insurance** program were extended to one year. The National Children's Alliance had recommended this change and is very pleased by its implementation and the recognition of the need to support parents in balancing work and family responsibilities. However, there is a need to expand eligibility given the nature of the Canadian labour market and the substantive number of workers that have part-time jobs or income generated through self-employment. The majority of these workers, particularly women, are low income earners. Fairness in expanding eligibility also needs to include ensuring equivalent benefits for adoptive families.

The current program does not provide adequate income support with the current level of only 55% of income. The gap in income stream due to the waiting period is further exacerbated by delays in the processing time. This situation is a hardship for the many families that are struggling to meet their regular monthly expenses.

Recommendation:

Increase parental leave benefits to 75% of earnings, and expand eligibility requirements to be inclusive of part-time and self-employed workers. Eliminate the waiting period for all parents and equalize the benefits for adoptive families.

Families with **children with special needs** often face additional challenges in balancing work and family. The recent addition of compassionate leave within the Employment Insurance program is a step in the right direction. However, it is critical that families dealing with ongoing disability-related needs have their economic security taken into account.

Recommendation:

Expand family leave provisions within the Employment Insurance program to include paid leave for a parent who must temporarily or periodically care for a child with disability-related needs.