

April 30, 2020



Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Honourable Minister Ahmed Hussen
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau and Honourable Minister Hussen,

As Dignity for All co-leads, we are writing to you on behalf of the *Chew on This!* campaign. *Chew on This!* is the largest anti-poverty campaign in Canada. In October 2019, over 100 hundred organizers from coast to coast to coast marked the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, calling for federal leadership to eradicate poverty in Canada.

Last year, over 100 groups in every province and territory participated in *Chew on This!*, talking to people in our communities about the realities of poverty locally, and across our country. We distributed over 15,000 postcards calling on our next federal government to take immediate, ambitious action to end poverty in Canada.

Our 2019 postcard informed the incoming federal government that we would check-in within the first 90 days of Parliament's sitting to review what commitments had been honoured. No one could have predicted the COVID-19 pandemic that subsequently came upon us. Unfortunately, the devastating ways in which this pandemic has further marginalized vulnerable populations in our country is not surprising at all.

We applaud the positive steps that have been taken by you yourself, Prime Minister, your cabinet, and all Members of Parliament to support workers, families, and communities during this crisis. We are encouraged by Parliament's recognition of financial security and housing as key determinants in individual and public health. Further, we are inspired that members from all parties have chosen to respond to this crisis with data-driven policy decisions and cooperation in place of partisanship. Most importantly, this moment shows us what is possible when government prioritizes people's health and wellbeing.

People Living in Poverty Continue to Need Your Support.

These actions, while commendable, must be paired with ongoing research and GBA+ analysis, investments, and rights-based public policies for the long-term. Having demonstrated what is possible with these emergency responses, we must not return to the status quo of inequity and under-investment that left millions of people in this country without the means to enjoy their basic rights and participate fully in our society. We must ensure the way forward is both equitable and sustainable.

The federal Poverty Reduction Strategy and National Housing Strategy signaled an important recognition of the depth and pervasiveness of poverty and housing insecurity in Canada. They were also significant in their recognition of poverty and housing insecurity as matters of human rights. These strategies, like the current emergency responses, were important steps in the right direction, that once strengthened and actualized, could make life and death differences for millions of people. Our target during this pandemic is to eliminate all cases of COVID-19 in Canada and to build our resilience to future health crises; in the same way, eradicating poverty and eliminating core housing need should be the goals of the PRS and NHS, acknowledging the impact both crises have on our health and well-being as a society, as well as individuals.

In the present moment, we have seen the government respond quickly to concerns that emergency benefits are not reaching all who need them. An intersectional, gender-based analysis is critical in assessing the needs and policy uptake of different communities. The levels of communication and cooperation between governments and the not-for-profit and charitable sector have contributed greatly to needed improvements being actualized. This has resulted in emergency benefits that exceed existing levels for social assistance

(including for people living with disabilities) that have long been shown to be insufficient and ineffective at reducing poverty.

Just as open communication and GBA+ analyses are critical in ensuring emergency benefits reach all those who need it, the PRS and NHS need to be evaluated and expanded through the input of the people most affected by their respective policies and investments. We recommend that the Poverty Advisory Committee be given greater power to make public recommendations to governments based on their consultations with communities across the country, and that the government be required to respond publicly within 90 days. We also recommend the expedited establishment of a strong, well-led, well-resourced and effective National Housing Advocate and Housing Committee to allow communities to report systemic violations of the right to housing.

Unfortunately, we have heard that consultation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups has been lacking in determining the appropriate allocation of emergency benefits and infrastructure. It is critical that the nationhood and rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples be respected. This requires meaningful consultation within and among affected communities, sufficient funding, technology, and infrastructure to meet the diverse needs of these communities, and the use of a nation-to-nation framework in all decision-making processes. We also urge the government to realized their commitment to pass legislation enshrining the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in Canadian law and to fully comply with Jordan's Principle.

We support continued efforts to develop and fund a universal, single-payer pharmacare program, and recommend that critical dental care, optical care, and physiotherapy be included in the public system. Surely, this is a time at which we have been forced to re-evaluate our prioritization of individual and public health.

Food security, food sovereignty, and food systems also play a huge role in individual and public health. More support is needed to ensure people have access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods. Further, the national dependence on minimum wage and gig economy workers, particularly in our food systems, underscores the need for the federal government to work with provincial governments to establish dignified working standards and to investigate the reliance on unpaid/underpaid labour in Canada.

As we look to rebuild our economy and revitalize our labour force, now is the time to invest in sustainable, equitable jobs that will serve us well in the short- and long-term. Any bailout money must be invested in workers and communities, not corporations who shelter their profits in tax havens, or who stand in the way of our emissions targets. We must not use this health crisis as an excuse to ignore our responsibilities in tackling the climate crisis. Corporations, governments, and individuals must all be held to standards of equity and sustainability as part of a just transition and a just recovery.

Thus far, the efforts of the federal government have inspired optimism for us as members of *Dignity For All* and the *Chew on This!* campaign. We express our thanks, as well as

We hope that members of Parliament such as yourself continue on this trajectory to achieve the eradication of poverty and dignity for all during this pandemic and beyond.

Sincerely,

The Dignity for All Team

Willard Metzger, Executive Director, Citizens for Public Justice

Leilani Farha, Executive Director, Canada Without Poverty

Natalie Appleyard, Socio- Economic Policy Analyst, Citizens for Public Justice

Leila Edwards, Staff Lawyer and Outreach Coordinator, Canada Without Poverty