

MGEU

Pre-Budget Submission 2021

Manitoba Government and
General Employees' Union

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Introduction

I am pleased to submit recommendations for the 2021 Provincial budget on behalf of the 32,000 members of the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU).

Manitobans endured a very challenging year in 2020 and continue to face the impacts of the deadly COVID-19 virus in 2021. We are fortunate that MGEU members across our Province have continued to answer the call for high-quality public services during this challenging time. Our members provide services in all areas of the public sector including: government services, at crown corporations, in health care, emergency services, child welfare, and through social service agencies. All Manitobans rely on these services, and they have all been affected by the global pandemic in some way. These challenges make Budget 2021 particularly important in ensuring the future health and well-being of our Province.

This year's submission, like previous MGEU budget submissions, will focus on the many public services that have been underfunded, cut, or privatized in recent years. We urge the government to reverse these irresponsible and short-sighted decisions, which continue to impact Manitoba's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keep Public Services Public

The MGEU has spoken out repeatedly about the under-investment, cuts and privatization schemes undertaken in previous years. This has negatively impacted the services Manitobans rely on, and will continue to erode confidence in the government's ability to be there for Manitobans when they need it most.

The experience of the past year has highlighted the risks of relying on for-profit businesses to provide critical services during the pandemic. Health care workers desperately waiting for their vaccinations against COVID-19 have, on numerous occasions, been sent the wrong booking information for their appointments. Manitobans

Pandemic Contracting Out:

- Mental Health Supports
- Public Health Enforcement
- Vaccination Scheduling
- Contact Tracing

expecting test results have often waited for over a week for information, and contact tracing lagged, exposing more people to the virus. Meanwhile, some enforcement of public health restrictions were outsourced to a private security firm, rather than adequately investing in and mobilizing more appropriate public resources.

Manitoba’s pandemic response has been criticized for being disorganized and under-resourced. We believe that this government’s fixation on cuts and privatization have impeded Manitoba’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The province has also refused to match federal dollars for supports like social housing, which remains a top priority as more Manitobans languish on the wait list for a place to call home. The government continues to advance the recommendations in the KPMG report, which will further erode public housing options through the sale of housing units and contracting out management of housing complexes. Manitobans need social housing now more than ever, in addition to an overall housing strategy that puts an end to homelessness in our province.

We recommend that the provincial government take full advantage of the federal housing funding arrangements, keep Manitoba Housing public, and invest in a “housing first” strategy.

Health Care Cuts and Privatization

- Cut Personal Care Home budgets
- Contracted Out Lab Testing
- Closed three Emergency Rooms
- Closed Quick Care Clinics
- Cut Physiotherapy Services
- Cut Occupational Therapy Services
- Privatizing Home Care
- Outsourced Day Surgeries
- Cut Funding for Sleep Apnea Equipment
- Cut the Special Drugs Program
- Mature Women’s Health Centre
- Cut Hospital Home Teams

Health Care- A Dangerous Situation

The years of cuts, privatization, and chaos in healthcare have left the system strained and under-resourced, making a system-wide response to the devastation of the COVID-19 virus near impossible.

The chronic underfunding and short-staffing in personal care homes left health care workers and residents vulnerable. These concerns are most evident in for-profit care homes. The devastating impacts of these decisions and slow government response have impacted the capacity to provide high quality care. We are calling on the government to invest in long-term care, reverse these cuts, and review the use of private for-profit seniors care.

Despite the urgent need to respond to the pandemic, the government is plowing ahead with plans to upend health care and mental health services. Phase one changes included closing emergency rooms, Quick Care Clinics, the Mature Women's Health Centre, cutting budgets and privatizing crucial services like physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Recently announced plans to disrupt mental health and addictions services and changes in rural health care indicate that these disruptions will continue with Phase two.

The ongoing reliance on private home care services continues to be of particular concern to our members and their clients. Large, for-profit corporations are being contracted to deliver a service that is already offered efficiently and cost-effectively by the public program. We strongly recommend that these irresponsible decisions are reversed and call for more funding to the publicly provided Home Care program.

Early in the pandemic it became clear that Manitoba would require enhanced laboratory testing capacity as the demand for COVID testing spiked. The government made the decision to rely on the services of a multi-national corporation rather than expanding the provincial Cadham Lab. It became clear that the turnaround time for tests was taking too long and reports indicated that some tests were being processed in Ontario rather than in Manitoba.

Years of underfunding left our public health care system vulnerable to the dangerous impacts of the COVID-19 virus. These gaps in service quality were compounded by a patchwork and ineffective pandemic response as critical services are outsourced to for-profit corporations.

**"When governments
hack and slash
resources away, there is
nobody and nothing left
when the crisis hits."**

– Chuck Sanderson, former
EMO Director

Civil Service – Dedicated to Public Service

The global pandemic has had a dramatic impact on all Manitobans and has required many of our members to go above and beyond their normal duties to help combat the virus. The public service is uniquely positioned to provide rapid response to emergencies like floods, snowstorms, and public health crises. Public resources can be mobilized and scaled up quickly, as they have during past floods and the SARS outbreak in 2002-2004. However, Manitoba's preoccupation with cutting jobs has led to a shortage of staff, reduced planning capacity, and a loss of institutional knowledge. The former Director of the Emergency Measures Organization (EMO), who has guided Manitoba through emergencies in the past, recently stated that, "The taxpaying public has the right to expect a robust response when emergencies occur. When governments hack and slash resources away, there is nobody and nothing left when the crisis hits."

In the past, the Premier has pledged that "no frontline civil servants will lose their job under a Progressive Conservative Government." Since 2016, nearly 3,000 jobs have been cut across the Province, including: Environmental Officers who monitor drinking water quality, nurses in the Medical Examiners Office, Public health inspectors, Distance Learning Supports for students, Road Maintenance crews, and French language interpreters.

These cuts add up and impact the services Manitobans rely on. A recent Auditor General's report called out the government for not hiring enough Environmental Officers to ensure our drinking water is safe.

Another Auditor's report from Ontario warns us of the dangers when contracting out highway snow clearing to for-profit businesses. Despite these caution signs, the Infrastructure Department continues to issue RFP's for private contractors

Civil Service Cuts and Privatization

- Cut 3,000 jobs
- Closing Manitoba Developmental Centre
- Closed 21 Agricultural Offices
- Contracted Out Road Maintenance
- Privatized Air Services
- Contracted out Park Pass sales
- Cut French Language Interpreters
- Cut the Crown Lands Property Agency
- Closed the Dauphin Correctional Centre
- Cut the Distance Learning Centre
- Cut the Learning Resource Centre
- Pending Parks Privatization

and is looking for more opportunities to privatize services.

Rural economies are being hit as family-supporting jobs and services are being gutted from their communities. Recent announcements that 360 jobs will be lost in Portage la Prairie, twenty-one Agriculture Services offices would be shuttered and the decision to close the Dauphin Correctional Center are examples of the short-sighted decisions made by this government.

We recommend that vacant positions are filled across the civil service and resources are provided so that these well-trained and knowledgeable public employees can provide safe quality services to Manitobans.

Our members, who work across the province, take great pride in their work and remind us that the services Manitobans rely on can't happen without the people to deliver them.

Public Education – Supporting the Recovery

We know that post-secondary institutions are key to a modern workforce and have been at the forefront of training workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The MGEU represents instructors and staff at Red River College (RRC), Assiniboine Community College (ACC), Université de St. Boniface (USB) and University College of the North (UCN) who provide educational services to students.

Successive provincial budgets have cut grants to universities and colleges while tuition fees have risen. Despite these budgetary challenges institutions like RRC have stepped up to provide specialized instruction for the long-term care sector and vaccination teams. This highlights the ability for colleges to adapt quickly to the training needs of the Province. Still, rather than invest in training and education to accelerate Manitoba's economic recovery, the government has forced post-secondary institutions to lay off staff, cut programming, and limit hiring.

Education and training are crucial to the economy and will be a key driver of the economic recovery as we come out of the recession. We are calling on the government to restore funding to Colleges and Universities and ensure that post-secondary educational opportunities are accessible for all Manitobans.

Community Social Services– Caring for Manitobans

Manitoba continues to face an addictions and mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. The MGEU members in community-based social services, who are on the

front-line of this crisis, have been asking for more supports to address the escalating crisis and keep Manitobans safe.

At the beginning of the first wave of the COVID-19 shutdown, the government contracted with an out-of-province corporation to provide mental health supports online. We believe that the investments should have been made in local service providers who are “on the ground” here in Manitoba and were positioned to provide enhanced services and support Manitobans.

The provincial government commissioned the Virgo Report in 2018, which recommended improving access to and coordination of mental health and addictions services. Yet, many of the key recommendations have not been acted upon.

We are calling on the government to address the mental health and addictions crisis by meaningfully investing in the services here at home, so Manitobans can get the care they need and we can keep these professionals employed in our province.

Both the Federal and Provincial governments recently stepped up to provide the Caregiver Wage Support program for workers who provide direct patient or residential care. This program was well-received by our deserving members who have been working with inadequate pay rates for too long. We strongly urge the Provincial government to expand this program to include the many other workers providing direct care who were left out of this program, like dietary and home care staff.

We recommend that the government permanently increase funding to these service providers to improve recruitment and retention, resulting in better services to vulnerable Manitobans.

Keeping Crowns and Agencies Public

Manitoba’s Crown Corporations and agencies provide affordable services, family-supporting jobs, and keep profits here in Manitoba. Recent decisions by the government at these entities are cause for concern.

The introduction of Bill 40 will open up the liquor retailing business to more private sellers and put our balanced liquor sales and distribution model at risk. Liquor sales contribute over \$280 million in profit to the provincial treasury, which support vital public services like health and education. Those profits are too valuable to lose in the face of growing health care demands during a pandemic, as well as our general need to invest in other public services like education and infrastructure.

Late last year the government directed MPI to sign a lucrative deal with insurance brokers while mandating a zero percent wage increase for employees. This raises questions about the government's commitment to the sustainability of public insurance in Manitoba. Our members are struggling to understand why the province would involve brokers in all online transactions, when in many cases, MPI could simply sell directly to Manitobans and avoid paying millions of dollars in commissions. Brokers will now collect a commission when a driver buys insurance directly from MPI, even if the broker had no dealings whatsoever with that driver.

Our Crown Corporations contribute to a stable economy and provide important services at an affordable price. We agree with the majority of Manitobans who want to keep our crown agencies publicly owned.

Federal-Provincial Coordination - Supporting the Recovery

The pandemic has put a huge strain on the lives of all Manitobans. Our reliance on quality public services has never been more apparent as we respond to this public health and economic crisis. The global pandemic has magnified the devastating effects of under-funded services across the public sector after years of cuts, contracting out, and privatization. Manitoba's recovery will depend, in large part, on the measures taken by the federal and provincial governments in response to the dual public health and economic crises.

A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) highlights the important role that the Federal government has played in funding supports to individuals, businesses, provinces and municipalities. Report author, David Macdonald, writes, "We're in the middle of a global pandemic. Sitting on unspent money makes no sense." The reality is that the vast majority of the investments have come from the Federal government as provinces like Manitoba refuse to take full advantage of cost-sharing programs to alleviate the impact of the crisis on the people of our province.

We recommend the government match the federal funding

"We're in the middle of a global pandemic. Sitting on unspent money makes no sense"

– David Macdonald, CCPA Senior Economist

available for long-term care and healthcare, housing and poverty reduction, education and childcare, and infrastructure projects. This funding is critical to strengthening public services and strengthening our economy. Manitoba will be truly prosperous and healthy when the most vulnerable among us have access to the services they need.

Conclusion

Manitobans rely on strong public services that support families, keep communities safe, and get Manitoba moving. The people who provide our public services deserve to be treated fairly and respected for the work that they do to keep our province growing. We call on the Manitoba Government to reverse course on their agenda of cuts and privatization.

The global pandemic has hit Manitoba very hard and continues to wreak havoc on our everyday lives. While the government has moved a minimum of resources to respond to the impacts of the virus, years of underfunding have left Manitoba's public services unable to respond as effectively as required. Despite the very best efforts of those on the frontlines as well as behind the scenes, the strain and chaos in healthcare and aggressive vacancy management across the public sector have undermined the planning and delivery of services during the crisis. These cuts need to be reversed and investments must keep up with the need to ensure workers are supported and Manitobans receive quality services.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss our proposals and hope to see them reflected in the 2021 budget.