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GWST 4390: NGOs and Government Services

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Final Report: Canadian Mental Health Association Placement

This semester, I was matched with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) for my placement. I was under the supervision of Bev Cadham and Marg Murray, the two co-managers of the CMHA Halifax-Dartmouth branch. The Canadian Mental Health Association is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing support to Canadians living with mental illness.

The Canadian Mental Health's mission statement expresses the association's goal to support recovery and well-being of those living with mental illness. They aim to do this through their social clubs and offering resources and advocacy in a safe, respectful, and inclusive space (CMHA, 2021). The group strives to "create an environment of hope, to reduce stigma, and to promote mental health for all" (CMHA, 2021). Their values include integrity, empathy, equality, diversity, collaboration, and transparency. Two of their main support services are focused on social inclusion of socially-isolated adults. The group has a Social Club Program which hosts weekly events to provide clients with information for mental health services and a place to meet new people. The Building Bridges Program focuses solely on providing a space for clients to relax, participate in activities, and enjoy the company of others. CMHA believes combating social exclusion is one of the crucial aspects of coping with mental illness. The association also aims to offer clients the information necessary to receive income assistance and support for housing, food, and clothing should this be necessary.

My main project during my placement was completing a research report on the proposition of a universal basic income in Canada. A universal basic income would allow every Canadian over the age of 19 to receive a monthly check for the same amount regardless of income. During tax season, those that made above a certain amount would be required to pay back all or some of the benefit. My report focused on what impact this would have on any Canadians currently receiving income assistance and how this would help various groups such as those with disabilities and women.

To begin, the start of my placement was a bit delayed. The COVID-19 pandemic caused all meetings and activities organised by the CMHA to be moved online at the beginning of January. For the first two weeks, I exchanged emails with Bev and Marg to discuss my project for the coming semester and completed readings they sent to me to understand the scope of what the association is involved in.

Once I was able to meet with Bev and Marg, we discussed the specifics of the report they wanted me to work on. I was asked to focus on trying to find out how many Nova Scotians currently live on no form of income. The various benefits that are available right now in Nova Scotia can take up to four months to be approved. This indicates that there are a number of people receiving no income for at least four months. There is also the chance that someone's application will be denied. In this case, someone that is unable to work but is not eligible for income assistance would be left with no income. In an attempt to find this statistic, I contacted a local MLA, Karla MacFarlane. Karla is also the Minister of Community Affairs, so I believed she would be of help. However, she directed me to the Department of Finance of Nova Scotia. I emailed the department directly, along with the office of the Minister of Finance, Allan MacMaster. I never received an answer from either email even after sending two follow-up

emails. I also attempted to contact Sean Fraser, the Member of Parliament for Central Nova. Again, I never received a response. Due to the lack of response, Bev, Marg, and I came to the conclusion that it must not be a statistic that is known for the Nova Scotian population. This is a statistic that should be known as anyone with no income is at increased risk of experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and social isolation.

Once we determined that this statistic would most likely not be found, Bev invited me to attend meetings with the Poverty Committee Group. This is a group of social workers, outreach coordinators, and volunteers focused on providing resources to Nova Scotians in need of income assistance. The meetings are hosted by Stella Lord, a retired social policy analyst who was awarded a PhD in Sociology in 2009. Stella has devoted her life to women's rights advocacy, and fighting poverty in Canada. During these meetings, members discussed the issues that faced when applying for various benefits for their clients such as the H2O (Help to Others) fund. This was one fund that was often brought up at the meetings as many Nova Scotians spent the winter fighting with water companies regarding overdue water bills. In one case, a man's water was shut off for over a week despite having paid the bill only five days late. However, this benefit involves a lengthy application process and it often takes up to a month to actually receive real help. The various stories I heard about this made me realise that a universal basic income would mean that many Canadians would finally have access to basic necessities such as water and food.

Another common issue discussed during these meetings were the issues of women living on income assistance. When receiving income assistance in Nova Scotia, a single person can receive usually up to \$950 each month. However, when living with a spouse or common law partner, the income assistance is combined to a maximum of about \$1350 per month for both individuals. To receive this extra income, the members of the poverty committee group discussed

the common issue of women staying in abusive relationships to receive a higher benefit. It was also presented that many women end up in situations where the assistance they receive is under their partner's name and in order to leave the relationship, they must reapply for the benefit. To go through this process can take up to four months while they wait for their application to be accepted. This leaves them depending on a partner while they await their own benefit and leaves many women in dangerous situations despite their attempts to leave.

Pertaining to the issue of cohabiting with a partner, many members expressed the issue of government agencies assuming that because someone lives with a roommate that the pair are in a romantic relationship. If the government believes that someone is lying about their relationship with a roommate, their application will be rejected or their benefits will come to an end. The only proof that is needed for government agencies to decide that two people are in a romantic relationship is if the pair present themselves as a couple to other people. In some cases, those in charge of approving income assistance applications will comb applicants' social media to check for any romantic partners that are cohabitating. This is a violation of privacy and what is found on social media can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. After hearing all of the issues that members' clients had faced, it became glaringly obvious that a universal basic income is the best way to address financial needs of Canadians.

I was invited to attend two meetings hosted by Joy Knight. Joy is the Executive Director of Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) of Nova Scotia. The first meeting consisted of a presentation on recommendations for the ESIA case management approach. Joy specifically asked that the presentation not be shared with the public until the final report has been released in May. However, the overall goal of the presentation was to show the changes that are being proposed to the way income assistance is offered to Nova Scotians. The changes

involve considering services for youth, addressing anti-black racism, prevention and early intervention, supportive housing, and considering the social determinants of health when managing a case. This was the first time I had heard of social determinants of health and took it upon myself to learn more while researching for my report. Social determinants of health are societal factors such as income, employment, working life conditions, and food insecurity that influence the overall health of an individual (WHO, n.d.). These factors were incredibly important to consider when addressing the benefits of a universal basic income as one's income plays an integral role in ensuring that communities' needs are being met.

The second meeting with Joy Knight was to address any questions the poverty committee group had regarding potential changes to the case management of income assistance. This gave everyone a chance to ask for clarification on the proposals and make suggestions that they felt would help their clients. Again, I am not able to discuss the details of what changes are being suggested until the final report is released. However, the meeting was filled with important conversations about what needs to be done to provide meaningful financial help to Nova Scotians. This is also the first time that the term health equity was introduced to me by Stella Lord. Through some research, I found out that health equity is achieved once everyone has the opportunity to reach their full health potential without disadvantages due to socially determined circumstances (CDC, 2022). It was important for me to take a health equity lens when writing my report on universal basic income. If all Canadians have a sufficient income, it will allow them to have equal opportunities to access healthy food, recreation activities, adequate housing, and proper clothing. With a health equity lens, it is also important to understand that for some people to achieve their full health potential, they may require more funds. For example, someone living with a disability may need extra income assistance to obtain the services and support they

need to be able to live independently. Therefore, my report for universal basic income had to consider the modifications to funding that would be required to give everyone a fair chance to reach their full health capacity.

Overall, my time spent working with Bev and Marg has taught me valuable lessons. I had never considered the impact that income has on a person and the difficulties people face when applying for income assistance. Social determinants of health were something I was not familiar with prior to my placement and I now know just how crucial it is to one's health to have sufficient income. I have a new appreciation for the work that social and outreach workers do each day to ensure that their clients have access to the help they require. All of the people I met at the poverty community group meetings work extremely hard to advocate for Nova Scotians living in poverty and I have now considered pursuing a career in non-profit work. I am glad I was able to use the research skills I have acquired during my degree to be able to give the Canadian Mental Health Association a meaningful report on the importance of implementing a universal basic income. I plan to continue to attend the poverty committee meetings and Bev has agreed to continue sending me the information to be able to attend and listen to any new changes to the income assistance program in Nova Scotia and at a federal level. Thank you, Dr. Denike for creating this course as this has been the most impactful class I have taken during my time at Dalhousie.

References

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