



**Written Submission for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance
Pre-Budget Consultations**

Submitted By: Centre for Sexuality

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- **Recommendation 1:** That the Government of Canada invest new resources in the National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence with a focus on providing desperately needed resources in the province of Alberta.
- **Recommendation 2:** Make new investments in community health initiatives to help prevent and address the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and bloodborne infections.
- **Recommendation 3:** That the Government of Canada repeal the blood donation ban for men who have sex with men and focus exclusion criteria on sexual behaviours not sexual orientations, and end the decades of stigma and discrimination targeted at gay, bisexual and transgender men as a result of the ban.

The Centre for Sexuality

The Centre for Sexuality is a nationally recognized, prevention focused, community-based organization delivering evidence-informed programs and services that work to normalize sexuality and sexual health across the lifespan. We have been leading the way in the areas of sexuality, healthy relationships, human rights, gender identity, sexual orientation, equality, and consent for 48 years in the Calgary community. The Centre for Sexuality aims to normalize sexual health in Alberta and across Canada by providing evidence-informed, non-judgmental sexual and reproductive health programs and services.

We offer a wide variety of programs and services – from sexual health education in schools and client counseling, to specialized programming for the LGBTQ2S+ community, parents, vulnerable youth and adults, immigrants, persons with disabilities, seniors and survivors of abuse. Our training centre provides educational workshops to professionals from across Canada, including teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, emergency responders, youth association leaders and human resource specialists - to expand their knowledge and better equip them to integrate healthy sexuality policy and practice into their work and workplace culture.

We provide subject matter expertise to all levels of government to help shape healthy, inclusive public policy that is rooted in equality and respect for all individuals. All aspects of our work are evidence-based and measurement-driven, giving us the ability to demonstrate meaningful, statistically relevant outcomes through our programs. We serve over 40,000 people annually and partner with schools, agencies, community groups and corporate partners, working together to incorporate healthy sexuality as an integral part of human development, community wellness and public policy. The Centre also operates programs funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada and Alberta Culture, Multiculturalism, and Status of Women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption, and not only to our economy, but the social fabric of our country. As we look to rebuild, we must focus on rebuilding a more just and inclusive society and make investments that will ensure equal opportunity for all Canadians, including marginalized communities who have suffered from historic inequalities. The Centre for Sexuality is urging the government of Canada to introduce measures to help re-build a better, more inclusive Canada.

Gender-Based Violence and an Inclusive Economic Recovery

Every six days a woman in Canada is killed by a current or former intimate partner, and Alberta has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the country.¹ We are facing a national crisis of gender-based violence, and as we look towards a pathway for recovery from COVID-19, we must take steps to address this pressing national emergency.

¹¹ Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, *Data Release*, 2019 https://acws.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ACWS_Data-Release-2019.ACWSWEB.pdf

Domestic abuse rates in Alberta are at a 10 year peak.² Study after study has demonstrated that during times of economic stress, gender-based violence and domestic violence increases, and these results are bearing out in the province.³

Our support services within the province are also being overwhelmed. In 2019, the Calgary Police responded to approximately 25,000 calls related to domestic violence, which they described as an “epidemic”, exacerbated by recent province wide traumas including forest fires, floods, and other economic turbulence.⁴ 23,247 Alberta women, children and seniors requesting admission to shelters were turned away in the last two years due to a lack of available space.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic will only intensify these crisis conditions. Early international studies have demonstrated that stress attributed to the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to increased violence during lockdown.⁶ We are also seeing those patterns emerge here in Alberta. The Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services reported a 57 percent increase in people reaching out for help during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.⁷

This violence comes with real-world economic consequences as well. One study by Justice Canada estimates the economic cost of domestic violence in Canada to be as much as \$7.4 billion per year.⁸

The Government of Canada should make investments to ensure we are rebuilding a society that treats people humanely and equitably. There are programs and services that can be deployed to achieve this goal, but they are in desperate need of resources.

The Centre for Sexuality works with boys, girls, and non-binary youth to educate them about the importance of consent, gender diversity, and healthy relationships, and we have demonstrated results for these programs. Participants in the Centre for Sexuality’s WiseGuyz program reported a 37% decline in bullying perpetration after participating in the program.⁹ What is lacking is the resources to sufficiently scale these, and other programs, which focus on the prevention of gender-based and youth dating violence.

² CTV.ca, *Alberta Women Face Highest Risk of Domestic Violence*, Dec 2019 <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/alberta-women-face-highest-risk-of-domestic-violence-in-a-decade-1.4717465>

³ Time, *As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out*, March 2020 <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

⁴ CBC.ca, *Calgary faces domestic violence epidemic, experts say*, Feb 2020 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/domestic-violence-calgary-women-murdered-partner-police-1.5462313>

⁵ CTV.ca, *Alberta Women Face [...]*

⁶ Axios, *China’s Domestic Violence Epidemic*, May 2020 <https://www.axios.com/china-domestic-violence-coronavirus-quarantine-7b00c3ba-35bc-4d16-afdd-b76ecfb28882.html>

⁷ GlobalNews.ca, *Coronavirus: Alberta domestic and sexual violence centres see spike in calls*, April 2020 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6824493/alberta-domestic-sexual-assault-increase-calls-coronavirus/>

⁸ National Post, *Justice Canada study says spousal abuse costs country at least \$7.4 billion a year*, Dec 2012 <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/justice-canada-study-says-spousal-abuse-costs-country-at-least-7-4-billion-a-year#:~:text=Domestic%20violence%20costs%20Canada%20%247.4,year%3A%20Justice%20study%20%7C%20National%20Post>

⁹ Exner-Cortens, D. & Hurlock, D. (2019). *Summary of WiseGuyz Research, 2014-2018. Internal Evaluation Report: Unpublished.*

In June 2017, the Government of Canada announced *It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence*, a federal response to gender-based violence (GBV). Now is the time to further invest in this strategy to respond to the dramatic increases in gender-based violence and trauma brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and help ensure that Canada builds an inclusive recovery.

- **Recommendation 1:** That the Government of Canada invest new resources in the *National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence* with a particular focus on providing desperately needed resources in the province of Alberta.

Sexually Transmitted Infections and Bloodborne Infection Prevention

As Canada emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic it is imperative that new investments are made to ensure that our health care system is prepared to manage the challenges that will re-emerge post-lockdown. Many psychological experts are anticipating a return to increased, or at minimum normal sexual activity levels post-lockdown. As our society recovers, so too should we expect normal behaviours to return to daily life.¹⁰ A core element of a successful recovery will be our ability to safely manage this transition. Not unlike COVID-19, sexually transmitted and blood borne infections disproportionately affect marginalized communities, and a truly inclusive recovery must make investments that correct these inequalities.

Canada was already facing significant challenges brought on by increases in sexually transmitted infections and bloodborne infections. Chlamydia and gonorrhea infection rates were already increasing across Canada prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, and Alberta is in the midst of a Syphilis outbreak with infection rates at a 70 year high.¹¹ As Canadians emerge from lockdown and begin to re-engage in normalized pre-lockdown sexual practices, there is significant risk that these already high infection rates are primed for a spike. Additionally, production facilities and supply lines have been interrupted, which could lead to condom and other prophylactic shortages, making it all that more important that we invest in education and preventative measure to promote healthy and safer sexual behaviour.¹²

Sexual transmitted infections and bloodborne infections also come with significant economic costs, but investments in prevention not only improve health outcomes, but lead to real cost savings. From 1987 to 2011, province-wide community-based programs helped to avert a total of 16,672 HIV infections, saving Ontario's health care system approximately \$6.5 billion.¹³ One study estimates the net present value of the economic loss attributed to those recently infected with HIV to be \$4,031,500,000, or \$1.3 million per person, over half of which represents lost labour productivity.¹⁴ The evidence is clear, investments in the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and blood borne infections pay back dividends.

¹⁰ PsyPost, *New psychology studies provide insight into changes in sexual behavior amid the coronavirus pandemic*, April 2020 <https://www.psypost.org/2020/04/new-psychology-studies-provide-insight-into-changes-in-sexual-behavior-amid-the-coronavirus-pandemic-56655>

¹¹ CBC.ca, *Alarming' increase in sexually transmitted infections found across Canada*, Aug 2019 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/sti-rates-canada-1.5230987>

¹² GlobalNews.ca, *COVID-19: World's biggest condom producer warns of global shortage*, March 2020 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6743979/condom-shortage-coronavirus/>

¹³ Canadian AIDS Society, *The Economic Costs of AIDS in Canada*, 2011 <https://www.cdnaids.ca/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Cost-of-HIV-AIDS-in-Canada.pdf>, 10

¹⁴ Ibid.

Sexually transmitted infections and bloodborne infections disproportionately affect already marginalized communities, which creates a vicious cycle when combined with other barriers like stigma, access, and poverty that mitigate access to health care. To facilitate an inclusive recovery, it is vital that we make investments to bolster our prevention and support services.

- **Recommendation 2:** Make new investments in community health initiatives to help prevent and address the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and bloodborne infections.

The Blood Ban and a Just Recovery for Canadians

Canada has maintained some form of ban on the donation of blood by gay men since 1992. The ban is completely unjust and promotes discrimination and stigma against gay, bisexual, and trans men. It also perpetuates an unjustified and prejudicial system that limits the blood donor supply arbitrarily, at a time when blood donations are vitally needed.

Canada Blood Services has warned about the critical shortage of blood and plasma it faces, following a sharp decline in donations (estimates suggest a 20% drop).¹⁵ As donations have fallen, there has been a significant rise in the need for blood and in particular plasma, to help patients recovering from COVID-19.¹⁶

Thus far Canada has taken an incremental approach to repeal of the blood ban, making reductions from the original life-time restriction in 2013, 2016, and 2019. However, this incremental approach falls well short in terms of delivering justice for gay, bisexual, and trans men who face ongoing discrimination and stigma as a result of the ban's continued imposition; and there is no evidentiary justification for its continuance. According to Health Canada's own analysis, "these evidence-based reductions to the original lifetime restriction have not resulted in any increase in HIV-positive blood donations".¹⁷

There are many alternative policies that could be put in place apart from a discriminatory ban that promotes homophobia and targets gay, bisexual, and trans men. Many countries around the world, including France, have adopted a gender-neutral blood screening process.¹⁸ It is time for Canada to do the same.

Numerous government leaders have called the ban "discriminatory" and said that the policy "ignores scientific evidence and must end," and yet the ban remains in place. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an acute need for blood and plasma donations and provides an opportunity to finally deliver justice for those who have long faced stigma and discrimination as a result of the blood ban. If Canada is to have a truly just and inclusive recovery, the time for action is now.

¹⁵ The Globe and Mail, 'On the precipice': COVID-19 has Canadian Blood Services worried about shortage, March 2020 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-on-the-precipice-covid-19-has-canadian-blood-services-worried-about/>

¹⁶ National Post, *Calls grow for Trudeau to end ban on gay blood donors*, Jun 2020 <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/calls-grow-for-trudeau-to-end-msm-blood-donation-ban>

¹⁷ Health Canada, *Statement from the Minister of Health on further reducing barriers for blood donation by men who have sex with men*, May 2019 <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2019/05/statement-from-the-minister-of-health-on-further-reducing-barriers-for-blood-donation-by-men-who-have-sex-with-men.html>

¹⁸ National Post, *Calls grow for Trudeau [...]*

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada repeal the blood donation ban for men who have sex with men and focus exclusion criteria on sexual behaviours not sexual orientations, and end the decades of stigma and discrimination targeted at gay, bisexual and transgender men as a result of the ban.