



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

June 25, 2020

Now is the time to protect public services

Last week was National Public Service Week. There usually isn't a lot of fanfare, but there should be.

All Canadians should be encouraged to recognize the public sector workers helping our country weather the brutal impacts of COVID-19.

In Saskatchewan, staff at the research lab at VIDO-InterVac, nestled in the University of Saskatchewan campus, have been at forefront of a vaccine for the corona virus that causes COVID-19. VIDO-InterVac was the first lab in Canada to isolate the virus for study, the first to develop an animal model of the infection, and is now one of only a handful of research labs in the world actively testing a vaccine in animal trials.

Across the Prairies, we all read the stories about meat packing plants overrun with the virus. It was federal food inspectors who continued to go into those plants to ensure the safety of our food supply during this crisis. Twenty-one meat inspectors in Alberta alone contracted COVID-19 while doing their job.

When millions of Canadians and business owners lost their income, the government turned to Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) staff to deliver the bulk of their financial aid package. With unprecedented speed, those workers have now processed over 15 million Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) applications in just over two months. Thousands volunteered to temporarily

take on new roles from completely unrelated jobs in order to answer phones and do whatever they could to support those emergency efforts.

When tens of thousands of Canadians were stranded abroad and needed help to come home, public service employees at Global Affairs worked 24-7. And as people arrived on Canadian soil it was Border Services personnel who faced the risk of COVID infection head on as they ushered them home. Everyday this work continues.

As Service Canada offices were overrun and became a potential hotbed for the spread of COVID-19, thousands of workers quickly created makeshift offices in their homes and continued providing critical support for Canadians – and many did so while caring for children full time.

Canada's public service has shown who they are: dedicated, nimble, compassionate, and hardworking people in communities across the country.

At all levels of government, it's become clear just how essential public services are and we must ensure that our political leaders understand this. In was only a few years ago that the Manitoba government started overhauling Manitoba's healthcare system which left emergency rooms closed, services reduced across the province, and increased privatization of previously covered services, all while doing little to

there is an alternative.

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address wait times and ignoring critical staffing shortages.

Further, we know that our economic recovery will only happen with a strong public sector to support the private sector's restart.

Unfortunately, cuts to public services are already being contemplated and, in some cases, implemented. In Manitoba, the provincial government has used the pandemic to attack our public services, threaten public sector workers with massive layoffs and had attempted to inflict deep cuts on our higher education system, ones that would have caused irreversible damage to the quality of a university education in Manitoba.

In Alberta, the province cut over 20,000 staff in the education system, staff who had to seek federal income support from CERB. In the height of the crisis, the Alberta government also invested public dollars into an app that payed our doctors two-tiered wages, undermined the continuity of care patients receive with their family doctor, and opened the door to the privatization of healthcare services in the province. Amongst the "healthcare heroes" rhetoric, the Alberta government intends to go ahead with previously planned cuts to healthcare that were introduced before the pandemic. At the moment, these cuts are only temporarily paused. These cuts directly target health care workers jobs, including the nurses and physicians who have gotten us through the first wave of this pandemic.

It's clear we have a lot of work to do here on the Prairies to ensure our political leaders understand the value that public services bring to our communities.

It also doesn't have to be this way. Governments could have wealthy companies and the ultra-rich pay their fair share to sustain the critical public services that Canadians depend on. Canadian corporations are hoarding hundreds of billions of dollars in cash—and shielding as much of it as possible from the same tax pool that everyone else has to pay into .

National Public Service Week may behind

us, but it is the choices we have a head of us that will define us and how we emerge from the financial crisis that came with the pandemic.

The lesson from the pandemic is that there has never been a more important time to strengthen and expand—not cut—public services and to recognize the critical jobs that public service workers do every day.

Marianne Hladun is the Regional Executive Vice-President with the Public Service Alliance of Canada - Prairies

References available upon request.