

Premiers focus on families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

VANCOUVER, July 21, 2011 -- Premiers today lent their collective voice to emphasize the importance of families in the decisions their governments make and discussed how to address some of the many challenges Canadian families face. Premiers released a backgrounder showcasing some initiatives launched in their jurisdictions to promote wellness and stronger families.

Helping Parents and Ensuring Children have a Good Start

Providing children with a good start is key to ensuring they grow into healthy adults with the best opportunities to succeed. Providing parents with choice about how to care for their children and making quality and accessible child care both affordable and available is critical.

Provinces and territories have been active in promoting early childhood development and have pursued policies that focus on increased parental choice and improvements in the quality of child care.

Premiers agreed that governments must work together to ensure adequate support for parents - for the benefit of families and the economy. Premiers noted that on their own, the current maternity and parental benefits under the EI program for participating provinces and territories are inadequate to provide the type of support required for many Canadian families to make parental leave a viable choice.

Premiers also noted that poor mental health and mental illness are the number one causes of disability in Canada, far greater than heart disease or cancer. Most Canadians will in some way be affected by mental health or mental illness, be it personally, or within their families. In economic terms, the costs associated with poor mental health in Canada amount to over \$50 billion every year. However, many negative mental health outcomes associated with mental illness can be prevented or effectively managed if addressed before adulthood.

Premiers noted that mental health promotion and mental illness prevention are a priority issue and that their jurisdictions are already doing important work in this area. To build on these efforts, Manitoba will host a mental health summit of governments and key stakeholders in Winter 2011. Among the issues to be discussed will be dementia.

Premiers also agreed to work together to find opportunities to address issues related to autism spectrum disorder.

Opportunities for Youth

Premiers agree that increasing opportunities for youth is a priority. Provinces and territories have programs that provide training for youth to help them find work. However, current federal activities in the area of labour market training for youth duplicate programming already in place at the provincial and territorial level. Devolution of federal programming, with funding, to provinces and territories would create a more coherent and integrated approach to labour market training, reduce inefficiencies, and support better outcomes for Canadian youth.

Healthy and Active Families

Premiers agree that healthy living is a priority—not only because it improves the lives of individual Canadians, but also because it makes sense for our health care systems. By strengthening our health promotion, disease prevention and chronic illness strategies and improving the health of Canadians, governments can help make health care systems more effective and more sustainable.

Premiers committed to continue working across departments, ministries and jurisdictions on a more proactive approach to these issues and to promote physically and mentally healthy and active families. They noted that approaches that involve education, justice, housing, social services and other areas are necessary.

For example, Premiers encourage relevant Ministers to work together to improve child and youth health, including accelerating work to increase the number of opportunities for children and youth in the after school time period to engage in healthy active living.

Fifty-nine per cent of adult Canadians and 26% of Canadian children are overweight or obese. Obesity rates in children have almost tripled in the last 25 years. It is projected that in 20 years up to 70% of middle-age Canadians will be overweight or obese. Affected adults die three to seven years earlier than their counterparts. Obesity is difficult to reverse. As such, prevention in childhood is crucial.

Premiers encourage their Ministers of Health/Healthy Living to continue their collaboration on a number of initiatives that could lead to greater overall health for Canadians, including:

- reducing sodium and sugar in prepared foods;
- exploring health-promoting procurement and other guidelines for child care service providers, schools, recreation centres and other places where children and youth gather; and
- prevention, diagnosis, early intervention, research and support to those affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Actions taken by Canadians to improve their health not only improve their well-being but also improve the sustainability of health systems. Governments can support these positive outcomes through appropriate and cost-effective education and support.

Active and Independent Seniors

Canada's population is aging. In 2009, there were 4.7 million seniors in Canada and this number is projected to double by 2036. Seniors are an integral part of our families and communities. In addition to providing valuable support and assistance to children and grandchildren, seniors contribute a wealth of knowledge and experience to society and are one of the most active groups of volunteers in communities.

Premiers identified three actions as examples of activities governments can take to help older people remain healthy, active and connected to their communities:

- encourage the development age-friendly communities that enable seniors to remain independent and in their homes for as long as possible;
- continue working together to improve Canada's income retirement system; and
- take measures to protect vulnerable seniors from victimization and abuse.

Building age-friendly communities involves developing policies, services, settings and structures across a wide range of ministries. Premiers agree to encourage a government-wide approach be taken to assist in this effort.

Premiers directed Finance Ministers to continue their work on improving Canada's retirement income system.

Premiers welcome the federal commitment to amend the Criminal Code to make it an aggravating factor in any offence if a victim is vulnerable due to age. Premiers commit to work jointly with the federal government on this so that progress is made quickly.

Premiers also directed Ministers of Justice to pursue their work with the federal Minister of Justice to examine approaches on how the criminal justice system could address concerns around the abuse and victimization of the elderly.

Volunteer and Non-Profit Sector

Premiers acknowledged the vital role non-profits, charities and volunteer services play in providing services to families in our communities. In the coming year, Premier Clark will host a special summit with non-profits, charities and government to obtain advice on the best way to continue this vital role in the future.

-reprinted from Canada's Premiers

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