

Financing for Children's Health

Fact Sheet

The Issue

The health of children and youth in Canada is declining year over year, decade over decade.

Healthcare delivery organizations and community-based providers serving children and youth are experiencing unprecedented demands for their services. The shortage of primary care providers in office-based practices means reduced capacity and resources to meet the demands of a growing population of medically complex children and youth. From coast to coast to coast, children are languishing on wait lists for essential and time-sensitive healthcare interventions, from child development assessments to community-based mental health services and acute surgical interventions. Many children's hospitals across the country are now routinely operating at or above one hundred percent capacity, while pediatric programs in community hospitals are being squeezed to meet the demands of adult (increasingly, elderly) populations.ⁱ

Children in Canada do not have access to fully integrated health systems. Instead, a collection of healthcare delivery organizations have evolved organically over time to meet emerging needs. This means that children do not benefit from integrated physical and mental healthcare services, leaving already-stressed parents and caregivers navigating a disjointed system on their own. Mounting public evidence shows that children now wait longer for essential healthcare services than many adults.

Why it matters

Waiting for care comes at a measurable human and financial cost. A 2023 research series commissioned by Children's Healthcare Canada reveals this country spends billions of dollars annually (trillions of dollars over a cohort lifetime) as the result of undersized systems, that are failing to provide timely services and supports for children, youth and families. Human costs of underinvestment are hard to measure but include impacts on family wellbeing, delays in social, physical and emotional development associated with isolation and/or immobility, learning delays, and experiences of chronic and acute pain. These delays can have lifelong impacts on children, and their families.ⁱⁱ

There is no simple solution to tackle the challenges children's health systems face. The current reality has been decades in the making and can be attributed to several complex factors.ⁱⁱⁱ

Canadians imagine a healthier future for their children, and they expect governments to play an important role in realizing this vision. In 2023, Abacus Data found that 94% of Canadians agree that it's time to improve healthcare systems to better meet the needs of children and youth. It's time for collective action to meet that level of expectation.^{iv}

Policy Solutions for the Federal Government

Measurably improving the health and wellbeing of children and youth requires that the federal government declare children's health and healthcare a national priority.

Further, to improve access to, experiences and outcomes of children's physical and mental healthcare services, the federal government must establish a **Dedicated Child Health Fund** protected funding envelopes for children's health systems, across the continuum of care, and inclusive of child health research.

This ring-fenced, sustainable funding would ensure healthcare systems serving children, youth and families could develop, implement and evaluate new models of care, address lengthy backlogs, recruit and retain sufficient numbers of highly specialized healthcare workers, and build interoperable data platforms.

This fund could be modelled on bilateral agreements the federal government signed in 2024 with the provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan focused on Aging with Dignity. This model provides inspiration for similar funding envelopes targeting the unique, and highly specialized needs of children and youth across the continuum of care.

References

ⁱ Statistics Canada: The Aging Population in Canada Statistics for 2024; 2024.

ⁱⁱ Health RCoPaC: State of Child Health; 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Munter, A.: CHEO crisis shows we must do better for children's health care. Ottawa Citizen: Postmedia Network; 2022.

^{iv} Canada CSHCaPCo: From Vulnerable to Thriving: Investing in Health Futures; 2023.