



General Review on the State of Social Work

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

December 18, 2023

Credits

Commissioners

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About INM

The *Institut du Nouveau Monde* (INM) is an independent, non-partisan organization that aims to increase citizen participation in democratic life.

The purpose of INM's initiatives is to encourage citizen participation and contribute to the development of civic competence, the strengthening of social ties and the enhancement of democratic institutions.

INM's team is driven by the belief that citizen participation reinforces democracy.

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To quote this document

INM. "General Review on the State of Social Work. Findings and Recommendations". Montréal, December 18, 2023.



INTRODUCTION

Background

On April 18, 2023, the *Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec* (hereafter the “Ordre”) introduced the General State of Social Work. It partnered with other stakeholders to carry out a wide-ranging consultation process to examine and discuss the pathways needed for social work to play its full role in the years ahead. Three commissioners, Denis Bourque, Ariane Émond and Nadine Volland, were appointed to hear the social work stakeholders’ proposals. Following this process, the commissioners share their findings and recommendations in this document which will provide input for the deliberations that will take place at the Summit on the State of Social Work on April 19 and 20, 2024.

Who are our social work stakeholders?

Social work stakeholders include both individuals and organizations that play an active role in shaping the priority areas of social work and determining its role in Quebec society. More specifically, the term refers to users of social services and their families, practitioners (technicians, social workers and other players involved in social work), students, researchers, teachers and professionals in the field, as well as people from other professions and community and institutional and organizational representatives that support the practice of social work in Quebec.



FINDINGS

In our eyes, the consultation confirmed the crucial importance of social work to the collective well-being in Quebec. Participants in the process were able to express their ideas and concerns regarding the current and future challenges of social work, in a variety of poignant and thoughtful ways. They highlighted the uniqueness of this profession and discipline, which establishes ties between the problems and needs of individuals and communities, and the social environment, living conditions and social structures that define them.

As a privileged witness of social dysfunctions, social work adopts a global vision, working to defend rights, social justice and the support and protection of vulnerable populations. It aims to tackle the causes that exacerbate social problems and challenges. However, the current health and social services system, whose hospital-centric vision focuses on health care, efficiency and the individualization of interventions, exposes its limits and hinders the full potential of social work. The biomedical approach, on the other hand, tends to interpret social problems in terms of individual pathologies, particularly in mental health, using mainly pharmacological treatments. In a sense, we believe there is a need to de-medicalize social work and liberate it from the subordinate position in which it finds itself in relation to health.

Rising inequalities, the deterioration of public services and the growing climate crisis all serve to illustrate the need to reorient social work as a vehicle for social transformation, in order to act on the causes of social dysfunction. The many testimonies and opinions expressed during the consultations highlight the unique contribution of social work in finding solutions to the challenges facing Quebec. For example, consider the difficulties caused by outrageously long wait lists for social services, especially with regard to youth protection; problems related to the housing crisis, such as homelessness; the social and psychological distress caused by social exclusion and discrimination; the precariousness and economic stress revealed by the broad use of food banks; violence in all its forms, including violence against women and the elderly, and climate anxiety about the future of the planet.

Social workers are quite often the first to witness the impact of social issues on people and the powerlessness of many of our fellow citizens in the face of everyday challenges. Because of their unique position, these professionals are the true architects of responses to social needs and builders of solidarity. Their contribution goes beyond individual well-being because it aims to bring about societal and political change.

In this regard, we believe that the Ordre can and must play a leadership role in collectively shaping the future of social work in Quebec. This leading role should involve close collaboration, not only with social work stakeholders, but also with institutional, community, union and academic circles, not to mention decision-making and government bodies. We propose that this commitment be based on the following five guidelines, translated herein as recommendations.

In order for social work to play its role as a driver of change, we must renew its foundations by:

1. Affirming the essential role of social work
2. Recognizing the value of social work practitioners
3. Increasing the population's access to social services
4. Developing and sharing social work knowledge
5. Mobilizing the driving forces of social work



GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Affirming the essential role of social work

We are firmly convinced that social work should not have to beg for its place in Quebec's health and social services system. It is an essential cornerstone of the system and must be recognized as such. The predominant biomedical rationale currently restricts its role, and social work must break free from these constraints. Greater recognition of the field, from both civil society and institutions, is crucial for enabling its practitioners to fully exercise their ability to protect and support vulnerable populations and prevent social issues.

This recognition must explicitly encompass the values and approaches specific to social work, i.e., defending social rights, and promoting collective action and social transformation interventions.

To re-affirm the fundamental role of social work, we recommend:

1. **Recognizing loud and clear the action of social work, and more broadly, social intervention, to meet the needs of individuals, families and communities in an ever-changing society, by:**
 - a. Enhancing and highlighting its human approach, focused on guiding individuals, and taking into account their social environment and living conditions.
 - b. Promoting a curative and preventive approach to tackle collectively the root causes of social problems.

2. **Distinguishing and promoting social work within the health and social services system, by:**
 - a. Implementing a roadmap agreed upon by the parties concerned (MSSS, Ordre, social work training units, internship settings, community organization networks) in order to overcome the human resource shortage in social intervention in the five coming years, both in the public network and in community organizations.
 - b. Establishing a transparent, specific allocation of budgets to social services in order to guarantee adequate resources to meet growing needs.
 - c. Having the Ministry of Health and Social Services increase funding for the mission of community organizations in order to recognize the power of action of Quebec's community sector.

3. **Strengthening the complementarity of individual, group and collective approaches in order to take into consideration needs and living conditions, by:**
 - a. Allowing practitioners to vary their approaches and to choose group and collective interventions based on needs, in light of their professional judgement.
 - b. Increasing the number of full-time positions in community organization (community organizers) from 500 to 1,000 in the health and social service network over the next five years.

4. **Updating the preventive and systemic vision of social work, by:**
 - a. Amending the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* in order to explicitly recognize the right to housing, families' right to support measures, and the right of any person to benefit from programs, goods, services, facilities and conditions that enable them to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
 - b. Including, within the *Act to make the health and social services system more effective*, a global definition of health that includes its social and preventive aspects, the affirmation of the right to health and social services, and the withdrawal of all provisions favouring the privatization of health and social services, in order to initiate the deprivatization of the system.
 - c. Prioritizing actions before problems occur and intervening on the causes, in conjunction with public policies, to redress social and economic inequalities.

2. Recognizing the value of social work practitioners

There is no doubt that practitioners' interventions have a direct impact on the quality of life of individuals and communities. However, despite their commitment, they face major structural obstacles, such as the bureaucratic management of services and restrictive policies and practice procedures that hamper their ability to intervene. Many feel that their professional autonomy is also hindered by their duty of loyalty to their employer, which undermines their other responsibilities to the people they support and to society as a whole.

We believe that if social work is to flourish in Quebec, the essential work done by those on the front line with the public must be highlighted. Whether this involves social workers, community social workers or social work technicians, it is crucial that we recognize and promote their expertise and autonomy to ensure that they provide effective social action.

To enhance the status of social work here in Quebec and increase the profession's appeal, it is crucial to provide the necessary resources and optimal practice conditions to those who, every day, across the province, carry out the mission of social work—especially in the public system. By offering the space and conditions needed for a professional practice to be truly based on a helping relationship, Quebec will benefit from an intervention that is better adapted and more responsive to the needs of people and communities.

To recognize the value of social work practitioners, we recommend:

1. **Recognizing the autonomy and expertise of social work practitioners within the public network by allowing them to innovate and create responses that are tailored to concrete needs in the field, by:**
 - a. Introducing practice conditions that enable them to comply with professional standards and their code of ethics, e.g., case load, availability of resources, training, etc., in the case of social workers.
 - b. Offering practitioners the possibility of expressing their opinions on practice conditions and the quality of services, with a view to improving them.
2. **Creating optimal practice conditions for supporting individuals and groups, by:**
 - a. Reducing administrative tasks, particularly with regard to the opening of files, computerized assessments, the closing or standardized monitoring of files, in order to reduce bureaucracy in social services.
 - b. Granting the Ordre investigative powers in addition to its power to assess professional activities, thereby enabling it to take action on practice conditions.
 - c. Encouraging the active participation of social work stakeholders in consultations and decision-making processes in connection with the development of programs and services.
 - d. Enhancing the value of family mediation in social and community services (public service and independent practice), by strengthening its framework and governing regulations.
 - e. Offering an immersion course or training on cultural safety to workers who are called to practise with First Nations and Inuit.

- f. Recognizing and training an increased number of First Nations and Inuit practitioners.
3. **Recognizing and enhancing the value of the role and place of social work technicians**, by:
- a. Granting a status within the professional system and the Ordre that could include—as within the *Ordre des infirmières et des infirmiers*—different practice titles, for technicians, baccalaureate social workers and specialized social workers with graduate training.
 - b. Reviewing the mechanism of reserved activities so that technicians may, under certain conditions and to varying degrees, contribute to specific tasks that are currently reserved for social workers.

3. Increasing the population's access to social services

For the past 30 years, the centralization of the health and social service network has caused a genuine disinvestment of local territories by compromising their ability to adapt services to the population's needs and situations. This is one of the predominant findings of the General Review on the state of Social Work.

Subsequently, social services were integrated into specialized programs, to the detriment of more easily accessible general services. For example, transferring social workers to family medicine groups (FMG) complicates the access to social services because access then depends on individuals being registered with FMGs. Centralizing the network has also eroded the sharing of expertise and the contribution of local partners and their potential for collective mobilization in neighbourhoods or regional county municipalities (RCM).

These changes have led to a growing weakening of the social fabric, with an increasingly rare, if not absent, professional presence in the field. Faced with these upheavals, we believe we must rectify the trajectory of centralization of the health and social services network in order to consolidate the ties between social workers and the populations they serve.

For decentralization to bear its fruit, it must be accompanied by a cross-sectoral approach that engages all communities, not just practitioners: citizens, community organizations, institutions, local decision-makers. We are convinced that ensuring the decision-making capacity of local populations means that their needs are better taken into consideration and contributes to more effective and better-adapted interventions. This local collaboration ensures greater accessibility, complementarity and coordination of services, while permitting that action be taken on living environments and conditions.

To increase the population's access to social services, we recommend:

1. **Organizing and actively supporting citizen's participation in the governance of health and social services by recognizing their right to participate and the value of their knowledge and expertise for effective policies and public services**, by:
 - a. Giving citizens and service users a place in the 1) decision-making bodies in the health and social service network; 2) territorial and cross-sectoral organization of first-line services; 3) training offered by social work programs; 4) research environments.
 - b. Creating participatory and consultative bodies in all health and social service network services and programs.
2. **Decentralizing and democratizing social services by taking into account local and territorial realities and the differing needs of communities**, by:
 - a. Implementing a community-based local and regional organization of health and social services by giving real power to communities, partners and locally elected representatives through shared governance.

- b. Creating forums for discussion, exchange and reflection within professional circles and institutions, to develop collaborations with community organizations and other partners and regional or local bodies, particularly, municipalities.
 - c. Recognizing the right of First Nations and Inuit communities to define and govern their own social services systems, in accordance with their needs and situations.
3. **Fostering local practices which address specific needs and properly support and accompany individuals, groups and communities, by:**
- a. Promoting “outreach” practices outside of institutions, such as living environments and local consultations.
 - b. Implementing the *Cadre de référence – Améliorer la qualité, l'accès et la continuité des Services de proximité*, (MSSS, 2023) across all territories and regions.
 - c. Fortifying collaborative work between local partners, in particular community organizations and public libraries.
 - d. Providing access to social services that promote human, face-to-face contact with the population, so that the virtual method is used only when necessary for reaching individuals or groups.

4. Developing and sharing social work knowledge

For many practitioners, initial social work training does not prepare them sufficiently for working in the field. Gaps have been noted in practical knowledge, the mastery of reserved activities and collective intervention. During the consultation, many stakeholders advocated for enriching initial university social work training to incorporate specific issues, approaches and methods into the curriculum. However, the time available remains limited because of internships and the three-year training period, whereas it should be noted that the university training required to be a member of most Quebec professional orders is four years.

Furthermore, to ensure a continuous progression of social work and to enrich professional practice, it is essential to share and develop knowledge and learning beyond the academic framework. We stress the importance of strengthening the ties between teaching and practice environments in order to foster the continuous improvement of professional expertise for the benefit of the people and populations being served.

In order to share and develop social work knowledge, we recommend:

1. **Updating the curriculum for initial social work training**, by:
 - a. Promoting group and collective approaches to complement individual and family intervention.
 - b. Taking into account environmental issues and the inclusive socio-ecological transition, including integrating environmental data as factors of social vulnerability in the assessing social functioning.
 - c. Stressing the importance of decolonization and cultural safety, by recognizing that the First Nations and Inuit are best-placed to develop training about their history, cultures and situations.
 - d. Ensuring a greater role for the voice, knowledge and experiences of social service users.
 - e. Creating groups of teachers from different social work training units, based on the proven research model, to pool, develop and implement innovative teaching projects.
 - f. Examining the possibility of moving from a three-year, 90-credit university program to a four-year program, with or without a Masters degree, as soon as the current shortage of social workers is resolved.
2. **Facilitating access to initial and ongoing training**, by:
 - a. Expanding online training.
 - b. Liberating staff for training and reducing the cost of training so that they can participate in professional development activities.
 - c. Developing technicians' access or gateways to the Ordre's professional development and training programs.
3. **Supporting the practical aspect of initial training**, by:
 - a. Developing participative learning within courses.
 - b. Increasing the number of internships.
 - c. Offering paid internships.

4. **Fostering the transition from initial training to the workplace**, by:
 - a. Improving bridges between college and university social work programs.
 - b. Bolstering the training and support for internship supervisors.
 - c. Providing adequate professional supervision in practice settings, when initial training is completed, to promote the integration of knowledge.
 - d. Implementing mandatory peer support programs, such as mentoring or preceptorship, in particular to support practitioners in the youth protection sector, an environment in which practice conditions are especially delicate.

5. **Facilitating the transfer and combination of knowledge between scientific social work research and practice environments**, by:
 - a. Improving researchers' access to fields so that they can more easily reach practitioners, settings and data.
 - b. Setting up a research centre on digital technology and social work, including a study of the potential impacts of artificial intelligence on social work.

5. Mobilizing the driving forces of social work

The consultation showed how social work offers approaches and solutions to respond to the acute social issues facing Quebec. It also highlighted the lack of a strong, unified perspective to convey this message. Many noted that the voice of social work was not sufficiently heard during the recent mobilization against the apprehended effects of Bill 15. More generally, government action seems to be guided by a top-down approach that leaves little room for social dialogue. There is an urgent need to restore the ability of social work and civil society to influence the direction and content of social policies in Quebec.

In light of the rise in inequality, discrimination, all forms of violence, climate change, the growing number of crises (cost of living, housing, homelessness, overdoses, etc.), the undermining of public services and their privatization, we believe it is crucial for social work stakeholders to speak with a common voice.

In order to create a collective, inclusive movement around social work, local and national mobilization must be initiated. This would include social work professionals and stakeholders invested in the future of Quebec communities and society. In order to have a real impact on public policy and propose major changes, we need to take the demands and values of social work beyond institutional walls, to communities on the one hand, and to the public authorities on the other.

To mobilize the driving forces of social work, we recommend:

1. **Unifying local communities' needs and aspirations and contributing to the development of appropriate responses**, by:
 - a. Significantly involving practitioners in local consultations, partnerships and collective action.
2. **Affirming the Ordre's proactive commitment to mobilizing the driving forces of social work**, by:
 - a. Raising public and civil society awareness of social issues and the role that social work can play in understanding and resolving social problems.
 - b. Developing arguments and advocacy in the public arena to highlight the most pressing social issues, such as the defense of human rights, and the urgent need to embark on the socio-ecological transition.
 - c. Developing an active, supportive partnership that takes into account respective mandates between the Ordre and social work associations such as the *Association québécoise des travailleuses sociales et travailleurs sociaux* (AQTS).
 - d. Creating a coalition of social partners—professional orders, groups, associations, unions, community organizations, philanthropy, etc.—to carry forward the recommendations of the *Summit on the State of Social Work* and take action to implement them.

The General Review of the State of Social Work has shed light on both the scale of the issues facing social work, and social intervention as a whole, but above all, the desire of those involved to initiate change. Through their commitment, social work will be able to demonstrate its potential and embody, in the eyes of the new generations who so choose, a path of innovation and transformation in the face of our social and environmental challenges. And, inject a dose of clear-sighted hope into the way we think about the future.

We trust these observations and recommendations will guide the way forward.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denis Bourque".

Denis Bourque, Commissioner

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ariane Émond".

Ariane Émond, Commissioner

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nadine Vollant".

Nadine Vollant, S.W., Commissioner



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