

Enhancing and Growing the Pan Canadian 211 system Ensuring access to services through social infrastructure

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's human service infrastructure has mobilized to serve marginalized community members at a time of widening inequalities. Government's emergency investments in community services have been critical to ensuring access to services and ensuring all residents of Canada get the help they need. **At the center of the human services system is a vital social infrastructure that connects people to those very services, no matter where they live – 211.**

211 is Canada's primary source of information on government and community-based health and social services. When people dial 2-1-1, they receive help navigating the complex network of human services quickly and easily, in over 150 languages, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. A multi-channel service, support is also accessible online, through chat and text. 211 maintains a database on all government, non-clinical health, and social services, and our Navigators provide fast and effective referrals for all of life's challenges. 211 is a high-touch service, and Navigators are trained to listen to callers and find appropriate services to meet their needs, often connecting callers to multiple supports to address financial assistance, health concerns, food insecurity, housing, gender-based violence and mental health.

With support from the Government of Canada, through Employment and Social Development Canada, 211 is now available to every resident of Canada until March 31, 2021. This smart investment helped ensure Canadians have access to up-to-date information about supports and services available to help them during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Federal investment enabled 211 to expand service access for residents of Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, rural Quebec, Manitoba, Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon.

Since March 2020, calls to 211 have increased by 30% compared to 2019 and call volume remains high as the pandemic continues, regional lockdowns stop and start and COVID-19 variants of concern are detected in urban and rural communities nation-wide. For the COVID-19 response, 211 is an ideal vehicle for providing information and referrals for pandemic-specific supports and programs. It is also well-suited to reduce the pressure on federal and regional health and information lines, sharing up-to-date information on changing public health directives while connecting people to other supports they require. Government can further leverage its investment in nation-wide services 211 so that it can support vaccination registration and communications, particularly for seniors, newcomers and residents of rural communities with limited broadband.

211 has a history of activation in times of crises and natural disasters such as floods and fires and can draw on this experience as the pandemic evolves. In the cases of Ontario floods and Alberta wildfires, 211 helped by diverting phone traffic from emergency services, triaging calls, reliably communicating changing safety directives to the public and connecting people to supports during recovery. Maintaining service infrastructure in the expansion areas is a wise investment in strengthening Canada's social infrastructure and will ensure 211 is there for Canadians when it is needed most and can provide valuable data insights to inform social policy interventions.

211 will be also invaluable during pandemic recovery and rebuilding, providing up to date information on skills training, financial support, housing and mental health services. The network is experienced serving as a front door for mental health, gender-based violence and other helplines and services targeting particular issues and communities. 211 data insights can both identify emerging needs and provide a clear picture of current priority concerns among vulnerable people to help ensure no one is left behind. These insights can be used to inform social policy, investment decision and both crisis response and prevention. 211 is uniquely positioned to capture data on the supply of and demand for social and community services and offer previously unavailable real-time insights as economic recovery progresses.

We thank the government for its investment to enable expansion into unserved areas, and to provide the much-needed increase in capacity for 211 to meet surges in service demand resulting from the pandemic. While federal funding is scheduled to expire on April 1, 2021, the need for 211 in the context of COVID-19 and for the continued delivery of social services beyond the pandemic remains critical.

Budget 2021 Recommendation

To meet ongoing service needs, we recommend the federal government invest \$27 million in 211 over three years. The 211 system is a multi-partner system with an integrated strategy, interconnected technology capacity, and shared standards that enables access to services for all residents of Canada. Currently, the 211 system is supported through funding from United Ways and Centraides, municipalities, and some provinces and corporations across Canada. The Government of Canada has the opportunity to build on their initial investment to build and support 211 as a national platform. A new phase of federal investment would:

- Mature and Grow existing and newly covered regions of Canada achieved through COVID-19 by stabilizing the expanded service regions and encouraging local partnerships that build long term sustainability for the whole system. This will include leveraging federal investment in national expansion to support achieving shared, nation-wide priorities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include supporting public health messaging, vaccine-related information sharing and registration for vulnerable populations and helping to connect people to community supports through recovery and building back better.
- Strengthen and Transform the national social infrastructure by supporting coordination of the myriad of human services databases, creating great alignment of the regional call centres for seamless support, and developing a fully functional national data insights and intelligence capacity to support social impact research and practices.
- Increase awareness of 211 for all residents while allowing for targeted interventions for federal priorities like seniors' services, newcomers, and/or other vulnerable populations.

This investment will ensure that the 211 system is a key component of Canada's next generation social infrastructure. It will enable the transformation of 211 into a digital first service accessible by phone, text, chat, web and email, guaranteeing improved access to information, programs and services for all residents of Canada. Furthermore, by augmenting the 211 data insights capabilities we will be better equipped to address systemic barriers that contribute to social exclusion and increase our learning on effective approaches to reach those in need.

Thank you for your consideration and attention to the significant role 211 can play in building back better. United Way Centraide Canada and 211 are eager to continue to play a leadership role in delivering much needed community supports today and through the equitable pandemic recovery and rebuild all Canadians need.

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