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# Charities can't keep helping others if no one will help them

After three years of prolonged crisis even the helpers are burnt out.



Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland must ensure a strong and resilient community services sector continues in this country as she prepares the 2024 budget, writes United Way Centraide Canada CEO Dan Clement. *The Hill Times*  
*photograph by Andrew Meade*

**OPINION** | BY DAN CLEMENT | September 21, 2023

September is usually a time when many of us settle into the routine of school, and begin to look forward to the coming fall and winter celebrations.

This year, the return to routine is matched with growing financial anxiety and stress as families and low-income individuals experience a growing cost-of-living crisis.

On the heels of a devastating pandemic, households are facing rising housing prices, increasing costs of food, and natural disasters that have uprooted them from their homes and livelihoods. This triple threat of housing affordability, rising costs for essentials, and disruptive natural disasters is driving sustained pressure on Canada's essential community services to address basic needs like food security, mental health, emergency financial support, and disaster response and recovery.

Data from calls to 211—Canada's helpline for information on government and community-based health and social services—underscores the desperate need for better housing solutions. From July to December 2022, there was a 25 per cent increase in people reaching out to 211 for housing and shelter-related help, and a 26 per cent increase related to mental health. Families are feeling the pressure of a lack of affordable housing as they struggle to put food on the table.

Community service groups have worked tirelessly to meet these growing needs. Every day, people in precarious circumstances turn to community services to cope, connect, and recover. But after three years of prolonged crisis, even the helpers are burnt out. In addition to the compassion fatigue they may be feeling, many are dealing with financial strain because of their agencies being underfunded.

At one charity supporting the homeless in Halifax, a staff member told us that, "I often don't take a break during the day because there is so much to do. We're short-staffed. There are so many jobs in the private sector right now that are easier and better paid, it's hard to attract and retain good people."

A strong and resilient community services sector is necessary to support Canadians in times of need, and create the conditions for long-term success. With staffing shortages and a drop in donations coinciding with an increase in demand, local community services can't keep up with the needs of those they serve.

As Canada's leading national network of local experts working in more than 5,000 communities across Canada, United Way Centraide is uniquely placed to provide advice on how to enact lasting change. Our 2024 federal budget proposal is built on data and the community based knowledge of our members.

It is also grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion, and focused on creating opportunities to thrive for everyone in Canada.

United Way Centraide Canada is recommending that the federal government invest in the long-term success of the charitable sector, including Caring for Carers, a program to address front-line worker burnout; tackle housing and homelessness, for example, through improvements to the Canada Housing Benefit, as every person in Canada deserves a safe and affordable home; ensure income security for everyone in Canada by increasing funding for the Canada Social Transfer, among other programs; make childcare accessible by implementing a comprehensive Canada-wide childcare workforce strategy, so parents—especially mothers—can participate in the economy; and invest in community-based mental health supports, including for crisis prevention, so those in need don't have to join long waitlists for help.

Finally, we are proposing that the government lean into the resource of the 211 helpline. Currently, 211 enables people to access non-emergency health services, virtual mental health support, financial counselling and food. It has been critical to communities grappling with floods, fires and the pandemic, enabling quick, easy access to help in more than 150 languages.

People in Canada are using the service as a lifeline during this difficult economic time. Expanding 211's reach and resources could reduce the prevalence of poverty, improve health outcomes, and facilitate community connections that build resilience. Given its many benefits, 211 should be a fundamental part of Canada's social infrastructure.

Canadian families are facing historic challenges as the colder weather approaches, but things can get better. The community services sector is stepping up to help, and will continue to do so, in collaboration with business, labour and all levels of government.

*Dan Clement is the president and CEO of United Way Centraide Canada.*

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