



**Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in
Advance of the 2024 Nova Scotia Budget**

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *THAT the government increase the Nova Scotia cancer improvement budget by 8 per cent from the 2023 amount of \$11.3 million to \$12.2 million.*

Recommendation 2: *THAT the government strengthen the reach and capabilities of the Nova Scotia Lung Screening Program. Governments must increase the accessibility of screening to encompass individuals who may have other risk factors, as well as individuals living in rural areas.*

Recommendation 3: *THAT the government to take proactive steps towards safeguarding public health by initiating the widespread distribution of government-funded radon test kits.*

Recommendation 4: *THAT the government intensify educational campaigns, streamline vaccination access, and enhance community outreach efforts to ensure optimal vaccine uptake and protection against HPV-related diseases.*

Recommendation 5: *THAT emergency preparedness plans should include provisions for the continuation of cancer care and screening. Governments must ensure that cancer patients continue to receive care during emergencies, including those related to all future pandemics, and other unforeseen crises like natural disasters.*

Recommendation 6: *THAT the healthcare system need to recognize and address the long-term symptoms of COVID-19, providing appropriate medical care, support, and resources for those experiencing these symptoms, including cancer patients.*

Introduction

The Canadian Cancer Survivor Network (CCSN) is a national organization of patients, families, survivors, friends, and community partners. Our mission is to work together by taking action to promote the very best standard of care, support, follow-up, and quality of life for cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers. With a steadfast commitment to supporting the interests and welfare of those affected by cancer, CCSN recognizes the immense challenges faced by these individuals throughout their journey. By prioritizing these key areas, we can collectively foster a supportive environment that addresses the unique needs of cancer survivors while empowering them to lead fulfilling lives beyond their diagnosis.

CCSN stands as a national voice for the over 1.5 million Canadians living with cancer, a figure that has tragically and substantially increased in the past decade. The growing population of people affected by cancer face immense challenges, navigating a complex healthcare system while battling the physical and emotional toll of their diagnosis. In Nova Scotia alone, an estimated 48,000 residents grapple with the disease, putting it as the province with the 4th most cancer cases in Canada. Lung cancer remains the leading cause of death among cancer patients, claiming over 700 lives annually in the province.

The impact of cancer extends far beyond the physical and emotional toll it exacts on individuals and their families. The financial hardships faced by those affected by cancer are often profound and can exacerbate the already challenging journey they must endure. From the moment of diagnosis, individuals find themselves navigating a complex web of medical services and expenses, including costly medications and supportive care services. Furthermore, many patients, survivors, and caregivers find themselves battling other indirect costs, including transportation expenses and parking charges at hospitals and cancer treatment centres. These financial burdens can quickly accumulate, placing immense strain on patients and their loved ones.

The Canadian Cancer Survivor Network has established a set of budget recommendations for the 2024 Nova Scotia budget aimed at reducing the emotional, physical, and financial burden placed on cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers. As we look to the 2024 Nova Scotia budget, we urge the government to prioritize investments in critical areas that will significantly improve the lives of cancer survivors and their families.

Strengthening Cancer Treatment in Nova Scotia

We strongly recommend that the government allocate additional resources to improving cancer care in the 2024 Nova Scotia budget. Specifically, we propose an increase of 8 per cent from the 2023 amount of \$11.3 million to a revised budget of \$12.2 million. This funding boost is critical in addressing the growing demand for cancer treatment services, reducing wait times, and enhancing the overall quality of care provided to cancer patients across the province. By making this investment, the government can demonstrate its commitment to the well-being of Nova Scotians affected by cancer, ensuring timely access to life-saving treatments and fostering improved health outcomes.

The proposed 8 per cent increase in the Cancer Treatment Services budget is rooted in the pressing need to accommodate the rising number of cancer cases and the associated demand for comprehensive and timely care. The additional funding would significantly contribute to reducing wait times for diagnostic tests, surgeries, and other critical treatments, ultimately enhancing the overall patient experience. Furthermore, it allows for the incorporation of technological advancements, innovative therapies, and improved infrastructure, aligning with the government's commitment to advancing healthcare standards in Nova Scotia. This investment is an essential step towards building a more resilient and responsive healthcare system that can effectively address the evolving challenges within the field of oncology.

Recommendation 1: *THAT the government increase the Nova Scotia cancer improvement budget by 8 per cent from the 2023 amount of \$11.3 million to \$12.2 million.*

Improving the Nova Scotia Lung Screening Program

On January 19th, 2024, the Nova Scotia government issued a press release that stated that the Lung Screening Program has launched in the province. CCSN welcomes this news with open arms, and while the current eligibility criteria for the program is a step in the right direction, we recommend considering a broader range of risk factors to identify more individuals who could benefit from screening. Currently, the program requires that Nova Scotians have smoked cigarettes every day for twenty years. However, the fact that 30 per cent of lung cancer patients have never smoked is significant and underscores the importance of broadening eligibility criteria for lung cancer screening. CCSN recommends that the Nova Scotia government recognize the significant proportion of lung cancer cases in individuals who have never smoked cigarettes. Incorporate this information into the eligibility criteria to ensure that individuals who may have other risk factors, such as exposure to radon, environmental toxins, or genetic predisposition, are considered for screening.

While the press release mentioned that the program will “eventually be available across the province,” it’s important to emphasize the urgency of expediting the rollout to ensure timely access and benefits for all residents. Swift implementation is crucial to address the pressing needs of the community and maximize the positive impact of the program. Therefore, we support allocating funds for the establishment of additional sites to enhance accessibility for eligible individuals, especially in rural locations. A wider network of screening facilities across the province would reduce barriers to participation and ensure that all at-risk individuals can undergo timely screening.

Radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas, is the number one cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. A Cross-Canada Survey of Radon Concentration in Homes revealed that 10.7 per cent of homes in Nova Scotia had concerning levels of radon exceeding 200 Bq/m³, which required remedial and immediate action. CCSN believes that the government must take the necessary steps to distribute radon testing kits to all at-risk homes and residential buildings, at no cost to the homeowner or renter.

Recommendation 2: *THAT the government strengthen the reach and capabilities of the Nova Scotia Lung Screening Program. Governments must increase the accessibility of screening to encompass individuals who may have other risk factors, as well as individuals living in rural areas.*

Recommendation 3: *THAT the government to take proactive steps towards safeguarding public health by initiating the widespread distribution of government-funded radon test kits.*

Reducing HPV-Related Cancers through Vaccinations

Introduced in 2007, Nova Scotia provides free vaccines against human papillomavirus (HPV) through its school health program to all students in grade 7. Prior to 2015, the vaccine program was only offered to female students, but has since expanded to include all individuals. The program is also currently offered to men who have sex with men and are 45 years of age or under and individuals 45 years of age or under who are living with HIV. While the current vaccination program in Nova Scotia has made significant strides in reducing HPV-related cancers, there are still opportunities to further enhance its effectiveness and reach.

In Nova Scotia, 84.7 per cent of eligible grade 7 students received both doses of an HPV vaccine, still short of the 90 per cent target rate. Despite the advancements, challenges persist in achieving optimal vaccination coverage and raising awareness about the importance of HPV immunization in preventing cervical and other HPV-related cancers. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines targeted education, streamlined access to vaccination services, and strengthened community engagement initiatives.

Recommendation 4: *THAT the government intensify educational campaigns, streamline vaccination access, and enhance community outreach efforts to ensure optimal vaccine uptake and protection against HPV-related diseases.*

Ensuring the Continuation of Cancer Care

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many healthcare services across Canada were closed to contain the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, that included all screening programs, leading to an extremely significant number of late diagnoses. Appointments stopped, clinics were closed, and cancer patients were forced to wait out the lockdowns while their care was paused. But **Cancer Can't Wait**, and it didn't. Over four in ten patients, seven in ten caregivers, and nearly six in ten pre-diagnosis patients had appointments cancelled or rescheduled during the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, cancer patients lost time, setting their treatment back and creating anxiety around their prognosis. When the lockdowns began to lift, COVID-19 vaccinations became commonplace, and mask requirements were cancelled, immunocompromised patients' anxiety increased because they now worried not only about cancer care delays, but also about getting the virus from the general public.

As the COVID-19 pandemic fades from the public eye, long-term symptoms that persist after COVID-19 – or long COVID – have become a serious public health issue. Yet, long COVID is often overlooked and incompletely understood. In spring of 2023, the Canadian Cancer Survivor Network conducted its fifth Leger survey to better understand the impact of long COVID on cancer patients and caregivers. The results show that the effects of long COVID on cancer patients and caregivers have varied widely and that for many, it has profoundly worsened their quality of life.

CCSN calls on governments to take the experience of people facing cancer and their caregivers into account and to include provisions for the continuation of essential cancer care in planning for future pandemics and crises. Our public institutions must be equipped so that the next public health crisis does not leave cancer patients behind.

Recommendation 5: *THAT emergency preparedness plans should include provisions for the continuation of cancer care and screening. Governments must ensure that cancer patients continue to receive care during emergencies, including those related to all future pandemics, and other unforeseen crises like natural disasters.*

Recommendation 6: *THAT the healthcare system need to recognize and address the long-term symptoms of COVID-19, providing appropriate medical care, support, and resources for those experiencing these symptoms, including cancer patients.*