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## Sector News Digest — March 24, 2020

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**Editor's note:** *The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits.*

### Charities respond to COVID-19

In the two weeks since the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, Canadian charities and non-profits have faced surging demand for services, placing a severe strain on resources already stretched by self-distancing measures. What's more, the sudden slowing of the economy has threatened many sources of revenue, and fundraising events have been cancelled. Yet many organizations are continuing to serve their communities under adverse circumstances.

Last week, Kids Help Phone launched an appeal for volunteers to help respond to a growing volume of calls and texts from youth struggling to cope with the pandemic. "We are worried about increased suicide ideation with young people," CEO Katherine Hay [told CBC](#). Volunteers can access training and complete duties from home to comply with public health recommendations for social distancing.

Many food organizations cancelled community programming—free meals, cooking programs, et cetera—and have shifted to a take-out model. One of those organizations is Toronto's The Stop Community Food Centre, which has also [launched a call for donations](#) so it can purchase high-quality food for program participants, many of whom struggle with poor health and food insecurity. Second Harvest, a food rescue organization, launched a [fundraising campaign](#) to keep its trucks on the road.

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The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Canadian Mental Health Association, and other organizations have all put out tips and resources to help people cope with rising levels of stress and anxiety. Global organizations, including the Canadian Red Cross and UNICEF, have launched COVID-19 response funds to support people affected by the crisis.

In Montreal, West Island Community Shares launched a new “solidarity fund” to support charities struggling to fundraise to meet community need. Meanwhile, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness issued an urgent call for more emergency shelter beds to protect Canada’s vulnerable homeless population. Homeless shelters are facing a particularly difficult decision as need for their services rises. Some shelters have closed to minimize exposure, while others remain open but are asking volunteers to stay home and are putting more stringent cleaning measures in place. The [economic aid package](#) announced by the federal government included more than \$200 million in support for the homeless, women’s shelters, and sexual assault centres.

### **Funding for international women’s health**

[The Slight Family Foundation](#) made another major strategic funding announcement in early March: [a \\$15 million commitment to the health, safety, and education of women and girls around the globe](#). Fifteen Canadian NGOs will each receive \$1 million for programs that support women’s health, discourage child marriage and early pregnancy, boost literacy, and improve access to gender-responsive education in Africa and the Middle East.

“The projects we’re funding will leverage the expertise of these vital organizations to protect women and girls in the most fragile countries from direct harm; rebuild the lives of those who have been unjustly affected by conflict, deprivation, and conflict; and give them the tools and support they need to survive and thrive,” the foundation’s Gary Slight said of the new [Global Initiative for Women and Girls](#).

[This is the sixth major funding commitment the Slight Family Foundation has made since 2013](#). With previous pledges to hospitals, global humanitarian organizations, Indigenous programs, and seniors, the foundation’s contributions now total \$125 million.

This latest move coincides with the release of several reports that track global progress on gender issues. The [United Nations Development Programme’s Gender Social Norms Index](#), which aggregates data collected in 75 countries covering 80% of the world’s population, contains some grim findings. Almost 90% of men and women hold a bias against women, while 50% of those surveyed think men make better political leaders than women. More than a quarter think it’s still acceptable for a man to beat his wife.

[Oxfam’s 2020 Feminist Policy Scorecard](#), meanwhile, concluded that Canada lags on solutions to gender-based violence, work and pay equity, and support for Indigenous women, among other issues. Still, Oxfam’s report acknowledges that Canada has made progress on representation, poverty reduction, and global development assistance. But while Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy has led to significant support for women’s health and education, development experts caution that the federal government will need to increase its foreign aid spending if it wants to make a lasting impact. Canada’s official development assistance currently sits at 0.28% of gross national income, below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s average of 0.31% and well below the long-standing

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United Nations target of 0.70%.

### **Mowat NFP's parting shot on the Senate report**

The Mowat Centre last month [released a set of four reports on the state of the non-profit sector](#), its final act before shutting down as an independent think tank and being folded into the Public Policy Forum. The reports document the research and findings of Mowat NFP, a research hub established in 2012 to “provide evidence-based research and analysis on systemic issues facing the non-profit sector in Canada.”

The reports provide suggestions for advancing the Senate committee's recommendations for a stronger charitable sector, examine the changing role of civil society in promoting civic discourse, explore the potential of commissioning for outcomes and the impacts on non-profits and charities, and consider how to build health and resilience in the non-profit sector. That [latter report](#) digs into the issues and trends affecting the financial health of non-profits, including commissioning, donor-advised funds, social impact bonds, and the impact of previous funding-modernization initiatives.

One topic of particular interest to sector lobbyists is the eventual location, within the federal government, of a secretariat that will serve as a policy hub and point of contact. The Senate committee report recommended the Ministry of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development, but Mowat NFP's research found there's no consensus about the right spot.

“Previous Mowat NFP research recommended locating it within a central agency as this would enable it to take a ‘whole-of-government’ approach and more effectively engage in horizontal problem-solving,” [one of the four studies noted](#). “[The secretariat's] success will be predicated on its political influence, its leadership capabilities, and the interests of the government of the day.”