



Lobbying

Pre-budget pitches, virtual 'Hill days' push February lobbying

Two of the busiest groups in February—the Canadian Nurses Association and Diabetes Canada—said they used their virtual Hill days to press the feds for commitments on health in Budget 2021

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN

The promise of the first federal budget in more than two years, planned legislation to address online hate, and pandemic-related health concerns drove the lobbying efforts in February of some of the busiest groups as Parliament returned for its first sitting of 2021.

Last month, lobbyists filed 3,223 communication reports in the federal registry, a 55 per cent uptick from the 2,086 filed in January. Activity, however, was down 10 per cent compared to the year before, when lobbyists logged some 3,583 reports in February.

Health, economic development, and the budget were the top three issues on the influencers' minds. The constant drumbeat of health-related advocacy and pandemic response have kept officials across the board conversing on this subject, which clocked 556 mentions. Talks on the budget more than doubled in February to 472 from 214 communications disclosed in January. At that time, the April budget date was not yet known, and March was still a possibility,



The four most-lobbied in cabinet in February, from left: Innovation Minister François-Philippe Champagne, Transport Minister Omar Alghabra, Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault, and Jim Carr, who rejoined cabinet in January as a special representative for the Prairies. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade

but after a two-year wait, lobbyists knew it would be coming.

Topping cabinet targets for the second month in the row—and his second month heading the innovation file—Minister François-Philippe Champagne (Saint Maurice-Champlain, Que.) was listed in 25 filings, according to an analysis of the federal lobbyists' registry as of March 26. Transport Minister Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Ont.), who joined cabinet in January, followed at second with 23 mentions. Tied in third with 20 apiece were Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, Que.) and Jim Carr, who rejoined cabinet in January as a special representative for the Prairies.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.), who last week announced the next budget would be presented on April 19, connected with lobbyists seven times. Associate Finance Minister Mona

Fortier (Ottawa-Vanier, Ont.) meanwhile, had 18 mentions. Finance ministerial staffers were on their toes, with several at the top of the lobbying list, including: Aneil Jaswal, Ms. Freeland's senior policy adviser, with 24, Leslie Church, director of policy (18), and Tyler Meredith, director of economic strategy and planning (16).

Health and Hill days

The three busiest groups—Mortgage Professionals Canada and Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), and Diabetes Canada, with 54, 52, and 50 communications, respectively—each held their virtual versions of Hill days to drum up parliamentary attention.

Diabetes Canada met with more than 50 MPs and Senators between Feb. 2 and 4 to push the government to commit to a nationwide diabetes strategy in the next budget. Since that outreach,

MPs unanimously voted in support of Bill C-237, a private member's bill to establish a national diabetes framework, and the organization will appear this month at a committee studying the act, noted spokesperson Pilar Iglesias.

"We will continue to reach out to Parliamentarians, and to support Canadians in doing so, to encourage that Budget 2021 include a commitment to action to address diabetes and a measurable step towards the implementation of Diabetes 360," she said.

The Canadian Nurses Association, meanwhile, spoke with about 60 MPs, ministers, and senior staff in February as the organization pushed for national standards and funding for long-term care as part of its budget request. These facilities have borne the brunt of COVID-19 in Canada, representing a particularly devastating number of outbreaks and an estimated 82 per cent of all deaths.



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Standardization can save lives, said the CNA's CEO Michael Villeneuve, who pointed to emergency rooms as a good example of where the same practices mean Canadians receive similar treatment, regardless of the jurisdiction.

"That predictability and that sameness of the standards is what helps to create safety and quality," said Mr. Villeneuve, whose organization is also calling on the government to expand virtual care, and introduce a demographic top-up to the Canada Health Transfer as Canadians age.

The recommendations brought by the Mortgage Professionals Canada during its Hill days don't need to be tied to the budget, noted its president Paul Taylor, whose organization says Canada's mortgage underwriting rules and current policy thinking "has focused on the financial system's solvency to a greater degree than the promotion of aspiring middle class Canadians."

It's meant that fewer Canadians than intended are taking advantage of the First-Time Home Buyer Incentive, introduced in 2019, and Mr. Taylor said, the government should address that low uptake by extending the mortgage amortization periods to 30 years, up from 25 years for insured mortgages. The feds budgeted \$1.25-billion over three years for the shared-equity program aimed at helping new homeowners purchase a house, with CMHC offering 10 per cent toward the down payment and five per cent for resale homes, without interest.

"There's no legislative change required for that; it really is just a sentiment change in the leadership at finance and [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.] CMHC," said Mr. Taylor, who noted broad interest in this file from the 60-plus Parliamentarians his group of 44 volunteers met online over 11 days.

COVID-19 brought a "real re-evaluation of people's living circumstances as that security of income returned, coupled with very low interest rates," he noted, for salary-earners who could work from home. The housing market has been strong, he added, noting many are paying more for rent than if they qualified for a mortgage.



Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, pictured in Ottawa on Nov. 23, 2020, will present her first budget, the Liberals' first in two years, on April 19. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade



CIJA said it has extensively engaged with the office of Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault, who was also among the most lobbied in cabinet last month, *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The government's policies are "exacerbating the wealth gap" between those who own property and those who don't, and, he said, are tied back to credit restrictions brought in with stress testing and more stringent mortgage insurance qualification. It's made it more difficult to borrow, which has had the intended result of shoring up the financial and risk position of banks and mortgage insurers, he explained, but has disqualified many previously eligible first-time buyers and millennials.

Upcoming legislation, border restrictions keep two groups busy

In anticipation of the Liberal government's plan to present legislation addressing online hate, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) was also busy on the Hill last month. The group posted several meetings with heritage- and justice-related officials, and has "extensively" engaged with Mr. Guilbeault's office ahead of the Action Summit to Combat Online Hate on April 14 to 15.

"For a decade, we have been leading the fight against online hate," as part of a longstanding fight to combat anti-Semitism, said Richard Marceau, CIJA's vice-president of external affairs in an email.

"Our testimony was widely cited in the Justice Committee report, and, over the last few months, in anticipation of the tabling of legislation to address online hate, we have continued to deliver those messages and concrete proposals to the government of Canada and members of the opposition," he said.

Mr. Guilbeault is expected to table legislation soon that would offer a new definition of hate speech, as part of the Liberals' plan to tackle online hate content. The minister's 2019 mandate letter said new regulations would require internet platforms to remove "illegal content, including hate speech, within 24 hours or face significant penalties."

The upcoming budget was just one of three timely concerns that bumped the Alliance of Manufacturers and Exporters Canada outreach to 29 filings. The other two focused south-

ward, said CME's director of trade policy, Matt Poirier, as the group advocated for easing the movement of essential workers to support manufacturing, whose supply chains mean a product can make several trips across the border before being completed.

Last month, the government announced it would extend the U.S.-Canada border restrictions on non-essential travel to April 21. And, he said, the other big focus is conversations with officials to better understand the new U.S. President Joe Biden's "Buy American" executive order.

"Even just the slightest hint of clamping down ... it creates a chill for Canadian manufacturers," he said, noting the tight integration between countries and a North American trade deal that's supposed to support trade between markets.

"There's no light between our position and the government's position," he said. "It's working together to [determine] 'how do we push the Americans as much as we can to give Canada an exemption and [to] adopt a more buy North America strategy?'"

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