

# Build the Call:

## BC Needs a Poverty Reduction Strategy

**A guide to engaging political candidates at all-candidates meetings and making sure they hear our call for poverty reduction in BC**

A call is building across British Columbia for a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. You've heard the call and joined the call, and now you want to pass it on to your local MLA candidates. The lead-up to May's provincial election is a window of opportunity for you to get the attention of candidates in your riding.

By any measure, BC has the highest rate of poverty in Canada. Now is the time to let candidates from all parties know that you want to vote for someone willing to make a commitment to a poverty reduction plan — a detailed and accountable strategy with concrete and legislated targets and timelines to dramatically reduce homelessness and poverty in our province.

You can be more effective if you take some time to prepare and this guide is designed to help you do that.

This guide will give you some tips for **Getting Started**, provide you with a brief **Breakdown** of poverty in BC, and offer suggestions for some **Engaging Questions**.

### **You are not alone:**

In a recent Environics poll of BC residents:

- **87 per cent said both the prime minister and the premier should set concrete targets and timelines to reduce poverty.**
- **74 per cent of British Columbians say they would be more likely to support a provincial political party that pledged to make poverty reduction a high priority and propose clear policies, targets and timelines aimed at reducing the number of poor people.**
- **When asked whether, in the face of a recession, governments will have to focus on other priorities or whether an economic downturn makes it more important than ever to make helping the poor a priority, 77 per cent chose the latter.**

\* commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, one of the signatories to the open letter. It was conducted in the fall of 2008 (in the midst of the growing economic/financial crisis).

## Getting Started

Setting yourself up for success in getting your candidate's attention and getting a concrete commitment to poverty reduction.

### ◆ Find your candidates.

You can locate your BC Liberals candidate by name or riding at [www.bcliberals.com](http://www.bcliberals.com); your BC New Democrats candidate at <http://www.bcndp.ca>; and the Green Party at <http://www.greenparty.ca>. For a listing of other registered political parties with contact information visit <http://www.elections.bc.ca>

### ◆ Pick one or two points about poverty reduction that you believe in and understand.

Decide on one or two points for advocacy, especially during an election. The breadth of the issue of poverty in BC is a lot to pack into a limited time. Identify the particular elements of the issue that you can speak to most confidently. Political representatives must review and evaluate a great deal of information and often consider competing priorities. It is important that you believe in and understand the specifics of the issue you want to address with candidates.

### ◆ Provide perspective. Introduce yourself.

Before launching into the issue with a candidate, tell them a little bit about who you are and how poverty impacts your life and your community so they know why a comprehensive poverty reduction plan is a priority for their constituents.

### ◆ Focus on the issue.

Frame the issue so your candidate can relate. Describe how the poverty affects people, and how many people it affects. Use personal stories to illustrate your concerns; link the personal stories to the general issue. Tell them clearly what will happen if your issue is not addressed during the next government mandate. Be ready with solutions. Outline what's working now and what changes would make a difference.

◆ **Be ready to press for a concrete commitment.**

Many candidates may try and side-step the call for a poverty reduction plan by simply outlining a few policy initiatives their government has or would do with respect to poverty and homelessness. Acknowledge good steps. But insist that BC needs a comprehensive plan with legislated targets and timelines. Press for that commitment.

◆ **Make the call public.**

Attend one or more All Candidates meetings.

Meet with each candidate in your riding.

Talk to the candidates when they knock on your door.

Send an email to the candidates in your riding outlining your issue.

Call in to a radio or TV phone-in show when candidates are on the air..

◆ **For the record.**

Let your local media know about the responses you get. Write in to your local papers and tell them about your meeting and what candidates in your riding have to say about the need for a poverty reduction strategy in this province and their party's position on it.

## The Breakdown

Break down the issue of poverty in BC with some questions to bring it home for your candidate.

### ◆ Income Assistance

In its 2007 budget, after many years of benefit rates being either frozen or cut, the BC government announced a modest increase to income assistance rates. In real dollars, however, these increases have effectively brought after-inflation benefit rates only to where they were at the start of the decade. The current rate of \$610 per month for a single “employable” person is less than the average rent for a bachelor suite in BC. Single people on assistance are expected to rent homes with a mere \$375 per month, and receive \$7.58 per day for everything else.

**Q:** Is \$375 per month an adequate allowance for rent in your neighbourhood?

### ◆ Employment and the living wage

Most poor people in BC are employed in the low-wage workforce. The minimum wage of \$8 an hour has not been increased since 2001. BC has gone from having the highest minimum wage in Canada to having one of the lowest, on par with the Atlantic provinces.

**Q:** Do you think \$8/hour is enough to live on in your community?

### ◆ Housing and Homelessness

The Auditor General of BC’s newly released report, *Homelessness: Clear Focus Needed*, highlighted the provincial government’s lack of solid numbers on how many homeless people there are in BC and who they are. Effective solutions to the housing crisis in this province must account for those living on the street and in shelters as well the so-called “hidden homeless,” people who are couch-surfing, staying with family, or living in very overcrowded, insecure situations.

**Q:** What would it take to ensure secure housing for everyone in your constituency?

## ◆ Child Poverty

For five years running, BC has had the highest child poverty rate in the country. While the national rate of child poverty has steadily decreased in recent years (and now stands at 11.3 per cent), BC's child poverty rate of 16.1 per cent is higher now than it was in 2001. Children of families with at least one member who is Aboriginal, a recent immigrant, or has a disability are at an even greater risk of poverty.

**Q:** What's your plan to eliminate child poverty?

## ◆ Health and food security

According to the latest Food Banks Canada HungerCount, in March 2008, over 78,000 British Columbians used food banks. Approximately one in three of these individuals were children. The state of hunger in our province has dire consequences for the long-term health of British Columbians and for the sustainability and affordability of our healthcare system.

**Q:** How do we ensure all British Columbians can afford a nutritious diet?

## ◆ Vulnerability

Poverty rates are higher among certain groups. As such, measures targeted toward these groups will have a significant impact on reducing overall poverty rates. The highest poverty rates in BC are found among the Aboriginal population, recent immigrants and refugees, and people with disabilities, including mental health issues. The different needs of these groups necessitate different policy responses in order to address the underlying causes of their poverty.

**Q:** What specifically should be done to reduce poverty among Aboriginal British Columbians / people with disabilities / those living with mental illness / recent immigrants?

## ◆ We all pay for poverty

Poverty is consistently linked to poorer health, higher justice system costs, more demands on social and community services, more stress on family members, and diminished school success. As governments prepare stimulus measures for the economy, actions directed at poverty will be among the most effective. This is because all of the remedies will be based on local initiatives, whether it is housing, increased wages, or improved welfare benefits. The poor spend their incomes and that, in turn, will stimulate local businesses.

**Q:** Can we afford not to reduce poverty in an economic downturn?

## Engaging Questions

### **Is your candidate ready to make a commitment to reducing poverty?**

#### **Questions to all candidates.**

Five provinces in Canada have either adopted poverty-reduction plans, or are in the process of developing them. Is your party ready to adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction plan?

Accountability mechanisms are key to an effective and credible plan. Legislated short-term targets and timelines allow a government to be held accountable within its mandate. Is your party ready to legislate targets and timelines for reducing poverty in BC?

A solid plan must deal with the multiple dimensions and causes of poverty and homelessness. Policy measures must aid those in the low-wage workforce and those who cannot work in paid labour, as well as enhance the social programs/public goods that are relied upon by everyone. How will your party take leadership in understanding and addressing the breadth of poverty in BC?

Voters all over BC have signed on to an open letter calling for poverty reduction in BC. Is your party ready to make the same commitment?

**For more information about poverty reduction and to Join the Call visit [bcpovertyreduction.ca](http://bcpovertyreduction.ca)**

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