

Where the major BC political parties stand on poverty reduction

What follows is a summary of where the parties land in relation to the Open Letter's call for a BC poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines. To help you compare the parties' positions with what is called for in the Open Letter, we've included the Open Letter's call in **bold**.

LIBERAL PLATFORM AND THE POVERTY REDUCTION CALL

Our Call: Commit to a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines (including: a 30% reduction in poverty in 4 years and a 75% reduction in 10 years, for both the overall population and population groups where poverty is concentrated; ending street homelessness in 2 years, and all homelessness in 8 years; and ensuring all British Columbians have an income of at least 75% of the LICO within 2 years)

During the election campaign, Premier Campbell has repeatedly been asked by reporters and citizens if a re-elected Liberal government would bring in a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines. On each occasion, he has declined to say yes (and likewise, the official Liberal platform does not make this commitment). Instead, the premier has replied that his goal is "to have the lowest unemployment rate that we can," because "a job is the best social program." It is correct that job creation is important to poverty reduction. But most poor British Columbians are already employed in the low wage workforce, and record low unemployment over the past few years has not changed the fact that BC has the highest poverty rate in Canada. So clearly, a focus on employment is insufficient.

In a letter to the BC Poverty Reduction Committee, Premier Campbell assures us that, "the Province of British Columbia has made promising steps to address the challenges associated with poverty and we are working on additional measures to put together a comprehensive plan to continue moving forward." The Poverty Reduction Committee also received a lengthy email from the Liberal campaign team. However, most of the information provided relates to past initiatives, not future plans or commitments.

Similarly, the official Liberal platform speaks primarily to past actions of the government. It does, however, outline some further funding plans in some of the policy action areas our open letter is calling for (see below), including housing and homelessness. However, nothing in the Liberal platform directly addresses an overarching poverty reduction plan and there is no mention of targets or timelines. There is a lack of accountability mechanisms and no indication of how success might be measured.

The closest the Liberal platform comes to suggesting a real target is in the area of homelessness, in titling the one-page policy section on housing, "Ending homelessness with new solutions." The section describes various initiatives to date (outlined below). But the goal of ending homelessness is not linked to clear timelines.

Our Call: To meet our proposed targets, action is needed in seven policy areas, with special attention focused on the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty (single mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and recent immigrants and refugees).

Policy Action Areas

1. Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed.
2. Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce.
3. Improve food security for low-income individuals and families.
4. Address homelessness and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan.
5. Provide universal publicly-funded child care.
6. Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people.
7. Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.

On providing adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed: Neither the Liberal platform, nor their response to our committee, provides any concrete plans to address the inadequacy of income assistance rates for the non-employed, or improve access to income assistance.

In their response to the BC Poverty Reduction Committee, the Liberal Campaign Team writes: “We believe in an income assistance program that supports people with disabilities and those who are unable to work.” Their letter notes that the income assistance caseload has shifted significantly in recent years, with the majority of those on assistance now having disability status (however, a single person with disability status still has an income of only 62% of the after-tax LICO; the most common poverty line).

On improving the earnings and working conditions of low-wage workers: While the Liberal platform makes many references to getting people into the workforce through job training and job creation, they have little to say about improved earnings, or improved standards for workplace conditions once those people are employed.

The Liberals have made it very clear that they will not increase the minimum wage.

The platform does say the Liberals would spend \$16 million over the next three years to help remove barriers to employment through the Skills Connect for Immigrants and the International Qualifications programs.

On improving food security for low-income individuals and families: The Liberal platform speaks of:

- promotion of healthy living, nutrition and fitness through ActNowBC;
- promotion of healthy food options in schools;
- new measures to help remote communities get access to fresh fruit and vegetables; and
- a new Agriculture plan to “market BC-grown farm products and help ranchers, hog-growers, wineries, and others get through these challenging times and expand their businesses.”

On addressing homelessness and adopting a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan: As mentioned above, the Liberal platform highlights past initiatives with respect to housing and homelessness:

- more supportive housing units;
- shelter beds across the province, and new “24/7 access to emergency shelters”;
- the purchase of 45 single-room occupancy hotels (a move that has helped *preserve* the stock of low-income housing, but not increase the stock);
- the expansion of homelessness outreach teams in cities around BC (which connect homeless people to shelters, income assistance, and other services); and

- the new Rental Assistance Program, which currently provides rental assistance to low-income families with children, provided they are employed (although only 7,700 families in BC currently receive support through this program); and expansion of the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters program.

Nevertheless, homelessness has increased in recent years, and the Auditor-General recently criticized the government for lacking an overall plan. But the platform speaks to only modest new initiatives planned: “We will build on these and other initiatives by further investing more than \$172 million in housing projects on six sites in Vancouver, with another six sites ready to go when the city gives them appropriate approvals. Non-profit societies have been selected to manage the 569 new units as soon as they are complete... We are also investing \$130 million to build an additional 478 new housing units on 11 sites in seven additional communities.”

On providing universal publicly funded child care: The Liberal plan commits to, “increase funding for early childhood development, childcare and supports to children with special needs.” More specifically, their plan commits to:

- increasing the child care subsidy budget by \$25 million over 3 years according to their 2009 budget (which amounts to roughly \$160 per child per year);
- establishing voluntary all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds (although it is not clear when);
- exploring “the feasibility” of expanding full-day kindergarten for 4 and 3 year olds (implying, as the economy improves and funding permits); and
- expansion of the StrongStart BC early learning program (these programs require a parent or caregiver to be present, making them inaccessible for most working parents.).

On enhanced support for training and education for low-income people: The Liberal plan commits to “increasing access to post-secondary education” and “investing in trades and training”. Specifically, they commit to:

- investing in new universities and new student spaces; (however, low income people are already having trouble accessing existing spaces due to high fees, and people on income assistance who are classified as ‘expected to work’ are not allowed to attend university programs);
- continuing to limit tuition increases to the rate of inflation;
- creating a new time-limited tuition assistance programs for displaced forest workers, miners and other workers;
- introducing a common U-pass system for all post-secondary students in BC; and
- doubling the BC Training Tax Credit, effective July 1, 2009.

The Liberals estimate that by year-end, they will have funded an additional 7,000 new apprenticeship spaces since 2007/08.

On enhanced community mental health and home support services, and integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services: The Liberal plan speaks to a new plan to further “increase access to home-support services, in-home nursing, and rehabilitative care to help seniors live more active, healthy, and independent lives.” The platform promises:

- \$123 million to build 1,000 new homes this year for seniors and people with disabilities; and
- increased investments in chronic disease and addiction prevention, mental health, and AIDS prevention and treatment programs.

NDP PLATFORM AND THE POVERTY REDUCTION CALL

Our Call: Commit to a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines (including: a 30% reduction in poverty in 4 years and a 75% reduction in 10 years, for both the overall population and population groups where poverty is concentrated; ending street homelessness in 2 years, and all homelessness in 8 years; and ensuring all British Columbians have an income of at least 75% of the LICO within 2 years)

The NDP platform does commit to “Developing a poverty reduction plan with targets and timelines that build on our initiatives that will raise the minimum wage, support jobs and skills training, increase affordable housing, improve child protection and change income assistance.”

This is good news. However, the NDP plan does not specify what the poverty reduction targets and timelines should be (presumably this would be determined after the election), nor does it say if such targets and timelines would be legislated (which is key to accountability).

The NDP commitment with respect to homelessness is more concrete. Their plan commits to “Ending the crisis in homelessness in 5 years.” The NDP will set firm targets for social housing, and report progress to the Legislature annually. First year commitments are for 2,400 social housing units, with 1,200 units in each of the next 4 years. During this time, short-term shelters will be supported to offset the housing shortage.”

Our Call: To meet our proposed targets, action is needed in seven policy areas, with special attention focused on the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty (single mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and recent immigrants and refugees).

Policy Action Areas

- 1. Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed.**
- 2. Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce.**
- 3. Improve food security for low-income individuals and families.**
- 4. Address homelessness and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan.**
- 5. Provide universal publicly-funded child care.**
- 6. Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people.**
- 7. Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.**

On providing adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed: The NDP platform includes a commitment to “Making life more affordable for the most vulnerable British Columbians” by:

- increasing the earnings exemption to \$100 per month for individuals and \$200 per month for families (people on disability assistance already have an earnings exemption of \$500/month);
- increasing support payments for people with multiple barriers who are unable to work;
- increasing Income Assistance-to-Work supports, such as allowances for work clothing, bus fares to job interviews, etc.;
- linking Income Assistance rates to inflation and reviewing overall rates as part of the process to develop a poverty reduction plan.

These changes are all positive (particularly the commitment to index welfare benefits and to review overall rates with an eye to poverty reduction), but in and of themselves are unlikely to make a significant dent in making rates *adequate*. Overall, the NDP's planned increases to social assistance spending are disappointingly small: \$15 million this year, rising to \$35 million in the following two years.

The 2009 Platform does not speak to improving welfare access. However, the NDP has gone on the public record numerous times supporting the elimination of the 3 week waiting period, the welfare time limits, and the 2 year independence test.

On improving the earnings and working conditions of low-wage workers: Here, the NDP platform is quite solid, and commits to:

- raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour, and linking it to inflation – to help make sure BC's lowest-paid workers never fall so far behind again;
- improving foreign credentialing to help immigrants work in their chosen field and also help alleviate the skills shortage many sectors are experiencing;
- strengthening protection for foreign workers and increasing support services for new immigrants;
- restoring employment standards for all workers to protect the most vulnerable;
- providing coverage for agricultural workers under the Employment Standards Act to help prevent exploitation of vulnerable farm workers; and
- protecting those hurt on the job by restoring lifetime pensions, increasing compensation claim benefits and improving inspections and enforcement.

On improving food security for low-income individuals and families: In addition to the income measures above, the NDP plan commits to “establishing a strong Buy BC and food security program, building on the growing trend to buy food products that are locally produced, healthy, and linked to BC's long-term food security needs.” The NDP would also strengthen the Agricultural Land Reserve and Commission, “support community agriculture, co-ops and farm organizations, including small scale farmers; expand community gardens and local farmers markets.”

On addressing homelessness and adopting a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan: As mentioned, the NDP plan does include some specific targets, “ending the homelessness crisis within 5 years.” In addition to the measures mentioned above, the platform includes a number of policies aimed at protecting and increasing the stock of affordable housing (p. 19), and speaks to supportive housing (see below). Their commitments to new housing units substantially exceed the Liberal plan.

On providing universal publicly-funded child care: The NDP platform commits to creating more affordable and accessible child care spaces by:

- capping fees;
- improving recruitment and retention, and enhancing training of teachers and early childhood education professionals (although the party does not speak specifically to the low wage of child care workers);
- “as finances permit”, introducing all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds and the accompanying after school care. The NDP estimates this “will free up 10,000 spaces within existing group child care centres and family child care providers”; and
- creating targets and timelines to build an affordable, accessible, quality child care system.

Overall, the NDP plan proposes to increase child care spending by \$25 million this year, and by \$50 million over each of the following two years (an amount that, for now, would only modestly boost spending).

On enhanced support for training and education for low-income people: The NDP plan commits to “investing in accessible and affordable post-secondary and apprenticeship opportunities for British Columbians.” They propose a five-point affordability plan, implemented over four years “as financial resources permit”:

1. freeze tuition rates and compensate post-secondary institutions for lower tuition revenues;
2. restore needs-based student grants;
3. expand post-graduate student grants to improve research and teaching activities;
4. cut interest rates on student loans, making loans more affordable and reducing debt;
5. simplify grant and loan applications and provide more repayment options and establish an Independent Financial Aid Review Office to improve student service.

The NDP plan also proposes to expand apprenticeship opportunities by at least 4,000 (“twice the number planned by the BC Liberals’ current budget”).

On enhanced community mental health and home support services, and integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services: The NDP plan includes many measures in the area of community health care, including:

- expanding the number of residential care beds by re-opening 300 renovated beds in the first six months, and partnering with the non-profit sector to create 3,000 more new long-term care beds;
- more funding for home support (increasing the number of seniors who can access home support, and number of hours received);
- building more supportive housing for people suffering from mental illness and addictions;
- enhancing outreach services for people with mental illness and addictions;
- immediate support for 100 new detox spaces, 100 new addiction treatment spaces, and 100 new long term mental health treatment beds; and
- improved mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention programs.

While the above sounds good, the funding allocated to these initiatives is modest. Overall, NDP spending increases on community health care (beyond the last Liberal budget):

Mental Health/Addictions: \$11 million this year and next, increasing to \$39 million in 2011/12 (not including modest new capital spending)

Seniors’ Care: LTC beds/improved care: \$30 million more this year, rising to \$100 million in 2010/11, and to \$130 million in 2011/12 (plus capital spending of \$85 million this year and \$125 million next year).

Home Support: \$15 million more this year, rising to \$20 million in 2010/11 and \$40 million in 2011/12.

Overall, the NDP plan provides about \$3 billion more of economic stimulus over the next two years, compared to the last Liberal budget.

GREEN PLATFORM AND THE POVERTY REDUCTION CALL

Our Call: Commit to a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines (including: a 30% reduction in poverty in 4 years and a 75% reduction in 10 years, for both the overall population and population groups where poverty is concentrated; ending street homelessness in 2 years, and all homelessness in 8 years; and ensuring all British Columbians have an income of at least 75% of

the LICO within 2 years)

The Green Party has included poverty reduction as a priority in their platform, *British Columbia's Green Book*: "The Green Party understands that immediate action is needed to ensure every British Columbian has a meaningful opportunity to share in the wealth of this province." In terms of targets, the key goals of their plan include ensuring British Columbians can all meet their basic needs, and "reversing the trend towards greater disparity between rich and poor." Additionally, in the area of housing and homelessness, the Green Party has committed to "safe and affordable homes" for everyone living in BC.

Their platform does not elaborate on more concrete, measurable targets or legislated timelines. Nor do they include any costing or budget planning to accompany their strategy. As the Green Party is not contesting government, they have not costed out their policies. Nevertheless their plan offers some promise and ingenuity in many policy areas regarding poverty reduction, and make a valuable contribution to the public discourse.

Our Call: To meet our proposed targets, action is needed in seven policy areas, with special attention focused on the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty (single mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and recent immigrants and refugees).

Policy Action Areas

1. **Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed.**
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5. **Provide universal publicly-funded child care.**
6. **Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people.**
7. **Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.**

On providing adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed: The Green Party takes a different approach than the other parties (and from the Poverty Reduction Committee). They propose: "The Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) will replace all existing income assistance programs. The rate will be based on the cost of living and other factors. The GLI is socially progressive because it ensures a higher basic amount without placing difficult barriers. Simultaneously, it encourages people to earn more income. By removing the trauma and waste of the bureaucratic process and streamlining access to assistance, GLI creates greater efficiencies and helps us focus on the ultimate goal: a better quality of life." The Guaranteed Livable Income is not costed in their platform.

On improving the earnings and working conditions of low-wage workers: Again, the Greens take a different approach introducing the Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI). The Greens have made commitments on the public record to raise the minimum wage and create a "living wage" for employees of provincially-funded government agencies.

On improving food security for low-income individuals and families: With the goal of "stimulating local production to improve regional food security," the Green platform promises to:

- implement consumer-focused and school-based education emphasizing the relationship between good nutrition and good health;
- promote local, in-season food grown without pesticides using biodynamic or organic farming methods;
- build farming and food production into school curriculums; and
- support university-based programs in sustainable food production and agriculture.

On addressing homelessness and adopting a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan:

As mentioned above, the Green party has committed to “ensuring all British Columbians can live in safe and affordable homes.” Their plan commits to: “establishing a provincial housing program that works with municipalities to build affordable housing or to purchase existing housing that can be moved into permanent rental housing,” while advocating federally for a national housing plan. To these ends they have promised to:

- commit 1% of the total provincial annual budget to solving the housing crisis;
- support small-scale, mixed-income co-op and non-profit housing;
- construct healthy, energy efficient green housing for people with disabilities and mental health problems and for low-income people;
- update the *Residential Tenancy Act* to ensure a balance in the rights of renters and landlords and restore local Residential Tenancy offices; and
- mandate BC Housing Corp to purchase units of market housing within current or stalled projects to provide an expanding pool of permanent below market and market rental housing.

On providing universal publicly-funded child care: The Green Party commits to, “protect children by securing universal, safe, and affordable child care.” Again, this commitment is not costed.

On enhanced support for training and education for low-income people:

- full tuition refund for all post-secondary graduates who work and live in the province for five years after receiving their degree;
- immediate reduction of tuition fees by 20% and an increase in funding to post-secondary institutions; and
- the provision of training upgrades for laid-off workers to help them transition back into the workforce, training for jobs in the green economy.

On enhanced community mental health and home support services, and integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services: *The Green Book* promises to:

- reinstate and expand MSP coverage to include preventative treatments such as chiropractic physiotherapy, eye exams, massage therapy and routine physical exams;
- expand MSP coverage for preventative measures such as counseling for addictions, weight control and stress reduction;
- offer financial assistance to families providing home care for seniors and disabled family members;
- establish community health care centres that would include teams of health care workers trained in preventative care, primary care and diagnosis, designed to keep people healthy and out of acute and hospital care;
- expand home support and home care programs and assisted living services to support people with chronic care needs, including many seniors so they can remain in their own homes; and

- increase funding for non-institutionalized mental health patients including children and youth to provide adequate housing, community-based support, and ongoing outpatient and inpatient care by mental health practitioners.