

Policy Actions within a Poverty Reduction Plan for BC

British Columbia remains the only province in Canada without a formal plan to reduce poverty. A comprehensive strategy must focus on the following seven overarching policy areas and specific actions:

1. Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed

Welfare and disability benefits are far too low at \$610 for a single person and between \$931 and \$983 per month for a person with a disability (with and without a bus pass respectively). And the eligibility rules and procedures make income assistance far too inaccessible for many.

Priority actions:

- Significantly increase welfare and disability rates, and index them to inflation
- Increase earnings exemptions, and remove arbitrary barriers that discourage, delay and deny people in need

2. Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce

Most adults living in poverty have a job, and almost half the poor children in BC live in families with at least one parent working full-time. The employment standards protections for vulnerable workers, which cover such areas as overtime hours and vacation pay, are far too lax.

Priority Actions:

- Increase the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and index it to inflation, and encourage employers to adopt the living wage for families
- Restore the coverage and enforcement of employment standards

3. Address the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty

Indigenous people, people with disabilities and mental illness, recent immigrants, refugees and temporary foreign workers (including farm workers and live-in caregivers), single mothers, single senior women, and queer and transgender people (particularly youth) have higher rates of poverty and homelessness. The poverty reduction plan must focus its efforts on the structural barriers faced by these groups.

Priority Actions:

- Restructure federal and provincial funding to better address the needs of all Aboriginal people, including the large off-reserve population
- Increase disability rates and index them to inflation
- Guarantee access to income assistance for all regardless of citizenship status

4. End homelessness and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan

BC has the worst record of housing affordability in Canada, and the numbers of homeless and underhoused people are increasing.

Priority Action:

- Recommit to building thousands of new social and co-op housing units per year. BC should be bringing on stream 10,000 such units per year

5. Provide universal publicly-funded child care

The high cost of child care is a huge burden for many families and makes it completely inaccessible to others. Moreover, there is a shortage of child care spaces and the quality of care available is inconsistent across providers.

Priority Action:

- Adopt the \$10 a day child care plan produced by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC, which will provide free child care for those earning less than \$40,000 per year, increase the number of child care spaces, support high-quality programming and ensure early childhood educators are paid a living wage

6. Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people

Without meaningful long-term training and education, people cannot access stable and well-paying jobs.

Priority Actions:

- Reduce tuition fees by 50% and increase the availability of post-secondary grants for low-income students
- Allow welfare recipients to attend post-secondary education and get apprenticeships
- Adequately fund K-12 education to mitigate inequalities and to ensure adequate library, special needs and programs. Make adult basic education and English-language education free

7. Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services

Poverty is a fundamental determinant of health, and the health care costs of poverty add up to \$1.2 billion per year. So, all of the other objectives will have a direct impact on improving the health of low-income people. That said, government provision of essential health services and community health care — home care, home support, assisted living, long-term care, and community mental health services — should be enhanced and expanded.

Priority Actions:

- Expand essential health services in the public system, such as dental and optical care and community mental health services
- Eliminate MSP premiums
- Expand home support and residential care services, and increase the number of residential care beds