



Shifting the Culture at the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

In the Service Plan for the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (“the Ministry”), Minister Shane Simpson states that, “The work this ministry does makes life better for people.” While this may ultimately be the Ministry’s goal, there are immense road blocks for people receiving income and disability assistance, and for Ministry staff, that need to be addressed for this statement to be realized.

According to the 2017/2018 Annual Report from the BC Office of the Ombudsperson, almost one in three (28%) complaints and enquiries relating to provincial ministries was for the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. This consistently high volume of complaints can be attributed to substantial changes in the Ministry’s services delivery model, complicated eligibility criteria that make assistance difficult to access, and a culture focused on enforcement.

We know the Ministry aims to provide accessible, effective, and dignifying services, and we are committed to working with the Ministry to make this a reality. Everyone seeking help deserves to have their needs met adequately and compassionately, and to be treated with respect.

What follows is a brief overview of the key concerns brought forward to us through years of working on issues of assistance, and specific, relevant, and achievable recommendations for the Ministry. These changes require the resolve of a willing government to make people’s lives tangibly and qualitatively better. The list below is not exhaustive – for example, we do not address in detail the obvious and well-documented need to increase income and personal supports across the board – but is a set of achievable measures to improve access and service delivery that would give effect to our shared vision for a ministry that fosters a culture of support and assistance.

Access to Services

Issues

In the 2018 BC Budget, the government stated the following:

“The ministry is committed to providing high quality, consistent income assistance services that are responsive to diverse needs and that people can count on no matter where or how they are delivered. ... The public can access these services through traditional channels such as by phone, face-to-face, email, online and fax, and more recently through additional self-serve options.”

This depicts a laudable service delivery model that is attentive to the diverse and particularly vulnerable population the Ministry is supposed to serve. Unfortunately, it does not presently accord with reality. Over the past decade, Ministry services have increasingly been moved online and to a centralized 1-866 number, while in-person services have been drastically cut.

Consequences of this transition are made apparent from first contact when seeking Ministry assistance. From the outset, applicants for income and disability assistance are directed to a lengthy, complex online application. In February 2017, despite widespread criticism, the Ministry further complicated the process, now requiring applicants to register for an online MySelfServe account (which requires applicants to have an email address and a BCeID) *before they can even apply for assistance*. While the Ministry states that it provides remote-based phone support to applicants who require accommodation,

this raises many of the same accessibility issues as the online application. Further, we understand that in practice, the Ministry does not proactively offer this option, and rarely provides such phone support when requested. The Ministry also claims that in-person support is available for completing applications at Ministry offices throughout the province. This support is inconsistently available and rarely, if ever, proactively offered as a service.

For those who are able to navigate the application process and become Ministry clients, many continue to have difficulties accessing services. With so many office closures in recent years, face-to-face services are harder to access, particularly in smaller communities. Where dedicated Ministry offices still exist, only a handful of clients are allowed in at a time (often with no washroom access) and many are forced to line up outside, often in highly visible areas, which can cause shame and embarrassment; this is particularly problematic for people with disabilities who find it difficult, if not impossible, to withstand the elements or stand for long periods of time. Frontline workers are also not empowered to provide a full range of services and are often directed to refer clients to the phone.

Despite the Ministry's full acceptance of most of the Ombudsperson's recommendations in *Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance*, those who have access to a phone continue to have very long wait times. Furthermore, the quality of information people receive over the phone (e.g., conflicting information between multiple workers) hasn't improved, and there are still frequent telephone glitches, such as, random disconnections while on hold. This is problematic both for people trying to access services through shared phones where they may be time-limited and for people trying to access the system using their own mobile phone where they have to pay for every minute spent on the call, including time spent on hold. To further complicate matters, not all issues can be resolved on the same call as services are "streamed" to different worker groups.

The MySelfServe online portal is not a realistic option for many clients (i.e. those who are not digitally literate, have language barriers or certain disabilities, or those who do not have access to computers and secure internet). Many that may otherwise find MySelfServe useful are frustrated that the portal does not allow clients to initiate a conversation; rather, they can provide only a single reply to Ministry-initiated messages.

Recommendations

- *Provide timely in-person individualized assistance to those who need it, reinstate in-person services where such services have been cut and empower front-line workers to provide the full scope of services. General Service BC offices are not an appropriate substitute for Ministry offices with specialized staff;*
- *Provide appropriate service delivery options to everyone who accesses Ministry services, with appropriate accommodations for people who are Deaf, people with communication disabilities, those with cognitive disabilities, mental health issues, language barriers, etc.;*
- *Provide computers and Ministry staff at every Ministry office for the purposes of helping applicants through the application process for income assistance and other supports;*
- *Modify the online application for income assistance so that it is not mandatory to create an email address and BCeID;*
- *Make the online application optional but still accessible;*
- *Increase the availability of workers in offices and call centres.*

Ministry Staff: Training & Culture

Issues

The Ministry's move from in-person service delivery to centralized and technology-based services has corresponded with a noticeable change in Ministry culture. Although many Ministry workers are reluctant to speak publicly about the many difficulties they face in their work, these difficulties have been well-documented, including in the BCGEU's [Choose Children](#) report. Workers have described frustration with the lack of support and dissatisfaction with technology-focused work; such dissatisfaction is clear, given the Ministry's extremely high turnover, with almost 75% of current staff having worked there for less than two years. Staff have said that training is inadequate and that workers are often thrown in without proper support. Unsurprisingly, this causes problems for clients as well, as workers are not equipped to work with people who are in crisis situations, and may be, for example, experiencing mental health breakdowns, depression, and/or desperation.

Centralization and the lack of in-person services has depersonalized Ministry services. The centralized phone system creates confusion, the spread of misinformation, and a lack of accountability (e.g. passing off decisions to the provincial service request 'queue'). Clients are forced to retell their story with each Ministry interaction, and Ministry workers often have difficulty locating client information in the computer system. Without individual case workers, it is difficult for clients and social workers from other ministries to obtain information about a file. Frontline workers in Ministry offices are not empowered to provide a full scope of services, nor to make decisions when clients come into the office with urgent requests. We understand that information that workers can share with clients is also restricted; there are certain policies that Ministry staff are not allowed to tell clients about unless they are directly asked. One worker shared with us that he was being penalized for taking time to ensure clients understood what he was saying because his effectiveness was being measured by how many times he "clicked" within the government computer system.

There is a desperate need to move the system away from a culture that focuses on surveillance and enforcement to approaches based on positive interactions that help people achieve improved outcomes. The current culture is exemplified by the Ministry's decision to invest significant resources into the Prevention & Loss Management services branch (as of November 13th, the government's directory lists 148 staff province-wide in this branch). A focus on compliance, complex eligibility criteria and verification of reporting requirements places a huge administrative burden on front-line workers and generates a culture of suspicion and policing. Resources should be re-allocated, so that front-line workers can be empowered to be case collaborators whose primary role is to act as supportive problem-solvers and system navigators that look for creative solutions to address issues.

Recommendations

- *Return to a system with individualized caseworkers and train staff how to interact empathetically with clients with a trauma-informed approach, as opposed to a system that depends on phone and internet and values staff solely for their technical skills;*
- *Re-orient Ministry focus from rules-based enforcement to creative problem solving, person-centred service delivery and system navigation;*
- *Reduce the complexity of criteria for eligibility and reporting requirements which place a huge administrative burden on front-line workers and creates a culture of suspicion and policing;*
- *Train Ministry staff in all aspects of the Employment and Assistance Worker ("EAW") role (as was done previously) rather than segregating workers into highly specialized "streams";*
- *Empower frontline workers to provide a full scope of services, to make decisions on service requests and to share relevant information with clients;*

- *Stop using caseload reduction as a measure of success for the Ministry; success measures for the Ministry includes poverty reduction, health & wellbeing.*
- *Adequately staffing the call centre to reduce wait times rather than arbitrarily limiting call duration.*

Arbitrary Barriers and Exemptions

Issues

The purpose of income and disability assistance should be to provide the supports that people need to flourish. We were glad to hear at a BC Poverty Reduction Coalition meeting on December 11th 2018 that Minister Simpson told us the Ministry no longer uses the language of “income of last resort” to refer to income and disability assistance. However, we need to ensure that not only language but also rules and regulations are updated to remove the ethos of poor-bashing, classism, and ableism that keeps people off the system, painting them as “undeserving” or unwilling to help themselves.

These rules and regulations create a culture of suspicion where funds that people need to live are immediately cut if somebody is accused of not complying with a “work plan” or could be cut off if they’re unable to comply with a Ministry request for information under s. 10 of the Act. This puts clients in impossible situations. It is difficult to appeal an unfair or wrong decision if your only source of income has been cut. Furthermore, much of the application process, such as the two-year independence test and the five-week work search for first time applicants or three-week wait for returning applicants, are impossible to comply with for people in desperate need of support.

Asset Limits, Arbitrary Exemptions

The system of asset and income limits with exemptions is arbitrary, unjust and unnecessarily complex. One example that we hear most often perfectly highlights the irrationality of the current system: the government clawback of CPP (including lump sum retroactive payments, survivor benefits, disability benefits, and retirement benefits) from people receiving welfare and disability. Unlike in Ontario, Alberta, the Northwest Territories, and Newfoundland and Labrador, if you are eligible to take out early CPP in BC, the government forces you to apply for it so that they can claw it back. The uproar over the CPP clawback is reminiscent of the campaign to end the child support clawback, and could be repeated again and again from clawbacks of most EI benefits to ICBC payouts to funds for education. Instead of taking on each clawback one at a time, we need an overhaul of the system.

Employability and Work Search Requirements

Each person’s pathway off of assistance will be unique, requiring differing combinations of education, training, work, and supported transitions to work; nobody should be pressured or forced off the system, particularly those currently struggling with mental health, addictions, health issues, children with special needs, and more. Employment supports that focus on self-determination, personal choice and control have the best evidence of success for folks that face employment barriers. Current exemptions to the work-search requirements are inaccessible and are often not proactively applied. This aspect of the system must be tailored to meet people where they are at, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach emphasizing work only.

Single parents are considered “employable” when their youngest child is 3 (rather than 7 as in 2001 or 12 in 1994). This decrease in the age limit for children is entirely arbitrary and has no basis within the experiences of single parents. There is no reason why this cannot be increased or removed alongside other work search requirements

Definitions of Spouse

The current definitions of both “dependent” and “spouse” in the Employment and Assistance Act (“EA Act”) and the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act (“EAPWD Act”) disproportionately and negatively impact women by forcing them to financially depend on another person. This places women at heightened risk of relationship violence, undermines their independence, and prohibits them from entering new relationships that could eventually provide mutual support.

Division between Shelter and Support Rates

People who are homeless and don’t pay rent typically cannot access the shelter rate. Furthermore, MSDPR shelter information forms currently have to be signed by a landlord/property manager. Some landlords aren’t willing to sign the forms and some income and disability assistance recipients are nervous to ask. This process also creates opportunity for landlords to discriminate against potential tenants based on source of income. While there have been recent policy amendments to make clear that the landlord could also be someone renting at the unit, and doesn’t need to be a property owner, we’ve seen that this is not being consistently applied, and some staff won’t accept a signature unless it is from a property owner. While current income and disability assistance rates are inadequate, they are even more inadequate without the shelter portion.

Recommendations

- *The two-year independence test (Section 18 of the EA Act) and the five-week work search for first time applicants or three-week wait for returning applicants (Section 4.1 of the Regulations to the EA Act) must be discontinued immediately;*
- *Significantly increase asset limit for those accessing income assistance to at least \$10,000.*
- *Significantly increase earnings exemptions and change the monthly earnings exemption for IA to an annual earnings exemption. Include annual earnings exemptions for hardship recipients under both EA and EAPWD Act*
- *Rewriting “EA Act Regulation; Schedule B – Net Income Calculation” and “EAPWD Act Regulation; Schedule B – Section 1, Net Income Calculation, Deduction and Exemption Rules” to replace specific arbitrary exemptions with broader, all-encompassing exemptions; for example, instead of exempting only CPP surviving child’s benefits and disabled contributor’s child benefits, exempting all CPP benefits; or instead of exempting payments made under specific settlement agreements, exempting payments from all settlement agreements or legal proceedings.*
- *Exempt all Employment Insurance and Workers' Compensation Board benefits for people receiving hardship, income and disability assistance.*
- *Allow Ministry staff to provide crisis supplements proactively without requiring the request of individuals in crisis;*
- *Remove maximum amounts on crisis supplements. A crisis is a crisis and people should get the support they need;*
- *Amend the Employment Assistance Act and the EAPWD Act to ensure that the definitions of “dependent” and “spouse” reflect actual levels of financial dependence in relationships as recommended by West Coast LEAF, specifically removing “indicates a parental role for the person's dependent child” in definition of “dependant” in EA Act/EAPWD Act, and changing the definition of spouse to two years co-habitation (from 3 months) to be consistent with other provincial statutory schemes.¹*

¹ [Amending The Employment and Assistance Act and the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act to Better Support Women’s Financial Independence](#), West Coast LEAF

- *Remove compliance with an employment plan as a condition of eligibility for people receiving income and hardship assistance under the EA Act.*
- *Allow all people and family units including single mothers receiving IA and PWD to access any education, program of studies and training available to all British Columbians, and exempt all bursaries, grants, loans and other funding opportunities, whether privately or publicly funded;*
- *Retain the Single Parents Employment Initiative that provides tuition and transportation coverage but extend the one year of tuition coverage to multi-year degrees and training programs and any programs chosen by a recipient and remove the restricted list of eligible careers and programs. Retain all other benefits offered through the program.*
- *Combine the shelter and support rates into a single payment.*
- *Remove citizenship requirement from legislation.*
- *End the practice of denying income, hardship, and disability assistance because of outstanding warrants.*
- *Amend the EA Act and the EAPWD Act to allow benefits to continue during an appeal with no repayment required if the appeal is lost.*

Incongruences with other Ministries

Issues

Conflicting regulations between different ministries and levels of government have had a devastating impact on people and families. For example, the requirements within MCFD of how many bedrooms a family should have per child can be impossible to find with MSDPR shelter assistance rates.

Furthermore, when parents have their children removed by MCFD, they lose their child tax benefit and can be evicted from their homes, making it difficult to return their children. Another example is that when clients are incarcerated, their welfare file is closed. When they come out, there is no way to reopen it and they have to do a whole new application including the three week wait; this can lead to increased instances of homelessness and instability.

Recommendations

- *As part of the upcoming poverty reduction plan, align regulations from different ministries so that they do not harm people living in poverty;*
- *Legislate a Poverty/Equity Lens at Treasury Board to ensure no Ministry can make decisions that will hurt people in poverty;*
- *Create an independent, funded Office/Advocate to monitor the poverty reduction plan's implementation.*

Conclusion

A Ministry that is dedicated to poverty reduction should be designed to meet the needs of people currently living in poverty and help to lift them out of poverty. We envision a culture of care, instead of a culture of suspicion, with better training and supports for staff, and a serious commitment to accessibility for clients; an accessible system should not require the help of an advocate to apply, make a call, and/or address an issue.

Such a Ministry would be a respectful and supportive environment, where somebody needing support can walk into an office and meet face to face with a worker who treats them with dignity and respect. Work with us to come up with tangible, time-sensitive changes to the culture and accessibility of the Ministry. Commit to an ethical, dignified assistance system that works to actively lift people out of poverty and end poverty altogether.

Further Reading

- [Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC](#), CCPA
- [Access Denied: Shut out of BC's Welfare System](#), BCPIAC
- [Letter re: Accessibility at the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction](#), BCPIAC
- [SMABC Submission for the Development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy for BC: Human Rights Affirmed](#), Single Mothers Alliance
- [Sharing our Realities](#) Citizens for Accessible Neighbourhoods and BC Poverty Reduction Coalition
- [Amending The Employment and Assistance Act and the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act to Better Support Women's Financial Independence](#), West Coast LEAF
- [Human Rights Denied: Single Mothers on Social Assistance in British Columbia](#), Brodsky, Buckley, Day and Young
- [Walking the line to put their families first: Lone mothers navigating welfare and work in British Columbia](#), First Call BC, SFU, Single Mothers' Alliance BC, SPARC BC
- [Choose Children](#), BCGEU

About the authors

The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (BCPRC) is an alliance of organizations that have come together to raise awareness about poverty in BC and improve the health and well-being of all British Columbians. The Coalition was launched in 2009 and has now gained the support of over 400 organizations throughout the province in the call for a strong, comprehensive poverty reduction strategy with legislated targets and timelines to significantly reduce poverty, inequality, and homelessness in BC. Our work is grounded in the foundation of universal human rights.

The Raise the Rates Coalition is a coalition of community groups and organizations concerned with the level of poverty and homelessness in British Columbia. Raise the Rates calls on the government to do many things to reduce provincial poverty rates including raising welfare rates to the federal market basket measure and removing arbitrary, punitive barriers to receiving welfare

Citizens for Accessible Neighbourhoods (C.A.N) is a non-profit with projects throughout British Columbia. C.A.N. advocates on behalf of people with disabilities, presents educational courses about inclusion and accessibility, produces and performs accessibility audits, improves access to information via our website, a hub of resources, including a database for adaptive sports and recreation in British Columbia, and creates and delivers presentations about barrier-free communities on subjects such as transportation, inclusive streetscapes, employment, disability awareness, inclusive playgrounds, intersectionality, attitudinal accessibility and more.

The Richmond Poverty Response Committee (RPRC) is a group of community volunteers comprised of local social services, the faith community, community organizations and members of the public including those affected by poverty. The Committee's goal is to work towards alleviating the effects of poverty in our community. The RPRC has a strong track record of identifying gaps in services in our community, working towards a solution and identifying funding sources and partnering with a suitable agency.

Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS) is the only organization in Victoria providing free, face-to-face legal advocacy for people with income assistance, disability benefits, employment standards, and tenancy issues. TAPS also provides legal education and training through seminars, and produces has a newsletter, TAPROOT with updated legal information that is widely distributed throughout Greater Victoria.

West Coast LEAF is the first and only organization in BC dedicated to using the law as a strategy to work towards an equal and just society for all women and people who experience gender-based discrimination. Since our founding in 1985, we have helped bring about some of Canada's most important feminist victories for reproductive rights, workplace standards, fairness in family law, legal protections from sexual harassment, and more.

UFCW 1518 represents over 20,000 workers in a diverse range of industries, including community health, seasonal agriculture, and professional services. We improve quality of life for our members and their communities by standing together to fight for fairness. We are a democratic, member-led union that is built on a foundation of integrity and respect. We work hard for our members, fighting for higher wages, better benefits, job security and fair treatment. We also use our voice to speak up on issues that impact our communities, such as implementing a living wage and standing against discrimination.