

## BCPRC Submission for the Basic Income Committee

January 2019

### Introduction

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 an **accountable, bold and 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.

We have a diverse membership of over 90 organizations throughout BC that bring their collective strength and support to this work, including community and non-profit groups, faith groups, health organizations, indigenous organizations, immigrant service agencies, businesses, labour organizations, and social policy groups (see Appendix A). Our office is on the unceded and occupied territory of the sə́lilwətaʔt /Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations.

**We congratulate the BC government for their commitment to implement a poverty reduction plan for BC.** After almost a decade of calling for action to address the root causes of BC's high poverty rates, it is good to see a government paying attention to the evidence. When the cost of poverty – \$8-9 billion per year – far exceeds that of an accountable, bold and comprehensive poverty reduction plan, it is smart policy to invest in eliminating and preventing poverty.

We also welcome the decision to study the potential for a basic income approach through modelling and consultation by an expert committee as opposed to launching a pilot program. There are ethical concerns with pilot programs, including the potential that people within the 'control group' may be trapped at low levels of income and, if people receive higher payments, they may be returned to previously inadequate levels of income after the pilot is over. There are also issues of privacy and consent in participating in the study.

The membership of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition consists of groups with **no determined position** on basic income, as well as both **supporters** of basic income, who highlight the value of the lack of stigma and conditionality, and **opponents** to basic income, who caution against the potential of providing a government subsidy to low-wage employers and the further dismantling of public services (housing, health, education, child care, etc.)

As such, the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition has no official position in support or in opposition to a basic income approach so this submission is focused on principles that must be at the foundation of any form of basic income in order for the intended outcome to be of benefit to those in poverty.

Our membership agrees that basic income should not be implemented if it cannot meet ***all of the following conditions***. These conditions balance the vision that supporters of basic income have for a more dignified system while taking into account the concerns that opponents of basic income have about making systemic issues worse for people in poverty (also included in point form in Appendix B).

## Human Rights

Basic income must be grounded in a human rights foundation.

As described by David Green, chair of the provincial basic income research committee, at Minister Simpson's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction meeting on December 7, the three main principles of basic income are 1) no cracks, 2) no shame, and 3) adequacy. One of the most important tasks of this committee is an analysis of our current income assistance system based on these principles because the shift to a system grounded in those values has the potential to fulfill our international human rights commitments and ensure dignity and respect for people in poverty.

The lack of stigma and discrimination at the foundation of a basic income approach would lead to the removal of the surveillance and bureaucratic hurdles embedded in our current income assistance system (see Appendix C). This, along with the adequacy of basic income, provides a step towards fulfilling our international human rights promises, including "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions" (International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966; ratified by Canada in 1976).

Regardless of their position on basic income, our membership agrees that our current income and disability assistance system is inadequate and inaccessible. We have presented a policy brief to the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR) (see Appendix C) documenting 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. The memo explains that, "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."

By definition, basic income should not have eligibility requirements (for example, the work search requirements), nor conditions or long wait times to access the income needed to live with dignity. "Earned" and "unearned" income or any other benefits should not create clawbacks below this income threshold. Basic income must be given regardless of work status or marital status. All this ensures 'no cracks,' which should more accurately be understood, in relation to our current system, as no more denials or displacements. As BCPRC member, Basic Income Vancouver, states, "[b]asic Income comes from a simple premise – that we have an obligation as Canadians to provide for the basic needs of people in our society. We have a duty to provide our people enough needs security. As a society we get to determine how much we can afford. Who we provide for defines us as a society."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Nicholas. *Basic Income Vancouver Guiding Principles: An ideological response to the Caledon Institute's paper "Guaranteed Income or Guaranteed Incomes?"* Basic Income Vancouver, January 23 2016. <http://basicincomevancouver.org/documents/BasicIncomeVancouver-CaledonResponse.pdf>

## Poverty Reduction

The aim of a basic income system should be poverty reduction, as opposed to cost savings. Basic income must therefore be implemented *within* a comprehensive poverty reduction plan not *to replace* a poverty reduction plan. Successful implementation would need to see basic income as a pillar of a poverty reduction plan that includes living wages, strong employment standards, child care, education, housing and health care. No social program (monetary or otherwise) should be cut for basic income. Instead universal basic services would need to be implemented and strengthened in order to ensure that increased incomes are not eaten up by increased costs. As the government builds social and co-op housing that low income people can afford, rent control on the unit should be implemented to avoid tenant eviction and increased income going to landlords.

Nobody should be worse off due to receiving basic income payments. Basic income should be in addition to appropriate supports and benefits - recipients should not lose benefits (monetary and non-monetary) if they receive basic income payments. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives simulated various potential basic income models and find that cancelling “existing income transfer programs in favour of a single basic income results either in dramatically higher levels of poverty, or ethically and politically unsupportable compromises where seniors are pushed into poverty to lift up adults and children.”<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, before any new system is introduced, we expect that this expert committee would have conducted a rigorous evaluation that demonstrates that the model would outperform the current income assistance system in terms of reducing poverty and improving other measures of health and well-being for all.

Furthermore, basic income provision should have the ability to respond and support someone in an urgent financial crisis. As we wrote in our policy brief to the MSDPR (see Appendix C), “a crisis is a crisis and people should get the support they need.”

## Addressing Inequality

Basic income should not serve as a wage supplement for low wage employers. Jean Swanson explains that, if this point is not addressed, basic income “could be a plan that would simply shift the burden of paying wages from corporate employers to mostly middle income taxpayers.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important that the basic income (or alternatively income assistance rates) be set at a high enough level that people can live with dignity – we recommend the Market Basket Measure as a threshold; and that a basic income be accompanied by substantial increases to the minimum wage until it reaches the living wage. Higher income households and corporations should pay an increased, more fair share of taxes (at the federal, provincial and municipal level) in order to provide basic income/higher assistance rates and improved public services.

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<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, David. *A Policymaker's Guide to Basic Income* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, October 2016. [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/10/Policymakers\\_Guide\\_to\\_Basic\\_Income.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/10/Policymakers_Guide_to_Basic_Income.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Swanson, Jean. *Guaranteed Annual Income: Is This Really What We Want?*, Canadian Woman Studies, 2004, Volume 23, Numbers 3,4, p.199-200 <https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/download/6259/5447>

These points are described in more detail in the Living Wage for Families submission:

*First, it is important to clarify the difference between the minimum wage and the living wage. While the minimum wage is a baseline threshold for wages legislated by the provincial government, the living wage is an optional, higher wage that employers can pay voluntarily.*

*The Living Wage for Families Campaign believes that everyone who works deserves a living wage. The living wage is the amount that a family – calculated as two adults, each working full time, with two young children – needs to live in their community. We calculate the expenses that the family would expect to pay on housing, food, child care, transportation, and so forth in their local economy; we also factor in both provincial and federal taxes, transfers, benefits, and other policies that would impact the living wage family. The living wage is recalculated annually to reflect changes in the cost of living as well as new or modified government programs. Therefore, the living wage provides an important benchmark not only of the wages workers need to get by in their community, but also of the interaction between wages and government policies.*

*For example, in our 2018 living wage calculation in Metro Vancouver, we found that the median rent had increased by a whopping 6.7 per cent from 2017. At the same time, two substantial policy interventions by the provincial government had also taken effect: the 50 per cent reduction to MSP premiums, and the Child Care Fee Reduction Initiative. Due to the high cost of housing, the overall living wage in Metro Vancouver increased by \$0.29 per hour over 2017, but this increase would have been even higher if not for these two government policies.*

*This example shows how wages and government programs are inherently linked when it comes to the effect on families. This is why we reiterate that living wages are part of an accountable, bold, and comprehensive poverty reduction plan which also includes income supports, child care, education, and housing. Should BC implement a basic income program, it would need to comprise only part of this overall strategy, recognizing that such a program would interact with wages and existing government programs to affect how families make ends meet. The umbrella of the forthcoming poverty reduction strategy should provide a guideline for ensuring that any measures taken are done so in order to reduce poverty and suffering.*

*Basic income must also not serve as a wage supplement for employers. If a basic income program were implemented in BC, it could affect the living wage calculations such that the amount a family would need through wages may be lower, depending on the amount of the basic income payment. However, this must not be an excuse for employers to pay their workers low wages. The skills, expertise, and time of British Columbians must be honoured through fair compensation for their labour, regardless of the type of government income support available.*

*...The work of the Fair Wages Commission will be directly relevant to the work of this Committee. The third piece of the Fair Wages Commission's mandate is to "advise the government on ways to begin to address the discrepancy between the minimum wage*

*and a living wage in our province.”<sup>4</sup> Any actions the government may take to address that discrepancy – be it through increasing the minimum wage, implementing a basic income to fill the gap, expanding social services, or other actions – would again need to comprise part of an overarching poverty reduction strategy. Government activities related to poverty reduction must not happen in silos between ministries or committees; instead, all poverty reduction work needs to be informed by concurrent initiatives to be most effective, comprehensive, and efficient.*

## **Cost**

This submission has focused on a particular aspect of the basic income question because the Coalition views adequacy and accessibility of income supports as the fundamental issue. However, the other considerations that the research committee has been tasked with deserve some mention: can a province implement basic income without federal support? And, could basic income provide a transition in response to growing automation of jobs?

In relation to the first question, the concern may be cost and a simple answer is yes, we could afford it but, depending on the approach and holding to the condition of not cutting other social programs, likely only with a more progressive, increased tax regime – see David Macdonald’s piece for the costing associated with various models.<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, we can afford to raise income assistance rates to meet the cost of basic needs now. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has recently estimated that raising welfare and disability rates to 75% of the poverty line (Market Basket Measure) would cost \$365 million while lifting everyone on income assistance to the poverty line would cost \$1.16 billion, only 2% of the provincial budget.<sup>6</sup>

Lifting people out of poverty also saves money. It’s an economic investment in our province. Over the long term, a poverty reduction plan that puts in place strong, preventative measures to tackle both the depth and breadth of poverty costs far less than the cost of poverty, at \$8 to 9 billion per year for health and criminal justice costs, as well as lost tax revenue. Let’s stop mopping the floor and fix the roof.

Perhaps there is further worry that cost will balloon as people move to a province with a more generous and accessible provision of income. This is often an argument underlying caution over increasing income and disability assistance rates. However, the evidence does not back up this concern. The rates provided under Alberta’s disability program, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), are considerably higher than the disability rates provided in BC, and Alberta has not seen a significant rise in caseload. The substantial increase to the rates was made in 2012 but the increase in caseload over the next few years continues to rise steadily as in previous years with no uncharacteristic jump.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> BC Fair Wages Commission, <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/fairwagescommission/>

<sup>5</sup> Macdonald, David. *A Policymaker’s Guide to Basic Income* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, October 2016. [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/10/Policymakers\\_Guide\\_to\\_Basic\\_Income.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2016/10/Policymakers_Guide_to_Basic_Income.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Klein, Seth and Igluka Ivanova. *Deep poverty: BC can – and should – end it*. May 24, 2018. <https://www.policynote.ca/deep-poverty/>

<sup>7</sup> Maytree Foundation. *Social Assistance Summaries: Alberta 2017*. Published April 2018. [https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Social\\_Assistance\\_Summaries\\_AB.pdf](https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Social_Assistance_Summaries_AB.pdf)

This concern overestimates the mobility of people in poverty. In our poverty survey conducted in spring 2018, we heard stories of people not being able to travel to funerals of loved ones;<sup>8</sup> they do not have the means to travel in search of ‘greener grass.’ It also underestimates the connection of poor people to their communities. Our income supports should be set at a level that ensures a life of dignity for all not on the basis of fear and cost-savings.

## Automation

In response to the issue of automation, we need to be careful about the assumptions we are making. One of these is that work will disappear. Many of us have heard the statistic drawn from a 2013 Oxford paper that declared that 47% of jobs in the United States could be replaced by machines in the next decade or two. However, in a recent article, Bruno Dobrusin, coordinator of the One Million Climate Jobs campaign in the United States, highlights that “a 2017 [McKinsey study](#), drawing on similar datasets as the 2013 Oxford research, found that only 5% of jobs in the US could be fully automated, but that about 60% of American jobs could be partly automated. In other words, automation does not mean that human work *must* disappear, only that it could become more productive.”<sup>9</sup>

Dubrosin goes on to articulate two other common assumptions about automation as: workers will not benefit; and automation is the most pressing issue for labour (as opposed to, say, low wages and precarious employment). In response, he states, “people and politics – not machines – will determine how workers fare. If we accept the view that technology will increase overall productivity (a point that remains disputed given the low levels of productivity growth in OECD countries during the last decade), then workers and political leaders could focus on advocating for a better work-life balance. The fight for an eight-hour workday was waged more than a century ago, and the spaces created by the current discussion allow for negotiating a shorter working week. Some unions are already doing this; more should follow.”<sup>10</sup> This leads to a political solution that prioritizes supporting unions and their work in protecting and enhancing workers’ rights.

## Conclusion

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition members agree that the conditions articulated in this submission are the necessary elements of any basic income system: a basic income must be grounded in a human rights foundation; it should be embedded in an accountable, bold and comprehensive poverty reduction plan that provides universal basic services as well as accessible and adequate incomes; and it should not become a subsidy for low wage employers who need to provide living wages.

Regardless of whether the government decides to implement a basic income, the principles outlined here are critical for them to consider in the provision of any form of social safety net for all British Columbians.

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<sup>8</sup> BC Poverty Reduction Coalition. *Health and Social Impacts of Economic Insecurity: Summary of Poverty Reduction Responses*. July 2018. <http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Survey-based-Provincial-Poverty-Reduction-Strategy-Report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Dubrosin, Bruno. *Rewriting the Future of Work*. January 9, 2019. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/organized-labor-protecting-workers-from-automation-by-bruno-dobrusin-2019-01>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Appendix A: Current Members of BCPRC

Access Pro Bono  
ACORN BC  
Active Support Against Poverty Housing Society  
Africa Great Lakes Networking Foundation  
Association of Neighbourhood Houses BC  
Basic Income Vancouver  
BC Alliance on Mental Health/Illness & Addiction  
BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils  
BC Disability Caucus  
BC Federation of Labour  
BC Federation of Students  
BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union  
BC Food Systems Network  
BC Government and Service Employees' Union  
BC Health Coalition  
BC Healthy Communities  
BC Alliance for Healthy Living  
BC Non-Profit Housing Association  
BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre  
BC Teachers' Federation  
Burnaby Community Services Society  
Canada Without Poverty  
Canadian Cancer Society, BC & Yukon Division  
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - BC  
Canadian Federation of University Women BC Council  
Canadian Mental Health Association - BC Division  
Carnegie Community Action Project  
Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House  
Check Your Head: The Youth Global Education Network  
Citizens for Accessible Neighbourhoods  
Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC  
Columbia Institute  
Community First Foundation  
Community Legal Assistance Society  
Community Social Planning Council, Victoria  
Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC  
Cranbrook & District Social Planning Society  
Disability Alliance BC  
Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House  
Early Childhood Educators of BC  
Exchange Inner City  
Faith in Action  
Federation of Community Social Services of BC  
Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC  
First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition  
Gordon Neighbourhood House  
Grandview Woodland Food Connection  
Greater Trail Community Skills Centre  
Greater Vancouver Food Bank  
Health Officer's Council of BC  
Health Sciences Association of BC  
Hospital Employees' Union  
Interspiritual Sustainability Council  
Jewish Seniors Alliance of Greater Vancouver  
KAIROS Parksville/Qualicum  
Kiwassa Neighbourhood House  
Living Wage for Families Campaign  
Megaphone Magazine  
Metro Vancouver Alliance  
Migrant Workers' Centre  
Mom2Mom Child Poverty Initiative  
MOSAIC  
MoveUP  
New Westminster & District Labour Council  
North Shore Disability Resource Centre  
North Shore Homelessness Task Force  
Oxfam Canada  
Pacific Community Resources Society  
Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education  
Pivot Legal Society  
Positive Living BC  
PovNet Society  
The Union Protein Project  
Public Health Association of BC  
Raise the Rates Coalition  
Revelstoke Poverty Reduction Working Group  
Richmond Poverty Response Committee  
Single Mothers' Alliance of BC  
SPARC BC  
Society for Children and Youth of BC  
Streams of Justice  
Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition  
Together Against Poverty Society  
UFCW 1518  
Unifor  
Union Gospel Mission  
United Way of Greater Victoria  
United Way of the Lower Mainland  
Vancity Community Foundation  
Vancity Credit Union  
Vancouver & District Labour Council  
Vancouver Foundation  
Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks  
Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter  
Vancouver Tenants' Union  
Vibrant Abbotsford  
Weekend Fuelbag  
West Coast Women's LEAF  
Women Against Violence Against Women  
YWCA Metro Vancouver

**Appendix B: Basic income should not be implemented in BC unless it meets ALL of these conditions:**

- Basic income must be grounded in a human rights foundation
- Basic income must be implemented *within* a comprehensive poverty reduction plan not to *replace* a poverty reduction plan
  - Successful implementation of Basic Income will need to see Living Wage, Basic Income, Childcare, Education and Housing as independently related components of a poverty reduction strategy
  - Provision of housing services/subsidies must be separate and not subsidized directly or indirectly by any Basic Income
  - Rent control on the unit should be implemented to avoid tenant eviction and increased income going to landlords
- The aim of the basic income policy should be poverty reduction, not cost savings
- The basic income level (or alternatively income assistance rates) should be set at a high enough level that people can live with dignity
- There should not be eligibility requirements (for example the work search requirements), nor conditions, or long wait times to access income needed to live with dignity. Earned income or any other benefits should not create clawbacks on this income.
- Nobody should be worse off due to receiving basic income payments
  - Basic income should be **in addition** to appropriate supports and benefits - recipients should not lose benefits (monetary and non-monetary) if they receive basic income payments
- Basic income provision should have the ability to respond and support someone in urgent financial crisis
- Basic Income must be given to all individuals regardless of work status or marital status
- No social program (monetary or otherwise) should be cut for basic income
- Basic income should not serve as a wage supplement for low wage employers - minimum wages must be increased to \$15 immediately and to the living wage over time
- Higher income households and corporations should pay an increased, more fair share of taxes (at the federal, provincial and municipal level) in order to provide basic income/higher assistance rates and improved public services

- Before any new system is introduced, there should be rigorous modelling and comprehensive research that demonstrates a basic income outperforms the current income assistance system in terms of reducing poverty and improving other measures of health and well-being including, but not limited to, consideration of:
  - health measures such as those collected in the annual Canadian Community Survey including: self-described physical and mental well-being, life satisfaction, stress, suicidal thoughts and attempts, chronic conditions, unmet healthcare needs, access to physical activities, health insurance coverage, food security status, social provisions and access to homecare services
  - security of housing, rent increases
  - quality of jobs/income
  - access to affordable, quality child care
  - emergency visits and drug use
  - participation in education (both K-12 and post-secondary)
  - individuals as opposed to households

These conditions address many of the Committee's questions pertaining to the design, population groups, pros and cons, benefit delivery, and financial considerations of a basic income. A gender-based, intersectional analysis should be considered in all these elements. Importantly, it is our hope that the last point will be achieved through your Committee's work in this consultation and other research and analysis activities.



## Appendix C

# 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 13<sup>th</sup>, 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> [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.