

THE PROVINCE

Adrienne Montani: End of clawbacks is welcome news for single parents receiving assistance

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Rebecca Bodo, with her five-year-old daughter Sophey, is pleased that a policy change announced in the recent B.C. budget means that child-support payments will soon no longer be clawed back from single parents on income and disability assistance. — submitted photo



Life for Rebecca Bodo's five-year-old daughter Sophey just got a little bit brighter with the B.C. budget announcement of an end to the clawback of child support from single parents on income and disability assistance.

While \$400 a month may not sound like much to some, for Sophey it will mean no more trips to the food bank. Sophey's mom is unable to work and is on disability assistance. Her dad has been paying child support, but B.C. government policy has deducted 100 per cent of those payments from Rebecca's disability cheque. Sophey has been missing out on \$4,800 per year that could have bought her nutritious food, clothing, school supplies or even a bicycle.

This policy change in the budget means that, as of Sept. 1, the government will finally stop picking Sophey's pocket. The average monthly child-support payment in B.C. is just over \$300, but for families living in the deep poverty caused by inadequate income or disability assistance rates, even being able to keep a modest \$50 or \$100 will make a big difference.

In addition to Sophey, some 5,400 other children will now benefit from the child support being paid on their behalf. This powerful impact is why the First Call Coalition advocates for better public policy to improve the lives of children and youth.

Of course this should have happened many years ago. Since 2007, in our annual B.C. Child Poverty Report Cards, the First Call Coalition has been recommending that government end this clawback, because child support belongs to the child. Many of our coalition partners and allies, such as the Elizabeth Fry Society, West Coast LEAF, Community Legal Assistance Society, Inclusion B.C., the Canadian Mental Health Association, B.C. ACORN, Raise the Rates and the Single Mothers' Alliance, spoke up about the urgent need to rectify this policy and its negative impacts on child well-being. This call has been reinforced in recent years by the official opposition and the B.C. legislature's finance committee in its budget recommendations.

With single mothers like Rebecca courageously sharing their stories of hardship, and dads speaking up about how unfair it was that the money they paid never benefited their children, this hard-fought victory was finally won.

Yet it shouldn't have been so hard to convince government to respect Sophey's right to receive support from both her parents, as promised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It shouldn't have taken so long for the provincial government to do the right thing.

But to their credit, they did finally do the right thing and around the province parents like Rebecca are celebrating with their children. We applaud the government for listening and responding to what they heard on this issue.

Government has also responded positively to our recommendation to end the requirement for parents to assign their right to seek or enforce family maintenance to the government as a condition of eligibility for income or disability assistance. This is another victory that will help protect and restore the right of women to manage their personal relationships on their own and their children's best interests.

When they judge it to be safe and appropriate, they will now be able to voluntarily ask for government help to obtain and enforce a child-support order.

Sophey and 5,400 other poor children have a better chance of reaching their full potential thanks to this policy change, but they still face many barriers.

There were many missed opportunities in the new budget to support the healthy development of B.C.'s most vulnerable children. Our 2014 Child Poverty Report Card (still1in5.ca) proposes 15 more provincial recommendations that were not acted on, including the call for government to adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines.

First Call was also looking for the budget to contain a substantial investment in a new plan for affordable quality child care, increased income-assistance rates, a higher provincial minimum wage and policies to reduce debt levels for post-secondary students. We were disappointed to see the generosity accorded to the highest income earners through tax breaks was not matched in the treatment of vulnerable children and the services they rely on. A budget is not balanced if the needs of the province's children are going unmet.

*Adrienne Montani is provincial co-ordinator of **First Call: B.C. Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition***

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