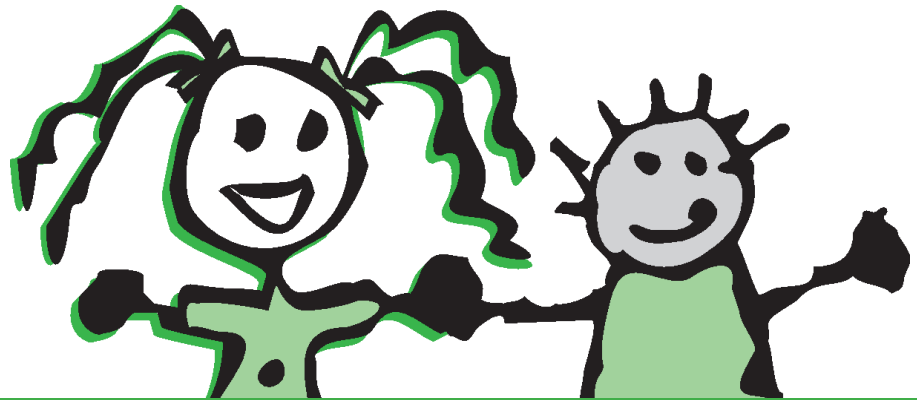




first call

BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition



LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR CHILDREN

A Community Action Toolkit

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This report was funded by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnerships Program. The opinions and interpretations in the report are those of First Call and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Canada.

The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

FIRST CALL is committed to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. One of the values flowing from the convention is the principle of economic justice:

- Economic justice is based upon ensuring that all families have a standard of living that provides for adequate nutrition, housing, and childcare.
- Economic justice supports healthy physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development, and assures access to health, educational, cultural, leisure, and recreational opportunities.
- Economic justice rests on the creation of an equitable economic base.

FIRST CALL provides local communities and organizations with information, tools and other supports to assist them in their advocacy on behalf of children and youth. Tools include things like election surveys, publications, poverty report cards, videos, e-mail networks, posters, and policy analysis. We are supported in our work by donations and contributions from various levels of government, private foundations, our partner organizations and individuals.



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Who We Are

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a cross-sectoral, non-partisan coalition. The Coalition is made up of over 75 provincial/regional partner organizations and 28 local communities mobilizing for children and youth. In addition, First Call has a network of hundreds of community groups and individuals.

Our partners work together on public education, community mobilization and policy advocacy to ensure that all children and youth have the opportunities and resources required to achieve their full potential and to participate in the challenges of creating a better society.

The focus of this toolkit is on public policies and programs that can reduce child and family poverty and income inequality. Policy changes, at all levels of government, have the potential to make lasting improvements in the lives of many children and families by tackling the root causes of their poverty and their social exclusion.

The Development of this Kit

BC has seen dramatic changes in social policy over the years. First Call tracks policy and reviews important research. We engage a broad range of experts who work together to make communities stronger and more inclusive.

In BC we have not yet succeeded in building a policy and program framework that consistently supports the health and well-being of children and their families. This kit is one of First Call's initiatives to encourage advocacy and action aimed at reducing poverty, economic inequality and social exclusion.

It is meant to be used by people and communities around BC. We invite you to join us in raising awareness of the problem of poverty in our midst and helping to build the public and political will to act. We welcome your suggestions for ways this material can be improved.

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Leveling the Playing Field for Children: A Community Action Toolkit

SECTION 1: Introduction

We view society's toleration of poverty as a fundamental threat to stability in Canada and the rest of the world. Systemic poverty is an unjustifiable burden to millions of people, which results in paralyzing costs to society. It perpetuates a vicious cycle by limiting opportunity and repressing the human spirit. The correlation between poverty and most serious social problems is a stunning indictment of society's continuing toleration of poverty.—From the Maytree Foundation vision statement

1.1 Introduction

Canada normally ranks near the top or at the top of the annual United Nations Human Development Index of the best places to live in the world. Despite this glowing acknowledgement by the international community, more than 4.8 million Canadians - one Canadian in six – were living in poverty at last count, according to the Statistics Canada low income cut-offs before taxes and government transfer payments. More than 1.1 million of those poor people were children under the age of 18. These are staggering statistics for a country as fortunate as Canada, as noted repeatedly by committees of the United Nations.

Poverty rates in Canada go up and down with each economic cycle, but there has been limited lasting progress in the fight against poverty. The one big success story is poverty among seniors. Poverty rates for people 65 and older have fallen dramatically because of government programs like Old Age Security and the Canada Pension Plan.

Poverty rates for most other groups of Canadians are about the same as they were when Statistics Canada first started publishing annual poverty statistics in 1980. Poverty rates for single parents have come down slightly over the years, but remain shamefully high.

When it comes to child poverty, British Columbia has a truly deplorable record – the highest child poverty rate of any Canadian province for four consecutive years, including 2005. Here are some figures for 2005:

- One in five BC children lived in poverty – a shocking 20.9 percent or 174,000 children
- The poverty rate for children living with lone-parent mothers was 48.1%. That was more than three times the poverty rate of 15.3% for children living in two-parent families.
- Aboriginal people, new immigrants and people with disabilities and their children also have poverty rates that are much higher than the BC population at large.
- Many of the food bank users in BC are children - 38% of food bank users as of the last published survey from March 2006.

What are the reasons for this troubling legacy of neglect and exclusion? More importantly, what can we do to change it? This toolkit looks at the systemic foundations that create and sustain poverty and income inequality and highlights the public policies that we need to build a better Canada.

1.2 Leveling the Playing Field: What Does it All Mean?

CHARITY VS. JUSTICE:

Many organizations and individuals support efforts to provide relief and services to people in need. These needed services, often called charitable works, are important and serve to reduce the harm of living in poverty. Services such as food banks and clothing exchanges, for example, meet immediate needs and can help build a sense of community responsibility for caring for each other. However, these charitable responses must be complemented by broader policy, program and structural changes that reduce and eliminate the need for charity by reducing and eliminating the incidence of child and family poverty.

DEFINING POVERTY

There is no single, universally accepted definition of poverty. The prevailing view in Canada is that poverty refers to income levels so low that they keep people out of the mainstream of life. Some people characterize poverty as social exclusion and argue that fighting poverty promotes a more inclusive society.

• Low Income Cut-Off (LICO)

The LICO is a measure developed by Statistics Canada that is used to identify households that are substantially worse off than the average. Data from the Survey of Household Spending is used to determine the percentage of income that households typically spend on food, shelter and clothing. The LICO identifies households that are using at least 20% more of their income than the average household on necessities, putting them in dire circumstances. It is adjusted based upon family and community size. It can be calculated on before-tax or after-tax income. While the LICO is used by many researchers as a measure of poverty, Statistics Canada does not call it a poverty line.

• Market Basket Measure (MBM)

The MBM was developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). The MBM sets a cost for goods and services (food, shelter, clothing, transportation and other necessities) needed to support a family. HRSDC uses a 'reference family' of one adult male, one adult female and two children as the basis for its calculations. The amounts are adjusted to reflect families of different sizes and different geographical areas.

While some feel the MBM more accurately reflects the cost of living and poverty, others advise to proceed with caution. As the MBM is relatively new, it lacks years of data for comparative purposes.

INCOME INEQUALITY

Income inequality refers to the gap between the richest and the poorest. There is long-standing and ample evidence that a disproportionate distribution of wealth negatively affects more than those at the very bottom of the income scale. A majority of Canadian families report that they are feeling the pinch even though the economy is strong.

Some facts about the current state of income inequality in Canada:

- The income gap has been growing for much of the past decade.
- Rising inequality is due almost exclusively to a sharp increase in income among the top 20 percent of family units.
- Gains by all other family units have been modest at best.
- Time at work has increased dramatically for some families yet earnings have not followed.

Government policy and program supports do help to reduce inequality, but they could do so much more. Current government programs, such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit, have helped to stop some families from falling too far behind. More has to be done to support those earning too little and those who are chronically excluded from the labour market. In recent years, both federal and provincial governments have recorded revenue surpluses year after year. We can afford better income supports and social programs, if we choose.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Inequality, that widening gap between the richest and the poorest, is about more than income. While the poorest endure a living standard far below that of others, poverty and the growing gap also result in a social gulf between high and low income Canadians. This gap creates social isolation and leaves poor people short of opportunities, with unequal access to participation in society. This has particularly significant consequences for the development of low income children.

Social exclusion, a lack of belonging, not being able to fully participate or being shut out of normal social activities, is linked to poverty and inequality. It has severely negative impacts on excluded children and youth and holds consequences for the long-term health of society.

While the Canadian economy has shown positive growth and competitiveness, particular groups of Canadians suffer chronically low incomes which make them both economically and socially vulnerable. Current Canadian data confirms that Aboriginal people, new immigrants, female lone parents, older workers (45 plus), and people with physical and mental disabilities are at greater risk of exclusion, and of living in low income situations.

While particular populations are chronically excluded, geographical areas of exclusion are also appearing in Canada's urban centres. The Canadian Council on Social Development study, *Poverty by Postal Code*, tells a chilling tale that points to a growing gap between rich and poor and particular groups becoming trapped in deprived neighbourhoods and communities, isolated and cut off from resources and hope.

As noted in the CCSD report, the causes of social exclusion are many, including economic and social changes that are advantageous to some, but not others. Exclusion is also linked to weak and ineffective government policies and services that do little to level the playing field for all Canadians. Such early disadvantage for children extends its influence to a life of challenges, making it harder for these children to achieve their full potential.

Yet these issues can be successfully managed. Other countries have used their resources to invest in supportive policies and programs that reduce child and family poverty, providing evidence of what needs to happen here in Canada.

1.3 Costs of Inaction

Sound and scholarly research tells us that not acting, and allowing poverty and the gap between rich and poor to grow, creates immediate and long-term negative outcomes for individuals and society.

Children growing up in disadvantaged situations are more likely to have poorer health, lower school achievement, fewer positive experiences at school, increased behavioural problems, less access to or participation in adequate play and recreational facilities, sub-standard and sometimes unsafe housing, higher injury rates, and live in worse neighbourhood conditions than children in families with higher incomes. The impacts of poverty on children are severe and lasting.

Longer-term, the consequences broaden, bringing with them significant societal costs. Outcomes include teen pregnancy, school drop-outs, and poorer physical and mental health, including depression and chronic illness. All this feeds spiraling social and health costs, increased anti-social behaviour and crime and a serious loss of human potential. And it translates into social and economic harm and community despair.

Arguments that we can't afford to eliminate poverty ignore these larger social and human costs we are already paying. Too many children are held hostage in a game of high stakes where paying down the deficit or reducing taxes is held to be more important than investing in their well-being.

1.4 Policy & Program Investments: A Way Forward

On November 24, 1989, members of the House of Commons voted unanimously to work to end child poverty by the year 2000. Unfortunately, they failed to follow through on their promise to Canadians. In fact, in the 1993 federal budget, then Finance Minister Paul Martin decided to stop building new, affordable social housing and slashed transfer payments to provinces for social programs. In the years that followed, both Liberal and Conservative governments generally favoured tax cuts over stronger supports for families with children.

In BC, policy and program changes have unraveled the safety net for children and their families. The estimated number of poor children in BC in 2005 was 174,000. That represents almost the entire population of Victoria and Kelowna combined.

Yet other countries and other Canadian provinces have made progress. Many European countries have developed formal strategies to reduce child poverty and to tackle the broader issue of social inclusion. Countries like Sweden have a history of strong policy and program investments, resulting in fewer children and families living in poverty.

It is worth noting that Canada and Sweden have very similar rates of child poverty before government transfers. After income transfers and taxes, Sweden's rate drops to 2.6%. Canada's rate is only reduced to 14% (for additional details, see First Call's Poverty Report Card 2006 at www.firstcallbc.org).

Britain, finding itself mired in poverty, crime and a growing income gap, has made great strides. The last decade of government policy and programs targeting these issues has led to more people in jobs, less crime, a rise in incomes for 19 out of 20 people and success in raising elderly persons and 800,000 children out of poverty. As a result, Britain is realizing increases in educational attainment and life expectancy (see www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/documents/publications_1997_to_2006/breaking_report.pdf).

There are other countries to learn about and watch: Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden and other Nordic countries all are working to eliminate poverty and address inequality and exclusion.

Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba represent encouraging Canadian examples of provincial commitments to better policy options aimed at reducing child and family poverty. Hopefully their progress will inspire other provinces and the federal government, demonstrating that it can be done (see <http://www.ncwcnbes.net/documents/researchpublications/ResearchProjects/NationalAntiPovertyStrategy/2007Report-SolvingPoverty/ReportENG.pdf>).

1.5 A Note on Taxation & Social Policy

Much of the information in this toolkit is about government policies that can make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families. At the root of decision-making around social policy are the values demonstrated through taxation policies.

For many people taxation has become a dirty word. Some lobbyists have effectively convinced Canadians and their governments that taxation is bad and tax cuts are the only way to go. But that is a short-sighted view that begs for further discussion.

Taxes provide the revenue for collective action at the federal, provincial or municipal level. How much is collected from people of different income levels, from corporations and from property owners, is guided by tax policies. These policies are influenced by our values and priorities.

Many government policies and publicly-funded programs directly affect the well-being of children and their families. Several examples are covered in the fact sheets in this toolkit, such as the Canadian Child Tax Benefit, parental leave policies, welfare policies, the public education system, and so on.

It is our job to let our governments at all levels know that we want the support of children and their families to be a higher priority in setting tax policy and government spending. We want them to know that the current level of income inequality, resulting in so many Canadian and BC children living in poverty, is unacceptable to us. We must tell our elected representatives that we expect this value to be reflected in taxation and social policy that will reduce income inequality and lift children out of poverty during their crucial developing years.

1.6 TAKING ACTION!

Taking action to achieve more supportive and successful policies and programs happens at many levels. The Canadian public has repeatedly said they want governments to address homelessness, inner city deterioration and poverty. Previously unheard voices, such as the Chartered Accountants of Canada and Business Improvement Associations are calling for government action, pointing out that such issues are socially and economically burdensome and call into question Canada's commitment to child and human rights.

First Call's vision regarding a child poverty reduction strategy fits with what many communities and experts have been advocating. The following needs to happen and is expanded upon in later sections.

INCOME ASSISTANCE

Welfare incomes have long been many thousands of dollars below the poverty line. Welfare rates need to be at a level that reflects a realistic estimate of the cost of living. The increase in BC needs to be in the range of 50%, and rates need to be indexed every year to keep up with the cost of living.

B.C.'s two-year independence test and three-week waiting period for income assistance applicants should be abolished. These policies are very short-sighted and create undue hardship, leading to greater problems including homelessness, stress and vulnerability.

As was formerly the case in BC, all people on income assistance should be allowed to keep some of their earnings when they find work and at least some portion of child support payments.

DECENT WAGES

Raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour would have an immediate impact on low income earners and provide an important boost in lifting Canadians out of poverty. The minimum wage also needs to be indexed every year and matched with stronger laws to protect workers, restore Employment Insurance eligibility and adequacy, and address labour market barriers for those experiencing chronic exclusion.

EARLY LEARNING & CHILD CARE

Canada needs a universally accessible and affordable system of high quality early learning and child care services. Numerous studies and experts note that early investment in children is particularly wise. Children who have a good start in life do better at school, are active in the community, have labour market success, pay more taxes, are healthier and are less dependent on social programs.

Too often, lack of quality, affordable care eliminates the opportunity for parents' labour market participation, a dire situation for many, especially lone parents. Working parents are also forced into placing their children in substandard care environments, with potentially hazardous consequences for their safety and development.

Canada and the provinces need to work together to create a national strategy that optimizes early childhood development and includes a policy framework, increased public spending and political commitment to build a national child care strategy.

EXPANDED AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Canada needs to reinstate a national affordable housing strategy. Too many Canadians are homeless, cannot afford shelter, or are one pay-cheque away from being on the street. New social housing must be a central part of a national housing strategy.

AFFORDABLE & ACCESSIBLE

POST SECONDARY EDUCATION & TRAINING

Tuition fees continue to rise, making access to post secondary education for students from low and modest income families increasingly out of reach. Canadians as individuals and Canada as a nation need more equitable access to post secondary education. Heavy debt loads from student loans are burdening too many young families.

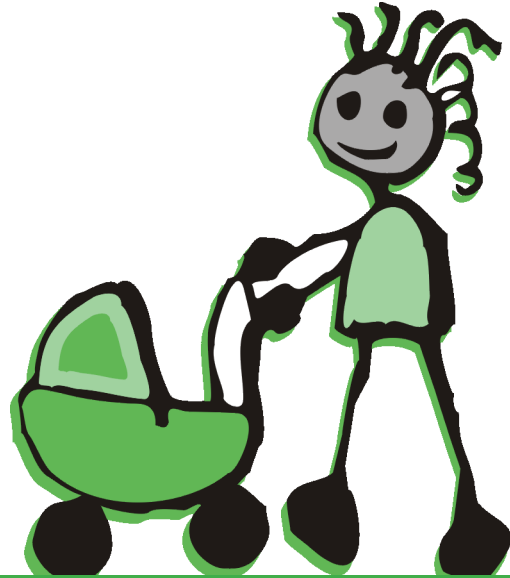
With this vision in mind, the following fact sheets have been developed to provide information about some of the key policies/programs that can be used to reduce child and family poverty. While there is a vast array of policies and programs that have the potential to impact on the well-being of children, the fact sheets that follow highlight some important areas where significant progress can be made. First Call is committed to addressing the broader and related issues of inequality and social exclusion. This toolkit is a first step on that road.

We can all hold ourselves and our governments accountable for solving the problem of child poverty. It takes courage, compassion and commitment to ensure every child is supported to be the best s/he can be.



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BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition



**Leveling the Playing Field for Children:
A Community Action Toolkit**

SECTION 2: FACT SHEETS

What is it?

There are both federal and provincial income benefits available to families with children. The BC benefits are closely linked to the national benefits as described below.

The National Child Benefit is a non-taxable benefit paid monthly by the federal government to most parents with children under 18. It is divided into two parts: the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) and the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS).

As of July 1, 2007, the maximum Canada Child Tax Benefit was \$1,283 a year for each child under 18. The maximum benefit goes to families with net family income of \$37,178 or less. The maximum National Child Benefit Supplement was \$1,988 a year for the first child in a family, \$1,758 for the second child and \$1,673 for each additional child. The maximum NCBS goes to families with net family incomes of \$20,883 or less, and reduced benefits go to families with incomes between \$20,883 and \$37,178.

The current system of federal child benefits began on July 1, 1998. Part of the arrangement was to have the National Child Benefit Supplement paid to all eligible families, but “clawed back” from families on welfare by provincial and territorial governments. Some provinces did this by reducing their welfare rates to offset the National Child Benefit Supplement.

Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick refused to go along with the clawback from the very beginning, and Nova Scotia, Quebec and Manitoba did away with the clawback in subsequent years.

The situation in British Columbia is more complicated because of the BC Family Bonus. When the province introduced the Family Bonus in 1996, it paid it to both working families and families on social assistance, but it reduced social assistance rates by the amount of the Family Bonus. In effect, it was a form of clawback by the BC government.

The Family Bonus was subsequently linked to the National Child Benefit Supplement. As federal funds for the supplement increased, the BC government decided to reduce the BC Family Bonus by the same amount—a second form of clawback. As of 2007, the BC Family Bonus was all but dead in terms of benefits for those not on social

assistance (see Social Assistance fact sheet).

The provincial government is currently using a third form of clawback with the BC Earned Income Benefit, a monthly payment to low-income families in BC where earnings rather than welfare are the main source of income. As the National Child Benefit Supplement goes up, the BC Earned Income Benefit goes down and will eventually disappear like the BC Family Bonus for working families.

Room for Improvement

BC is allowing federal money to replace benefits the province used to provide to low-income families with children. This has had the effect of freezing overall government support for low-income families.

Poor families need all the help they can get from governments. The provincial government should not be using sleight-of-hand tricks like taking money from low-income families provided by the federal government.

Take Action!

Child benefits are a vital part of any serious government program to reduce child poverty.

Tell your elected representatives in Ottawa and Victoria to renounce any and all clawbacks of child benefits. Tell them you want to see benefits for families with children that are straight-forward, fair and more generous than they are at the present time.

Federal: The Prime Minister, Minister of Human Resources & Social Development and your Member of Parliament.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of Employment & Income Assistance, Minister of Small Business & Revenue and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.



Learn more

- www.ncwcnbes.net (National Council of Welfare)
- www.campaign2000.ca (Campaign 2000)
- www.firstcallbc.org (First Call: BC Child & Youth Advocacy Coalition)
- www.incomesecurity.org (Income Security Advocacy Centre)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Universal Child Care Benefit

Fact
Sheet
2.2

What is it?

In the words of the federal government, the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) is "...designed to help Canadian families, as they try to balance work and family life, by supporting their child care choices through direct financial support. The UCCB is for children under the age of 6 years and is paid in installments of \$100 per month per child."

The UCCB is a taxable benefit. The lowest income families in BC will be able to keep only \$80 per month after taxes, while higher income families keep even less.

Child care advocates and families have been seeking national and provincial government support for a comprehensive child care strategy for many decades.

Following an election promise in 2004, the federal government, under the leadership of then Social Development Canada Minister Ken Dryden, worked with stakeholders to develop a national child care strategy with initial funding allocations. While the strategy required further development, it was an important incremental step in moving Canada towards an affordable, accessible and quality child care strategy.

Since then, the current federal government cancelled the initiative and replaced it with the UCCB. While the federal government sees the UCCB as providing options to parents regarding child care, the initiative does not address affordability, the chronic lack of child care spaces or quality. It provides a taxable payment of \$100 a month per child, leaving low income parents in particular to struggle with high fees, waiting lists for spaces and little choice or control over the quality of care available to them.

Especially in the case of children living in poverty, the importance of a high quality child care program is very important. There are benefits to children who access high quality care regarding social relationships, overall development and having a place to thrive and grow. Children from all families can benefit from a child care strategy; those from disadvantaged backgrounds, stand to gain an even more important boost.

Parents, primarily mothers, depend upon quality child care as a way to ensure their access to labour market participation. For lone mothers, many representing the poorest, most vulnerable families in Canada, quality, affordable child care is essential in order to allow them to take a job outside the home.

Take Action!

Make sure your federal and provincial elected representatives know how inadequate the UCCB is. The UCCB is \$100 a month minus federal and provincial income taxes. The average cost of child care for a pre-schooler in the Lower Mainland is around \$800 a month. You can:

- Pressure the federal government to restore, increase and sustain dedicated child care transfer payments to provinces and territories.
- Tell the federal government to make a long-term commitment to Canada's children by building a comprehensive early learning and child care system, and to make a commitment to working with other levels of governments, as well as experts and other stakeholders to ensure that Canada's children receive the best possible early start that we can give them.
- Contact the Premier and your MLA urging them to make child care a higher priority in the provincial budget.
- Call on them to commit to working towards a comprehensive early learning and child care system in BC.
- Tell them to demand federal participation and support of such an effort.

Federal: The Prime Minister, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development and your Member of Parliament.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of State for Childcare and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.cccabc.bc.ca (Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC)
- www.advocacyforum.bc.ca (Child Care Advocacy Forum- an alliance of 6 provincial child care organizations)
- www.buildchildcare.ca (Code Blue Campaign – a Canada-wide campaign to build a pan-Canadian child care system)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Early Learning & Child Care in BC

Fact
Sheet
2.3

What is it?

Early Childhood Development refers to the first developmental stage in a child's life from ages of 0 to 6 years. The education, care and attention children receive at this stage in their lives have a decisive effect on their personal futures as well as on the economy and society in general. There is a considerable amount of evidence-based consensus that public investment should be directed to community-based early childhood development programs.

For many years, BC has been promising an early learning and child care strategy. In 1999, the then BC government carried out a consultation called, "Building a Better Future for BC's Kids" in which 90% of respondents called on the federal and provincial governments to commit to a publicly funded child care system.

In March 2001, the Child Care BC Act was proclaimed and included a 4 year plan to extend public funding to family care, group child care and pre-schools. But in 2002, with the election of the BC Liberals, the Act was repealed and the Minister responsible announced a limited consultation for future planning. The bad news continues. That same year, BC cut its annual contribution to child care by \$50 million, resulting in many families losing access to child care subsidies, as well as reductions in wages for child care workers.

Through a series of continued cuts and changes in the Ministry responsibility for child care, the picture continued to look bleak. In 2007, the new federal government cancelled the 2005 Early Learning and Child Care Agreements and announced that the 2006/2007 final payment could be used flexibly by the provinces. Some provinces opted to spread the funds over the next few years in order continue to support



their plans to build a child care system. BC received its allocation in 06/07 and disbursed it in a flood of one-time-only grants for professional development and other activities, but not for sustaining child care operating costs. In fact, further child care cuts were implemented in the 2007/2008 provincial budget, resulting in rising child care fees, longer wait lists and the erosion of quality and access.

Drawn from the work carried out by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (www.cccabc.bc.ca) and a paper developed by the BC Government & Service Employees' Union (www.bcgeu.bc.ca), the following highlights BC's grim child care legacy:

- Since 2002, the provincial government has cut \$50 million from child care funding in BC.
- The crisis in BC child care is highlighted by the long wait lists for spaces—over 1,500 children are wait-listed in some areas of the province.
- Canada ranks last in a recent international study on investments in early education and care.
- Canada has some of the highest child care fees in the developed world.
- The Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC, under the direction of Dr. Clyde Hertzman, BC's leading early childhood researcher, has "mapped" BC's 59 geographic school districts and found that 25% of preschoolers were developmentally vulnerable when they entered the public school system.
- On January 5, 2007, BC announced cuts to Child Care Resource and Referral Centres totaling 77% in the next year. A few months later these cuts were reduced to 36%.

Currently the BC government does not have a comprehensive provincial child care plan in place. Central problems like affordability for families, recruitment and retention of child care workers, and insufficient quality care spaces are not being addressed by funding cuts and ad hoc short-term expenditures.

Continued on next page.

It is worth noting that previously unheard voices are raising concerns about the lack of quality child care options for parents. In May, 2007 the BC Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution concerning children and family development. In their resolution they drew attention to the critical role child care plays in enabling parents to re-enter the workforce following the birth of children. They note that a comprehensive strategic plan for a child care system in BC is critical to staying competitive in today's global market. It is essential to provide quality child care options to parents.

In 2007 BC passed new legislation giving school districts responsibility for early learning. Provincial funding has begun to be allocated for school-based early learning programs, often called StrongStart centres. These fee-free programs require participating children to be accompanied by their parent or other caregiver. Other early learning programs, for example, preschools or Mother Goose programs, are offered in a variety of settings. Some charge fees and some are free.

Room for Improvement

BC needs a comprehensive early learning and child care plan that commits to creating equitable access to quality, affordable, inclusive care for all BC families. The plan must include significant public funding and a timeline for implementation.

Children with extra support needs need access to child care in integrated, inclusive settings. They cannot afford to languish on wait lists during crucial stages in their development when they would most benefit from being in programs with other children.

Other early learning programs, for example child care or preschool programs, are offered in a variety of settings including schools, and many, if not most, have to charge parents fees. This unfairness in access to free programming, particularly affecting working parents who cannot accompany their children to programs, is of concern to communities throughout the province.

Take Action

- Contact the Premier and your MLA and let them know that provinces are accountable for building a child care system, regardless of the state of federal support.
- Tell them you want to see BC's children and families benefit from the prosperity evident in the provincial budget surpluses through a sustained investment in quality child care services.
- Remind the province they should be pressuring the federal government to restore, increase and sustain dedicated annual child care transfer payments to provinces and territories.
- Remind them that early learning occurs naturally as part of a quality child care program, as well as in other early years programs like StrongStart.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of State for Child Care, Minister of Children & Family Development and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.cccabc.bc.ca (Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC)
- www.ccaac.ca (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Social Assistance in BC

Fact
Sheet
2.4

What is it?

Social assistance, delivered by the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, includes income assistance, disability assistance and employment programs for British Columbians in need. BC welfare payments are determined with one part of the payment intended to cover shelter, utilities and phone and the other part covering all other needs.

Room for Improvement

According to the National Council of Welfare, welfare rates in BC and every other province are far below the poverty line. In 2005, a single employable person in BC had income of only 31% of the poverty line, a person with a disability got 51% of the poverty line, a single parent with one child received 54% of the poverty line, and two parents with two children reached 48% of the poverty line.

The changes in rates announced in recent BC budget speeches have not resulted in major improvements in those figures BC's welfare rates leave people far short of a quality existence. Benefits are thousands of dollars below the poverty line, making it impossible to afford adequate food and shelter. In 2002, BC introduced welfare cuts and rule changes that dramatically and negatively impacted people receiving benefits. Some of the most significant and damaging changes are outlined below:

- A three-week wait period was introduced requiring people who have requested welfare, to wait three weeks before formally applying.
- A two-year independence test was introduced, requiring extensive documentation to prove you have worked for two consecutive years prior to receiving welfare.
- The elimination of any earnings exemption (for non-disabled people) means that every dollar earned is money deducted from monthly welfare payments. B.C. is the only province that does not allow for any income to be earned and kept (previous to 2002, there was a \$200 a month earning exemption for families; \$100 for single persons).
- The welfare cuts of 2002 and 2003 were particularly hard on lone mothers. They saw their welfare payments get cut and child maintenance exemptions eliminated. Some BC lone-parent families saw their assistance drop by \$395 a month.

The BC Ombudsman called for a change in procedures to avoid having people in dire need have to endure the three-week wait period, but the rules and other barriers still remain. While the numbers of people affected has been reduced, it means some people still cannot get immediate help.

Changes announced by the government in 2007 did little to address the issues raised above. BC budget 2007 did announce an increase in social assistance rates. For singles, they saw an increase of \$50 per month for both the shelter and support portions, and persons with disabilities or those with barriers to employment saw an increase of \$50 for the shelter portion but no increase in support. These are welcome increases, but the rates are still too low and need to be indexed to inflation. The other barriers noted above remain unchanged.

BC has experienced solid economic growth, low unemployment rates and government surpluses yet homelessness, children and families living in poverty and economic insecurity are at record highs.

Take Action!

- Contact your MLA and Premier and let them know that no British Columbian should live in poverty. Tell them that welfare rates need to be significantly increased and tied to a realistic estimate of the cost of living.
- Rates need to be indexed to inflation and adjusted annually.
- The two-year independence test and three-week waiting period should be abolished.
- Reinstate earnings exemptions for people receiving social assistance who are not disabled.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of Employment and Income Assistance and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.policyalternatives.ca (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives)
- www.raisethe rates.org
- www.sparc.bc.ca (Social Planning and Research Council of BC)
- www.dietitians.ca (Dietitians of Canada – see Cost of Eating report in BC)
- www.ncwcnbes.net (National Council of Welfare)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Minimum Wage & Living Wages

Fact
Sheet
2.5

What is it?

Minimum wage is a tool that can 'raise the floor' for those working in the labour market. While it will not eliminate poverty for everyone in the labour force or help those that are not working, it is one tool that has a role to play in combination with other strategies to address poverty.

Statistics reveal that many people working full-time in Canada for minimum wage live below the poverty line. Yet some of the initial thinking behind the establishment of a minimum wage was to ensure adequate income to keep people out of poverty.

There are many initiatives across the country and in BC, linking the minimum wage to a living wage. This means ensuring that the minimum wage reflects a level of compensation that puts an employee at or above the poverty line. Most campaigns have been calling for a wage of at least \$10 per hour.

A living wage takes the campaign one further step by arguing for decent wages for workers with dependent children. One common proposal is for wage rates that would get a two-parent family with two children out of poverty if the adults in the family worked a combined total of 60 hours a week. That suggests a living wage well above the \$10 an hour featured in many minimum wage campaigns centered on workers without dependents.

In the fall of 2006, NDP MP Peggy Nash introduced a national minimum wage bill (Bill C-375), seeking to re-establish a federal minimum wage of \$10 an hour. The Bill, proposing a change to the Canadian Labour Code, would apply to all workers within federal jurisdiction. More importantly, it is felt that such a change could influence minimum wage legislation in provinces and territories. The Bill followed the 2006 government sponsored Arthurs' Report: A Federal Labour Standards Review, which supports a national minimum wage.

The minimum wage in BC has been frozen since 2001; the current

wage is \$8 an hour (2007). The BC government also introduced what they call a "training wage" of \$6 per hour. This applies to employees with no paid work experience before November 15th, 2001, and 500 or fewer hours of paid employment.

Room for Improvement

The BC minimum wage leaves people, especially families with children, well below the poverty line. Supporters of living wage movements want to see employer actions and government policies support all workers to be paid at a level that provides dignity and a decent standard of living for families.

The \$6 training wage, a policy that pays workers less for the same work as their colleagues, is unjust. It fails to uphold the broadly supported concept of equal pay for work of equal value. The policy unfairly impacts those new to the workforce and new entrants are primarily youth. The jobs new workers often fill do not typically need nor have extensive training as a requirement. Many feel the training wage is a way for employers to hire cheap labour for work that would otherwise require higher wages.

Take Action!

The economy is booming and many businesses are prospering. Ensure all workers share in the benefits. Make sure your elected representatives know the following are important to you and your community:

- No one working full-time should be living below the poverty line. Increase the minimum wage to at least \$10 per hour.
- Get rid of the training wage. It unfairly discriminates against new workers.
- Find out if there is a living wage campaign in your community that you can support.
- Encourage employers to make living wages and progressive human resource policies part of their philosophy and practice.

Continued on next page.



- Talk to your City Council about passing a local by-law that requires City contractors to pay a living wage to their employees.
- Lobby the federal government to reinstate a federal minimum wage that is a living wage. The amount should bring people above the poverty line and be adjusted annually for inflation.

Federal: The Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development and your Member of Parliament.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of Labour and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.napo-onap.ca (National Anti-Poverty Organization)
- www.policyalternatives.ca/ (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives)
- www.clc-ctc.ca (Canadian Labour Congress)
- www.incomesecurity.org (Income Security Advocacy Centre)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Affordable Housing for Families with Children

Fact
Sheet
2.6

What is it?

Affordable or social housing refers to housing, whether non-profit, co-op or public housing, that is built and subsidized for those who cannot afford market rental rates. The federal and provincial governments used to share responsibility for housing and pooled their resources to establish a range of social housing options.

In 1993, the federal government cancelled its involvement in new social housing. BC continued to budget and build new social housing units, one of only two provinces that continued such programming, following federal abandonment of social housing investment.

In 2001, the federal government re-committed to social housing and provided a one-time capital fund of \$89 million to B.C. to be used over the next 5 years. The government of BC used some of the funds to build new social housing units and to provide maintenance to existing stock.

The 2007 BC budget committed to the development of 250 affordable housing units over the next two years. Since then, the government announced that it purchased 14 buildings in order to protect the approximately 800 units within those buildings, from conversion to high-end housing. While these moves have been supported, housing advocates emphasize the need for the government to do more to add to the supply of affordable housing for families. Many families with children face particular difficulties finding affordable, adequate living space.

Municipal governments are responsible for a number of policies that directly impact on the provision of housing options. Vancouver has realized some gains in this area, including the introduction of by-laws to stop conversions of single room occupancy hotels to expensive suites; and, legalizing what were previously illegal suites in homes, therefore providing more legal rental properties.



Room for Improvement

In spite of the above efforts, BC's homelessness rate and the cost of housing (both purchase and rent) are spiraling out of control. The number of new and available social housing units has not kept up with the pace.

When BC received the one-time payment of \$89 million discussed above, the province used over half the allotted funds to build assisted living for seniors with health care needs. While this represents an important need, it meant affordable housing dollars were used to meet health care costs and failed to provide affordable housing for low-income families. This represented a significant shift in priorities that was not open to public input and debate.

Prior to 1993, when the BC and federal governments were working together to address housing needs, they were developing approximately 2,000 units per year. This is a far cry from the 250 units announced over two years in the 2007 budget. Such efforts and investment are needed again.

It is also important to consider that safe and affordable housing provides a place to be that can facilitate stability, well-being and inclusion in community. While this is relevant for everyone, it is of particular concern for families with children. Unstable housing options do not provide the healthy environment needed to best meet the needs of children.

The need for affordable housing is being felt across the country and is an acute problem in BC. Both the provincial and federal governments have the power to respond to this basic social right and need.

Take Action!

- Call on the federal and provincial governments to work collaboratively to ensure that the right to housing is respected in Canada. They need to develop a national housing strategy that addresses the affordability of housing for low and moderate income families that is ongoing and sustained.
- Call on the federal government to include terms and conditions in its cost-sharing programs with provinces and territories, ensuring funds are used for their intended purpose.

Continued on next page

- Urge the province to develop incentives and to actively engage a range of for-profit and non-profit partners in affordable housing projects.
- Encourage the province to work with their municipal counterparts to consider municipally-based actions like rent controls.

Federal: The Prime Minister, Minister Responsible for Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC), the Chair of CMHC's Board of Directors and your Member of Parliament.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister Responsible for Housing, the Chair of BC Housing and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.vancouveragreement.ca (Vancouver Agreement)
- www.bchousing.org (B.C. Housing)
- www.policyalternatives.ca (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives)

Parental Leave

What is it?

In 2001, the federal government extended parental benefits to provide the opportunity to take up to a year's leave from the workplace upon the birth or adoption of a child. Maternity benefits of 16 weeks continue to be available to mothers who have given birth, to allow for recovery following pregnancies. Maternity leave can be supplemented with parental leave of 36 weeks, providing employment income benefits for that period. The parental portion of leave can be utilized by one or both parents, shared simultaneously or consecutively, for a total of 36 weeks.

Some employers provide top-up benefits to the income provided through maternity/parental benefits (employment insurance), therefore avoiding an interruption in income. It is important to note that maternity and parental benefits are only available to those eligible to collect employment insurance benefits.

Room for Improvement

Maternity/parental benefits play an important role in addressing women's equality. These benefits support women's dual roles and responsibilities for family and paid work.

While the move to extend benefits should be applauded, unfortunately, many caregivers, primarily women, are not able to access this support. Many women and those working in part-time, contract and/or self-employed labour are not eligible. Others cannot afford to take the full year, as the benefit amounts to only 55% of wages, with a current maximum (March 2007) of \$413 per week. Only a minority of employers provide top-up benefits.

Adequate benefits for all workers are a key policy to support women in their dual roles of working and caregiving.

Areas for improvement include:

- improving access to parental leave by reducing qualifying periods affecting part-time and contract employees.
- Extending eligibility to self-employed caregivers. Quebec has taken this step.
- Raising the benefit rate and abolishing the two-week wait period.
- Protection for workers laid off in the months prior to or following parental leave

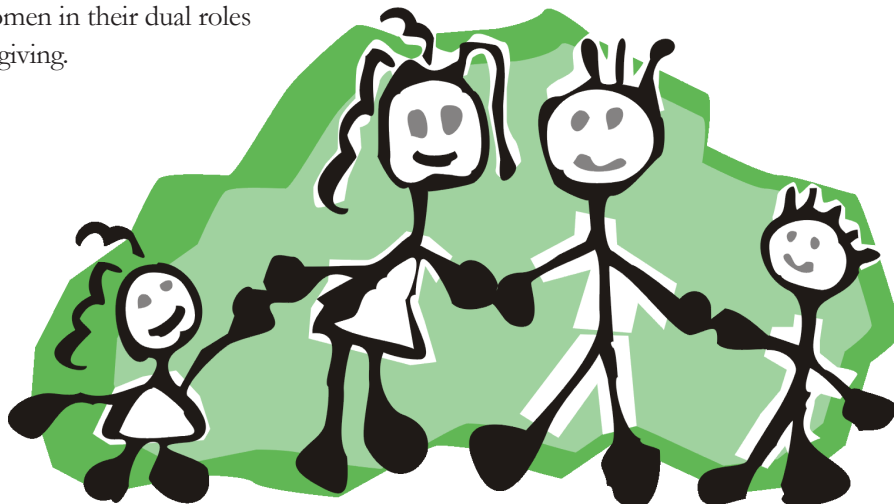
Take Action!

Urge your federal representatives to make the improvements to parental leave outlined above.

Federal: The Prime Minister, the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development and your Member of Parliament.

Learn more

- www.policyalternatives.ca (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, See December 2005: Protecting Parental Leave Benefits, CCPA, Margot Young and Jane Pulkingham, BC Office)

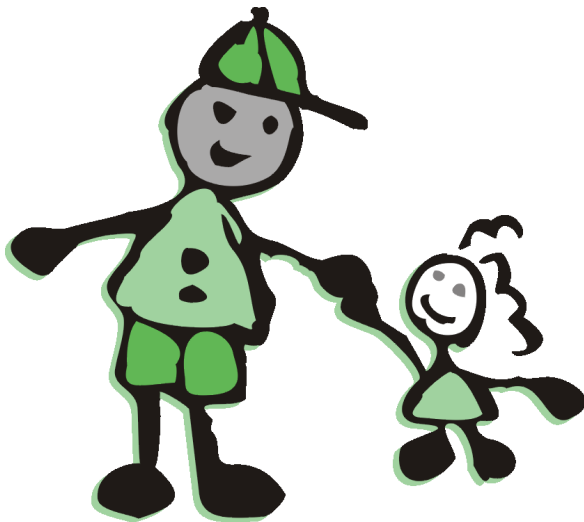


What is it?

Public education is part of the backbone of communities, providing a system of access and equality to citizens. It is the only societal institution where children from all backgrounds come to learn and grow together, providing a vital network in communities. Not unlike quality child care, access to quality education provides an essential investment in children and youth. This is particularly important for poor children who have limited access to alternatives or resources to pay for extra play, recreational and learning opportunities. Yet BC has seen the erosion of public funding for public schools, transferring costs to parents and communities. This increases inequalities between have and have-not neighbourhoods, and undermines the right to education promised to all Canadian children when Canada and BC signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Despite the fact that BC has an excellent education system, there are clear areas where gaps are developing and challenges continue to grow.

Over the last decade, BC class sizes have grown and the number of students with special learning needs has increased. This makes it harder to deliver quality teaching as needed school and classroom supports have disappeared. Funding to schools has not kept up with inflation nor do budgets reflect the current costs of delivering quality, sustainable education. Lack of support for students with special needs, English as a second language, as well as constantly increasing fees charged to families, is leaving many students behind and destabilizing quality and effective delivery of education. Children who live in poverty are most heavily impacted by these barriers and lost supports.



The passage of Bills 20, 21 and 22 in May 2007, amending the School Act, the Independent Schools Act and the Teaching Profession Act, have the potential to have sweeping impacts on the public education system in BC. Just some of the changes follow: centralize more power in the Ministry of Education, undermine the role of elected school boards, open the door to segregated, charter schools for special needs students, elevate measurable student achievement, particularly in literacy, as the main focus of teaching and learning, assign school districts responsibility for some early learning programs, and expand permission for schools to charge fees to students. The amendments cover many other topics as well.

Room for Improvement

Overall BC public education students have been high on the achievement scale for many years. This has been accomplished through positive collaboration between teachers, school boards, parents, universities and the Ministry of Education. This latest round of Bills, introduced and passed without consultation and forewarning to stakeholder groups, undermines the relationships needed for this collaboration. Many communities and educators are deeply concerned that increasing Ministry oversight and taking away local involvement and independence will not improve the education system. Local communities, left with diminished authority over their programs and finances to address growing student needs, wonder how they will sustain and improve a public education system that works for all students.

Take Action!

Tell the Minister of Education, your MLA and the Premier that a well-funded public education system is expected in B.C.

Let them know you are concerned about:

- Overcrowded classrooms, lack of support services in the classroom to address growing diversity and increased support needs.
- The loss of specialized supports within schools and districts, including teacher-librarians, special education teachers and counselors

Continued on next page.

- Legislation that undermines the independence and leadership role of democratically elected school boards.
- Supporting and respecting the role of teachers, who are the professionals trained to ensure student learning and well-being.
- Call for more financial investment in schools, to keep the public in education and reduce inequalities in students' educational opportunities and outcomes.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister of Education and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.bctf.ca (BC Teachers' Federation)
- www.charter.publiced.ca (Charter for Public Education Network)
- www.bcsta.org (BC School Trustees Association)
- www.bcspe.ca (BC Society for Public Education)
- www.gov.bc.ca/bced/ (BC Ministry of Education)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Immigrant & Refugee Services

Fact
Sheet
2.9

What is it?

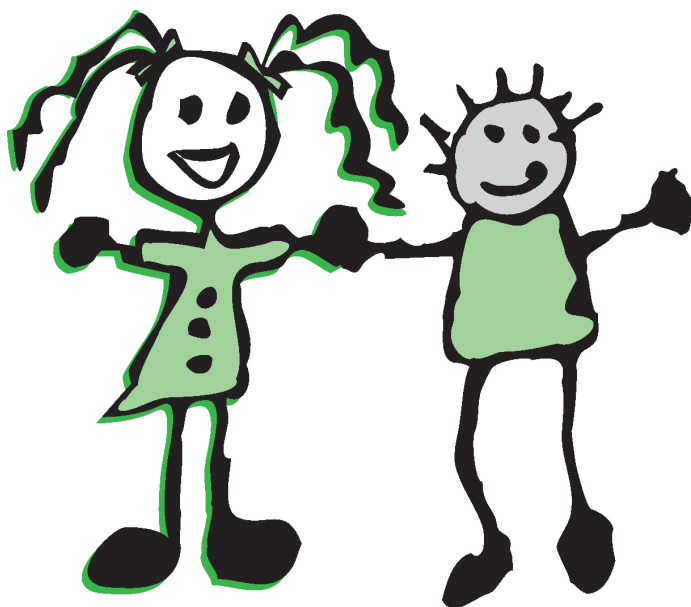
Many new immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada face significant barriers to social and economic participation. These barriers include limited and slow recognition of foreign credentials, difficulties in finding work, lack of English as a second language services (ESL) and insufficient income, to name only a few. Refugee children and youth may have had little schooling prior to arrival, and may be suffering the trauma of lost family members or witnessing horrific events. Such issues are having significant and lasting impacts on families and the well-being of their children.

In BC, the situation is of great importance. BC is a destination of choice, with the highest number of landed immigrants, second only to Ontario. A high percentage of immigrants and refugees arrive with limited, if any, English, few financial resources and many are children and youth.

BC had one of the lowest levels of per capita funding for adult ESL and settlement services in Canada and lagged well behind other provinces in the provision of publicly-funded adult ESL classes. But through extensive and assertive advocacy work over several years by organizations like the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC, commitment and support to settlement and multiculturalism services has significantly improved in 2007.

The federal government has boosted its funding across Canada, earmarking funds to be dedicated to settlement and multicultural issues. This has meant B.C. has at least double the funding it had previously. Immediate investments include:

- an increase in settlement counselors, many working directly within schools;
- new programming to assist newcomers with respect to labour market attachment;
- consultations with stakeholders to develop programming for high-risk/high need clients, primarily refugees;
- planning for new programming targeted to families with children;
- increased funding for anti-racism programs, linking anti-racism and settlement programs, with the goal of creating more welcoming communities;
- renewed efforts with respect to foreign credential recognition, and,
- new funding models to address the needs within smaller immigrant/refugee populations and remote communities.



Room for Improvement

Communities will be watching to see how effectively the new government funding is used to meet the many needs of new immigrant and refugee populations. Service organizations are working hard to respond and collaborate in creating new programs.

But the challenges are vast. Without fluency in English, immigrants and refugees have very limited employment opportunities. This, in turn, has significant impacts on families' economic security. Children and youth in many new immigrant and refugee families are growing up in deep poverty. Larger refugee families are frequently unable to find or afford adequate housing and are living in crowded, poorly maintained apartments.

Continued on next page.

Research indicates that the drop-out rate for ESL secondary students is in the range of 40%. The BC Ministry of Education currently caps eligibility for ESL funding for each ESL student in the K-12 system at 5 years. Many students need more than 5 years of extra support in order to be able to handle academic work., especially if they have not had much schooling before coming to Canada.

Newcomer children and families have endured inadequate support for many years. Once the new programming is fully in place, organizations that have fought for these improvements will continue to monitor equity and quality of services for these families within BC and across Canada.

Take Action!

- Tell your MP, the federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and the Prime Minister you want to see better supports for new immigrants and refugees, with a special emphasis on the needs of families with children.
- Tell the federal government to use Employment Insurance funds to support targeted training for new immigrants, regardless of their status regarding EI contributions.
- Tell the Premier, your MLA and the provincial Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism that you want all federal funding transferred to the province for immigrant services to be utilized for that purpose.

- Tell them you want the 5-year ESL funding cap removed for elementary and secondary students.
- Tell them you want to see access to free ESL programs expanded, including higher levels of training than currently provided.

Federal: The Prime Minister, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, and your Member of Parliament.

Provincial: The Premier, Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism, Minister of Education and your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

Learn more

- www.amssa.org (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies)
- www.mosaicbc.com
- www.issbc.com
- www.immigrantsandrefugees.ca
- www.cissa-acsei.ca (Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance)
- www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/CCICY/ (Canadian Coalition for Immigrant Children & Youth)

~ LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD ~

Role of Local Governments

Fact
Sheet
2.10

What is it?

Increasingly Canadians are moving to cities in the hopes of attaining economic advantages that they cannot find in rural areas. It has been estimated that over 79% of Canadians now live in urban areas across Canada. More than half the Canadian population lives in one of the four large urban areas, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and Calgary-Edmonton.

Many Canadian cities are faced with the high costs of poverty and urban decay, yet their capacity to deal with these issues is minimal at best. Most of the policies and programs geared towards the prevention and alleviation of poverty are within the jurisdiction of federal and provincial governments. Increasingly cities are attempting to influence the decisions of senior levels of government and make their own contribution. Most major urban centers, including a number of BC cities, have developed plans to address big social issues such as homelessness, crime, housing and poverty. These initiatives also help educate and mobilize local residents to advocate for more support from the federal and provincial governments.

Many cities have made the links between engineering/works services, urban planning/development and social issues. City policy can require a percentage of new development dollars be dedicated to the social infrastructure of communities, such as child care centres and play and recreation facilities. City planners can consult with community members on issues like affordable housing, inner city services and parks.

Depending on their size, cities are able to offer grants to support local services like neighbourhood houses, child care spaces, recreational programming, community events and investments in local arts and culture.

Room for Improvement

Cities must continue to become involved in the federal and provincial dialogue around services and policies that support the healthy development of children and youth. Cities clearly cannot deal with issues like child poverty on their own. However, they can use their collective voices to advocate for the families in their communities. They can also demonstrate their commitment to social inclusion through local actions.

Through work at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the national directors from cities across the country endorsed a motion to join Campaign 2000 in calling for an end to child poverty. They called on the federal government to tackle child poverty by creating more good

jobs at living wages, investing in an effective child benefit system, making a universal early childhood education and care system a reality, expanding affordable housing and renewing Canada's social safety net through the Canada Social Transfer.

Additionally, many cities have seen the value in establishing youth councils and using a child and family focus in the delivery of services that they can influence.

Take Action

- Take part in city or municipal consultative processes to raise awareness of the importance of using a children and families lens in all planning and development projects. Even writing a letter to your city staff or elected councilors asking what attention has been paid to children's and families' needs, can help raise the issue, and the answer may start a dialogue.
- Consider the policies presented in this kit and think about how city governments could become involved. For example, city councils can pass a motion committing the city to contract work only to employers that pay employees a living wage. They can also put policies in place to waive fees for low income families at municipal recreation facilities.
- Urge your city to plan neighbourhoods that include a range of income levels.
- Speak to your City Council about the types of programs and facilities for children, youth and families that you would like your city to fund.
- Remind your federal and provincial representatives that cities and local communities are dealing with complex social issues without enough revenue to fund services. Demand their involvement and support.

Learn more

- Visit your local government's website to see the programs and services they fund to improve the quality of life for all children and families.
- <http://www.fcm.ca/english/media/backgrounders/nov172004.pdf>
- <http://www.fcm.ca/english/media/backgrounders/febqol.pdf>



**Leveling the Playing Field for Children:
A Community Action Toolkit**

SECTION 3: TIPS & RESOURCES

This section provides information and links to additional resources. It is divided into two general sections. The first provides practical information related to advocacy work; the second lists where to find more information via key organizations active in the campaign to eliminate child poverty.

3.1 Supporting Advocacy

Advocating for your cause, in this case eliminating child and family poverty, is an important way to tackle specific issues and demand community and governmental action for positive change. Advocacy work can be both rewarding and challenging. The following resources will be helpful in supporting your efforts.

Who to Contact: Your Elected Representatives

- **Members of Parliament**
<http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca/MembersOfParliament/MainMPsCompleteList.aspx?TimePeriod=Current&Language=E>
- **Cabinet Ministers of Canada**
<http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca/MembersOfParliament/MainCabinetCompleteList.aspx?TimePeriod=Current&Language=E>
- **Members of Legislative Assembly of British Columbia**
<http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/3-1-1.htm>
- **BC Cabinet Ministers**
<http://www.bcliberals.com/EN/1244/>

Check your local city or town website for contact information for municipal representatives.

3.3 Key Opportunities

Elections and the release of budgets, at both federal and provincial levels, are key, regularly occurring events that provide opportunities to raise issues and concerns.

For elections, you can attend candidate meetings, raise issues with candidates through their election office and ask for public statements regarding the candidate and party positions on child poverty.

For additional information, see: www.firstcallbc.org, look under publications for election toolkits.

The release of budgets are often accompanied by an opportunity for public input and consultation. Even if such an event does not fit with your plans, you can gain media interest in key issues and priorities tied to budgets. It is an

ideal opportunity to ask what funds are being dedicated to ending child poverty.

For additional information, see: www.firstcallbc.org, look under publications for pre-budget briefs and response to budgets documents.

3.4 Working Within Your Community

Working within your community can mean finding like-minded people either in your own geographic community, or finding organizations or existing action groups that are working together to address child and family poverty. Here are some general tips for working with and/or organizing your community.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Do some initial research. Take the time to learn more about child poverty and income inequality. You can visit some of the web-sites referenced in the fact sheets. They will assist you in gaining a clearer idea of which issue(s) you want to address, as well as some of the key players involved. Knowing a bit more about the subject and current activities will assist in connecting with like-minded people and organizations. It will also help you understand those that take a different approach and may disagree with your position. Additional information will also help you develop your strategy, as well as increase your credibility when you take action.

LINK WITH EXISTING GROUPS & ACTIVITIES

Find out which local organizations are interested in child poverty and income inequality and work with them. Linking with such people and/or organizations typically provides support and structure to efforts. Linking your efforts with others helps amplify your contribution.

ENGAGE THE MEDIA

Reach out to the local media. Often locally based newspapers and reporters are keen to learn more about local action and the issues involved. Make sure your local community papers are aware of your issues. Give them information and stories to help convince them to provide coverage of your activities. Explore writing a feature article yourself or in collaboration with a media writer.

There are also opportunities to raise the profile of your issues through radio and television. Contact the radio to be interviewed on a morning show or explore public service announcement opportunities.

Television opportunities tend to relate to the news and topical issues but reporters also do in-depth stories from time to time. You could also contact a current events

program and encourage them to profile the issue of child poverty as a feature or programming focus for the show.

BE PERSISTENT

Advocacy efforts represent an important and effective public policy tool. Even if you do not feel you are making immediate progress, raising the issue of child poverty and the need for government action can have unseen results. Politicians and decision-makers pay attention to issues that are gaining broad public interest. Raising awareness of your issues with a broader range of people, potentially gaining the interest and involvement of new allies, increases the likelihood of public action.

For additional information on advocacy and speaking out, see the publication “Speaking Out! You Have a Voice, Use It!” on First Call’s website (www.firstcallbc.org).

3.5 Tips for Public Speaking

Prepare, prepare and prepare some more. There are many resources available, including courses and advice, to assist you in increasing your public speaking skills. The following brief tips provide an overview. Public speaking can be a very effective way in rallying support and facilitating a profile around your issue.

Stick to a few key messages: child poverty and income inequality are complex issues, but try to pull out a few key messages that you want to communicate. A few revealing statements about the nature of the problem will have impact and will clearly communicate the importance of the issue. State the problem and stick to 3 or 4 things you think need to happen now. For example, point out that the rate of child poverty in B.C. has been the highest of any province for four years in a row. Note that this issue needs government action and that it is doable. Both federal and provincial governments have surpluses and can afford to right this terrible wrong. State what you think they should do now to reduce child poverty.

If speaking at an event with other speakers, figure out what your unique contribution can be. Talk to other speakers ahead of time, if possible. Reinforce each other’s contribution and add your own perspective.

THINK ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

You may need to tailor your message to the knowledge and interests of your audience. If you are talking to the media as opposed to others interested in your cause, you may want to keep it short and repeat your key ideas and proposals. Think about the messages you want to emphasize as well as those you wish to avoid.

PRACTICE & PRACTICE SOME MORE

The saying, practice makes perfect could not be more correct than in public speaking opportunities. You want to prepare enough that your key statements and understanding of the issue become second nature. The more comfortable you are, the more convincing you will be.

ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

Questions following a presentation provide a great opportunity to clarify and explore the issue in greater detail. Think about potential arguments that do not support your position. Unexpected questions can be unnerving and challenge your composure. Stick to what you know, repeat your key messages and keep answers short and to the point. Don’t be afraid to say you don’t know the answer to a question. People will appreciate your honesty. Tell them you will try to find the answer (if it is information, not opinion), or ask them to help find out more.

BE CONFIDENT

Make it personal and speak with conviction. Child poverty affects the entire community and children need you to speak on their behalf. Avoid saying you think or feel something, stick to the facts. Ensure you are speaking slowly and clearly and stand tall, body language counts.

BRING ALONG YOUR FRIENDS

It often helps to see a friendly face in the audience or to know that supporters are nearby. Encourage friends, those you are working with or family members to attend to cheer you on. Having supporters in attendance can make all the difference.

References

The following links to key organizations and information sources provide in-depth information regarding the elimination of poverty.

One of the best sources for finding detailed information about child poverty in B.C. is First Call's annual child poverty reports. Go to First Call's website at www.firstcallbc.org and click on Child Poverty & Income Inequality in BC and on 2006 Poverty Report Cards.

Child poverty

- www.campaign2000.ca
- www.nationalchildrensalliance.com (National Children's Alliance)
- www.firstcallbc.org (First Call: BC Child & Youth Advocacy Coalition)
- www.childpoverty.com (Ontario based coalition)

General information re: poverty, including child poverty

- www.nwcncbes.net (National Council on Welfare)
- www.endcanadianpoverty.ca
- www.socialjustice.org (Centre for Social Justice)
- www.povnet.org (PovNet)
- www.napo-onap.ca (National Anti-Poverty Organization)
- www.makepovertyhistory.ca (Make Poverty History, Canada)
- Make Poverty History (Canada) Member of Parliament Advocacy Kit: www.makepovertyhistory.ca/e/resources/index.php?WEBYEP_DI=1
- www.tamarackcommunity.ca (Tamarack, a charitable organization that helps Canadian communities take local ownership of issues, with many communities involved in addressing poverty)

Social policy and research

- www.ccsd.ca (Canadian Council on Social Development)
- www.policyalternatives.ca (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives)
- www.caledoninst.org (Caledon Institute)
- www.cprn.com (Canadian Policy Research Networks)
- www.irpp.org (Institute for Research on Public Policy)

Kits with in-depth discussion of developing your advocacy skills

- www.care.org/getinvolved/advocacy/tools/english_01.pdf
- www.childcareadvocacy.ca/parent_voices/content/EN/tools.html
- www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook (The Citizen's Handbook)
- <http://ctb.ku.edu/tools> (The Community Toolbox)