

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition – Notes for Hon. Katrine Conroy, Minister of Children and Family Development and Hon. Katrina Chen, Minister of State for Child Care

September 28, 2017

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a coalition of 102 provincial and regional organizations, individuals and local community networks who share the belief that children and youth should have “first call” on our province’s resources. We are committed to achieving the following 4 Keys to Success for BC’s children and youth:

- A strong commitment to early childhood development
- Support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood
- Increased economic equality
- Safe and caring communities

We look forward to the opportunity to work with your ministry and across government to improve the lives of BC’s children, youth and families. We recognize the important priorities you have been given in your mandate letter from the Premier and offer the following outline of some of the key issues our members would like to flag for your attention.

Child Welfare

- Ministry Capacity to Meet Quality Standards

The Ministry needs to make significant investments to increase the number of front-line social workers within the Ministry and in Delegated Aboriginal Agencies to reduce their caseloads dramatically, eliminate inequities between these organizations and address serious recruitment and retention challenges. Young people in care and contracted service providers report that social workers rarely have time to meet with the children and youth in their care, or with foster parents and other community agency staff. We also hear that back-up support to handle their caseloads when they are on leave is inadequate or non-existent and that children are not receiving timely (or any) assessments while in care.

The stresses of the current underfunded child protection system and the negative consequences for children and families have been well-canvassed in multiple reports, including Grand Chief Ed John’s recent report and many from the Representative for Children and Youth. We urge government to act on the many recommendations in these reports with urgency.

- Poverty and Colonialism as Pipelines to Apprehension

Over 60% of youth in care in BC are Indigenous, an over-representation that reflects the continued impacts of residential schools, the subsequent ‘60’s scoop,’ as well as other legacies from our colonial history. Reducing the number of Indigenous children coming into care means addressing the unconscionable levels of poverty for many Indigenous families in BC, as well as the inequitable level of child welfare and education service funding.

For the past many years, MCFD was designated by the provincial government as responsible for ‘the poverty file’. This was inappropriate for a ministry primarily funded for child protection and with no ability to make the systemic changes necessary in other areas of government responsibility. We are optimistic that this will change with government’s commitment to bring in a provincial poverty reduction plan with cross-government involvement and responsibility.

We look forward to seeing a fruitful examination and action on the link between welfare and disability assistance rates that are far below the poverty line and the number of child apprehensions.

- Youth Transitions Out of Care

The transition youth experience in leaving government care has been identified as one of the key systemic failures leading youth to become homeless. As many as 40% of BC’s homeless youth have been in care at some point in their lives, and youth with experience in care are nearly 200 times more likely than their peers to become homeless.

Nearly half of former youth in care will go on income assistance within a few months of turning 19, plunging them immediately into the vulnerability of deep poverty.

Post-secondary tuition waivers as new government policy are a welcome and very important step toward future success. However, youth leaving care need consistent financial support with basic living costs like housing, transit and food well into their twenties while they deal with trauma, attend school, learn skills and find work.

They also need a sense of permanency to guide this transition: long-term relationships with caring, dependable adults for support and advice, and knowing they always have somewhere to turn. We need to be much better parents for the children and youth in our care.

Permanency in and after government care comes with youth having a chance to connect and contribute to their communities through creative, cultural and volunteer activities, so that they feel like they have a place they belong.

Early Childhood Development

- Child Care Crisis

Solving the crisis for families in accessing quality child care is a top priority for First Call. Unaffordability, too few licensed spaces, wait lists for children who need extra supports and concerns about quality resulting from low wages for early childhood educators, are major issues facing families throughout BC. Access to affordable, inclusive, high-quality child care is part of implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Research tells us that a universally accessible, high-quality child care system will greatly reduce family poverty by allowing parents to work and earn, knowing their children are safe and well-cared for. We also know that poverty is a major risk factor for child apprehension in BC.

First Call fully supports the \$10aDay Community Plan for a Public System of Integrated Early Learning and Care developed by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC, and encourages government to begin stepped implementation immediately.

We are encouraged that a strong shared commitment now to alleviate BC's child care crisis exists in government and to see that commitment reflected in the 2017 Confidence and Supply Agreement between the BC NDP and BC Green Party.

- Supporting Families

In addition to quality early care and learning, families need to be able to rely on a comprehensive range of supports in raising their children. Family resource programs, family places, early childhood hubs, referral services --- all BC communities need to have these types of programs and resources readily accessible, supported by government funding that is stable, durable and adequate, rather than piecemeal and uncertain year-to-year. These programs provide invaluable support for families across the income spectrum, including helping to create community connections for isolated and struggling parents/caregivers.

- Early Intervention

Knowing the importance of the early years for critical aspects of human development, it is shameful that BC children with developmental delays, health challenges and other special needs are waiting for early assessments and interventions that can have life-changing impacts. Barriers to access reflect income inequalities and undermine children's and parents' right to timely support.

First Call fully supports addressing the challenges and proposed solutions articulated in the *Kids Can't Wait* campaign call to action developed by Inclusion BC, BC Association for Child Development and Intervention and other partners: http://inclusionbc.org/sites/default/files/KidsCantWait-2016%20ECI%20Summit%20Report_0.pdf

- Healthy Babies

BC's system of perinatal supports for pregnant women, including prenatal classes and education and post-natal support has also become barriered and fragmented. Responsibility for this area falls primarily within the Ministry of Health, but pregnant women and new mothers with high vulnerability often come into contact with, or fear contact with, MCFD. We urge your ministry to work closely with the Ministry of Health and the new Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions to make sure both universal and easily-accessible, targeted perinatal supports are available to all women during pregnancy and after the birth of their child.

- Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC)

First Call fully supports BC Aboriginal Child Care Society's call for a distinct Indigenous approach to the development of high-quality Indigenous ELCC in a separate framework developed in partnership with Indigenous families and communities in response to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Such an approach is crucial to ensuring Indigenous ELCC is not marginalized within mainstream ELCC, and that Indigenous ELCC plays a vital role in addressing historical trauma, and ongoing Indigenous marginalization and dispossession,

while restoring Indigenous language learning, access to traditional foods and cultural learnings within a framework of self-determination.

- Funding for refugee and immigrant early years support must move towards long term investments to ensure program accessibility, stability and sustainability.
- Overall, First Call urges the provincial government to invest 1% of GDP in early childhood care and learning based on a social determinants of health early years funding framework. This would bring us in line with the OECD recommendation for developed nations and foregrounds the evidence-based importance of prevention, early intervention and high-quality early childhood care, learning and family support in enhancing life-long health and developmental outcomes.

The above is not a comprehensive list of issues of concern to our coalition members, but highlights of key issues we anticipate you will want to work on with urgency.

Please think of our coalition and its many members as a resource you may consult in the development of policy and practice within your ministry and across government that affects children, youth and families.

We also offer an efficient vehicle for the Ministry and government to communicate with community-based child and youth advocates across sectors (education, child welfare, health, youth services, immigrant services, early childhood, etc.). Two-way communication allows us to be able to share information about government initiatives and plans with our members and wider networks, as appropriate.

We meet monthly and you and your staff are warmly invited to join these meetings at any time. Meeting times, agendas and minutes are posted here for your reference: <http://firstcallbc.org/get-involved/meetings-events/>

We look forward to working with you and your staff to improve supports and services for BC's children, youth and families.