

A Call for a BC Poverty Reduction Plan

As British Columbians determine what our post-Olympics legacy will be, a clear and accountable plan to end poverty and homelessness in our province would represent an ideal goal, capturing the hopes and aspirations of all. British Columbians are eager to rally behind such an initiative, and would enthusiastically help to see such a vision realized. Now is the time to face this next challenge with confidence, creating a profound and lasting legacy.

No matter what method is used to measure poverty, too many people in our province struggle to make ends meet, and too many children start their lives living in poverty.

We know that all of us pay for poverty. We pay in increased health care costs. We pay in higher crime. We pay in higher demand for community, social and charitable services. And we pay in lack of school readiness, reduced school success and in lower economic productivity. People who are poor get sick more, die sooner, and lack many opportunities that others take for granted. There is a false economy in failing to act boldly.

We know that British Columbians are ashamed of the levels of poverty and homelessness in a society as wealthy as ours. We can drastically reduce poverty in British Columbia by mobilizing sectors and citizens to join hands and work together for a common goal that touches the hearts and lives of each of us. But we must act boldly.

We, the undersigned, reaffirm the call for the Government of British Columbia to launch a comprehensive and accountable poverty reduction plan, aimed at dramatically reducing homelessness and poverty in our province.

Six Canadian provinces — Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Manitoba — either have such plans or are in the process of developing them. In almost all cases, these plans have been initiated and adopted with all-party support. They are also characterized by a cross-government approach, with a lead cabinet minister coordinating an inter-ministerial secretariat, based upon the understanding that successful poverty reduction requires action across many policy areas.

In this current climate of global economic downturn and uncertainty, a bold poverty reduction plan also makes good economic sense. Low-income families spend all the money they have, and do so in our local communities. When we focus resources on the people and communities hardest hit by the economic downturn, we are likely to see the maximum economic bang for our stimulus buck.

BC has seen some modest reduction in poverty up to 2007 (the last year for which statistics are available). But with the onset of the economic recession in 2008, we fear this trend will now reverse, heightening the need for action. We are encouraged by the move towards universal access to all-day kindergarten. The government has also taken some important steps in recent years with respect to housing and homelessness, but more is needed. Together we can build on these actions and strengthen the outcomes with a coordinated and comprehensive approach.

We urge the provincial government to provide leadership, and to adopt and legislate poverty reduction targets and timelines. Such legislated targets (much like the government's climate action targets) will serve to galvanize efforts, and ensure accountability towards meeting our common goals. As a first step, we call upon the government to appoint a lead minister for poverty reduction (a champion for this initiative), have them oversee a cross-ministry poverty action secretariat, and have them report annually on their progress.

We recommend the following targets and timelines:

- Reduce BC's poverty rate by 30 per cent within four years, and by 75 per cent within 10 years.
- Ensure the poverty rate for children, lone-mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and recent immigrants and refugees likewise declines by 30 per cent in four years, and by 75 per cent in ten years, in recognition that poverty is concentrated in these populations.
- Within two years, ensure that every British Columbian has an income that reaches at least 75 per cent of the poverty line.
- Within two years, ensure no one has to sleep outside, and end all homelessness within eight years (ensuring all homeless people have good quality, appropriate housing).

In order to achieve these targets, we call upon the province to commit to specific policy measures and concrete actions in each of the following policy areas:

1. Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed, and remove policy barriers so that recipients can build and maintain assets.
2. Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce.
3. Improve food security for low-income individuals and families.
4. Address homelessness and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan.
5. Provide universal publicly-funded child care.
6. Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people.
7. Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.

There is nothing inevitable about poverty and homelessness in a society as wealthy as ours. Other jurisdictions that are setting clear targets are getting results. A comprehensive approach needs to boost the incomes of those living in poverty, but also build the social infrastructure, public services and assets that are vital to providing a path out of poverty and improving quality of life. If we commit to a bold plan, a dramatic reduction in poverty and homelessness within a few short years is a perfectly achievable goal.

For more information or to endorse this letter, visit www.bcpovertyreduction.ca