

Pivot Legal Society's submission to the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MSDPR'S 5-YEAR REVIEW OF THE BC POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

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Brief and Background

Pivot Legal Society is a human rights-based legal organization in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver BC, located on the stolen lands of the unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, including the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam Indian Band), Sk^wxwú7mesh (Squamish Nation), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh Nation). Our mandate is to use the law to address the root causes of poverty and social exclusion.

We are submitting feedback as an organization to the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction ('MSDPR', 'the Ministry') for the Ministry's 2023 five-year review of BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy. We are also a member of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition and were invited to submit feedback on their policy brief to the Ministry. We support their policy brief. On March 21, 2023, we hosted a community consultation with members of the Our Homes Can't Wait coalition at Pivot Legal Society to review the BCPRC's policy brief with nine people belonging to the 13 key population groups. With the recommendations that emerged from that consultation, we are making our own submission to the Ministry. These recommendations come from a diverse group of Black, Indigenous, racialized, and white people with lived and living experiences of poverty, active substance use, disabilities, and many other identities and characteristics, who are currently receiving or have accessed at some point in their lives a form of income and/or social assistance. The group reviewed and discussed five of the six of the MSDPR's priorities together, and also named their own priorities for the province's poverty reduction strategy, informed by their own personal lived experiences with poverty.

Priorities of the Group Outside of the MSDPR's Six Key Priority Areas

1. Social Inclusion and Belonging

To increase social belonging for people who live in poverty, the community consultation group recommends the creation of what they term 'Neighbourhood Community Liaison Teams', comprised entirely of people living in poverty in BC. These types of teams could oversee the construction of new housing in their neighbourhoods and host meetings for people who live in those neighbourhoods to provide input on what health and social services would be beneficial to include in those new buildings.

The group also named that civic engagement is not accessible to people living in poverty; for example, going to city hall meetings for public zoning hearings is a barrier due to time and financial constraints, as well as the stigma and discrimination that their communities face from other attendees of public zoning meetings. The group's suggested alternative for public town hall meetings is going to a place hosted in their neighbourhood by the Neighbourhood Community Liaison Teams, which would be a lower barrier place for local community members to share their ideas and opinions on issues that impact them. Another benefit of this initiative would be the creation of local jobs within their own communities for people with low or no incomes who do not engage in the traditional economy.

2. Funding Poverty Reduction

The community consultation group recommends new ways of funding poverty reduction in the province, including stopping cycles of criminalization for people who live in poverty by eliminating interactions between people and the criminal justice system, as well as reducing the number of police officers working in BC, including municipal police forces, RCMP contracted police forces, and transit police, and instead re-investing the resources gained into the poverty reduction strategies mentioned in this brief within the key priorities areas.

3. Legislated Human Rights Protections - Social Condition

Legislative protections are also recommended by the group to address discrimination and stigma, namely through the addition of a person's social condition as a protected characteristic under the BC *Human Rights Code*.

One member of the group raised that communities which are highly stigmatized would stand to benefit the most from legislated amendments to protect a person's social condition. For example, requirements to show proof of income when applying for housing or tenancy create enormous barriers for people who do sex work or who participate in the grey economy, also known as the survival economy. Sex workers experience discrimination, surveillance, and harassment on the part of landlords and housing providers, and these practices can force sex workers to accept risky clients or work in unknown, hidden, and dangerous settings. Discrimination based on a person's social condition, which includes a person's occupation, is not currently protected under the BC Human Rights Code, but from the experiences detailed above we can see that a social condition protection is necessary to eliminating discrimination for people who have stigmatized and criminalized forms of income generation.

Based on the personal experiences of the community consultation members, they have also experienced discrimination based on their social condition when applying for work. They explained that they are turned down for jobs when their prospective employers find out which postal code the applicants live in. In this way, protecting social condition against discrimination would reduce employment barriers for people who live in neighbourhoods where the majority of residents have low incomes and are highly stigmatized. Reducing stigma for people who live in poverty with an amendment to the *Human Rights Code* will meet the Ministry's identified priority to increase social belonging.

4. Free, Accessible Public Transit

The group recommends that the province make public transit fare-free and create a publicly-owned intercity or inter-regional bus service. They discussed that under the current system, there should not be additional fares when transferring from the bus to Skytrain or Canada Line for the obvious cost-saving reasons, and because many of them have ended up being fined and criminalized for not being able to afford multiple fares for bus and train fares for one trip. They also discussed solutions to this, such as the creation of 'Places of

Convenience', as they termed it, those being places that people living in poverty visit frequently to which they can travel at no cost.

Aside from creating a free transit system, the group also named that transit should be as accessible to people in rural areas across the province as it is in metropolitan areas. Buses should be running 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and they should run more frequently. One member shared having to wait for a bus in a rural town in BC that ran only once every three hours. Other members named BC's infamous 'Highway of Tears' and how free and accessible transit along that highway would have saved the lives of hundreds of Indigenous women, and the creation of which would prevent further tragedy from occurring.

Safety enhancing and poverty reduction measures were also discussed, aimed at de-criminalizing people who can't afford to take transit. As they said, "No cops in schools, no cops on transit!"

Community Consultation Recommendations for Five of the Six Key Priority Areas of the Province's Poverty Reduction Strategy

Recommendation for Housing: Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing

The group emphasized that language is a powerful tool that can be used to influence ideas one way or another, depending on who is using it and why. They highlighted that the word 'affordable' is subjective and will mean different things to people in different income brackets. The group strongly recommends that the MSDPR provide clarification on what 'affordable' and 'low-income' means in their planning for the updated Poverty Reduction Strategy. Additionally, the requirement for people to prove that they have a 'low income' or that they require 'affordable' housing were named as processes that create situations where people can end up revealing personal information about themselves that can result in criminalization, for example, when a prospective tenant might have to admit that they use illicit drugs or engage in the survival economy, which are generally criminalized forms of income generation, to pay their rent.

They discussed that the expansion of 'shelter-rate' and 'pension-rate' housing would be the clearest way to achieve 'affordable' housing, and that the cost of housing should be tied to the benefits being provided by income assistance. For example, a person on income assistance can earn \$6,000 per year, and if they were forced to rent their housing at market rate housing prices, averaging \$2,000 per month in Vancouver, they would run out of their entire year's finances within 3 months.

Tactics for resisting the current state of the housing crisis also came up in conversations, where one Indigenous member of the community consultation asked, "If the homes on E. Hastings St. [in Vancouver] were Tipis, would they have torn them down?" Another responded, "If we could build tiny homes, we'd dare them to tear them down!" Other potential solutions arose from the group as well, such as the creation of Neighbourhood Community Liaison Teams discussed above, to oversee the construction of new housing, which could also host meetings for the people who already live in the neighbourhood to have input on what health and social amenities could be included in the new buildings that would be beneficial to them. The group also discussed that for the duration of their lives, residential school survivors and survivors of the 60s Scoop should have guaranteed housing, which does not have to be on reserve.

In the context of the types of housing that government plans to create to house communities of varying income brackets, the group's thoughts are below as direct quotes:

"I've been taught that we're all one nation, but some nations have been [expletive] over 10 times more than us."

“Some people should get housing: Is this the same right for everyone? We don’t need to classify people as more deserving. We should recognize that things have happened to certain people, and it’s up to the government to house them. Some people are not getting a fair shake, so there should be more equality for that issue. Everyone has the same right to housing. You didn’t suffer enough shouldn’t be the test. They want to pit people against each other.”

“Equal right to housing is good but equitable housing is important too. Why do we have to compete against each other?”

“They got rid of segregation of men and women. Get rid of all that. Treat everyone equal with a place to live.”

Recommendation for Education: Provide access to free or substantially subsidized post-secondary education for people living in poverty

Members of the group discussed how employment options in BC for people who do not have a post-secondary education are very limited, and these training and education opportunities should be expanded outside of the trades, should include peer work and peer support work, and should include the option to attend post-secondary school for free or with substantially subsidized rates.

Recommendation for Employment: Provide more opportunities for peer work

As mentioned above, the community consultation group had their own creative ideas for providing employment opportunities to people who live in poverty. Government and businesses should provide more opportunities for people to engage in peer work and peer support work because this form of work is more accessible to people who have barriers to engaging in the economy in traditional ways, for example because they cannot afford to obtain a post-secondary education which would result in job opportunities in higher income brackets. Along these lines, there should be systems in place so that peer workers can access free and low-barrier mental health supports so that they can maintain their health and long-term employment.

Recommendation for Income Supports: Implement the BC Basic Income Panel’s roadmap for transforming the province’s income support system

The group asserts that it is a must to raise social and disability assistance rates to the poverty line, at least, if not to bring them higher than the poverty line, and that the BC Basic Income Panel’s roadmap should be implemented in BC. The welfare wall was also discussed, and the group had several recommendations to address it. They recommend raising the amount exempted on earned income for people who receive any form of income assistance; providing a variety of payment options for income assistance payments, including e-transfers; that identification issues and barriers be resolved for accessing and receiving pay from employers when people don’t have a way to verify their identity, and that banks should play a role in reducing barriers for people who have limited access to technology and means for identifying themselves when receiving payment for work that they have done.

In terms of barriers in applying for income assistance, the group mentioned that it is very difficult to do so as there are a variety of applications to complete and departments to go through. They labeled this as ‘guided misdirection’. They recommend that there be advocates who work at every MSDPR office to guide individuals through the application process, and that MSDPR offices should always provide the opportunity to take appointments in-person to accommodate people’s learning and access needs. Accessing technology to make phone calls and navigate websites is not possible for many people who receive income assistance and who do not have the technology or literacy to use them.

Additionally, they recommend that for the duration of their lives, residential school survivors and survivors of the 60s Scoop should have a guaranteed income, separate from payments that survivors received for participating in class action lawsuits for their residential school experiences. Finally, the group mentioned that the living wage for employed people in BC is calculated for families with two incomes, so single adults would need even more money than the living wage of \$24 an hour in Vancouver. They also discussed the fact that rent costs can increase by up to 2% each year but that income assistance rates don't match that increase so they also recommend matching income support rates to the rate of inflation and annual rent increases.

Recommendation for Social Supports: Close the gap between the living and minimum wage

The group discussed their own personal experiences as people living in poverty where they end up relying on money lending institutions to fill in the gaps between their income and the cost of living. These companies deduct fees and interest, and the group added that that they also have to pay for transit to get to these places, so in the end they end up losing much more money by relying on these institutions to cash their cheques or borrow money. Additionally, since banks often won't cash cheques or accept transfers for people without ID, they are forced to rely on institutions like money lending institutions whose extremely high interest rates leave people with more debt than they started with. Finally, as mentioned above, another key social support for people living in poverty is providing them with the opportunity to obtain a post-secondary education for free or at a considerably subsidized cost.

Conclusion

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit feedback and recommendations to the Ministry from communities directly impacted by poverty. We look forward to seeing the next steps of this strategy implemented in the province and to a more equitable and dignified place for us all to live.

Sincerely,

Pivot Legal Society

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