



THE HIGH COST OF NOT CARING

Submission to the 2010
BC Budget Consultation

*Investing in children, families and poverty reduction
strategies is the underpinning of a civil, progressive society.*

*We ask the BC government to dedicate the 2010 budget to the interests
of dignity, human rights and respect for all our citizens.*

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“Bearing in mind that the peoples of the United Nations have, in the Charter, reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person, and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Recalling that, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations has proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance, convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.” - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 20, 1989)

INTRODUCTION

The BC Association of Social Workers is the professional association for social workers in British Columbia, a membership-driven organization of more than 1200 social workers employed in all areas of the province, in child welfare, health care, community agencies, universities, institutions, private practice and actively retired. We have a wealth of wisdom and experience as a result of our frontline social work with children, youth, families and vulnerable individuals. Our submission is grounded and arises out of our collective expertise and the honour of working with citizens throughout the province of British Columbia.

We have witnessed the rapid erosion and dismantling of the child welfare and child and family serving systems and its toll on our most vulnerable people in BC. These circumstances are preventable and can be remediated by the province. Improving investment in our social infrastructure through sound economic and public policy decision-making, made in consideration of proven best practices in child welfare, anti-poverty strategies and economic development, have all yielded measurable results and improvements in other jurisdictions. We believe that BC can and must do better for our current and future generations of citizens. Our very health, well being and future as a province depend on it.

CREATING A FUNCTIONAL AND ETHICAL RIGHTS-BASED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Since 2001, the Ministry of Children and Family Development has been reeling chaotically, confused, and stumbling in the dark. The child protection, childcare and child and family supporting systems have been cut to the bone. The entire system of care for BC's children and families is inadequately funded. We have seen many tragic examples of how MCFD is failing to meet its basic child protection mandate through systemic inadequacy. The cost to our children, youth, families and to society as a whole is unfolding in communities all around the province and cannot be condoned in a civil, ethical and progressive society.

The Representative for Children and Youth reported the following in her recently released Annual Report:

“In 2008/09 in BC, approximately 14,500 children and youth lived outside their parental home. About 60 per cent of those were in care and more than half were Aboriginal children and youth. In addition, nearly 4,400 children and youth lived out of parental placements in the home of a relative, over 600 were on youth agreements and 188 were in kith and kin arrangements. In some instances, government takes on full parental roles for these children and youth. In others it is not

so clear where responsibility and accountability rests for the day-to-day care of children, their guardianship or their well-being. Many of these children are in limbo and my Office continues to advocate for a stronger system of supports for them, with proper guardianship.” (p.5)

MCFD consistently fails to respond to independent reports regarding child safety, well being and monitoring, such as the many reports released by the Representative for Children and Youth. They have also failed to provide any meaningful response to the report, *Hands Tied: Child protection workers talk about working in, and leaving, BC's child welfare system*, produced by Pivot Legal Society. In this study the voices of child protection social workers were heard, reporting that they could not always meet either legislative or policy obligations with respect to a child's best interests. This is a significant failure given the admonitions around best interests in the governing child protection legislation, *The Child, Family and Community Services Act (1996)*.

The four most cited reasons for leaving MCFD's child protection front lines include “unmanageable caseloads, a lack of confidence in all levels of leadership and management, high stress levels, and a lack of preventative and supportive resources for children and families.” Not even five months after the release of this research, within MCFD there is a freeze on hiring. Employees who go on leaves, those who resign or retire are not being replaced, leaving many caseloads vacant.

There is internal organizational chaos and confusion as people bump from regions and teams are reconfigured. With the loss of auxiliary social workers, children at-risk and families needing support are pushed to the side for more “restructuring.” Caseloads are not theoretical; they are children at risk of being abused and neglected, and in many areas around BC the state is neither monitoring nor supporting them, except for emergency triaging and reactive, crisis-based band aid work until their files can be closed. Frontline workers and their representatives, such as the BCGEU, have emphatically advised management and MCFD and BC Public Service Agency (PSA) leadership that caseloads have risen beyond the capacity of workers to protect children adequately, that they are overwhelmed by the workload, by the administrative burden, by the lack of coverage, funding for services and adequate staffing levels. In the 2007/08 fiscal year employees of MCFD took \$7.3 million of sick leave, “which equals 47,313 sick days or an average of 12.39 days per employee - significantly more than the 8.55 day average across government” (Holman, 2008). This is most often related to the inability to continue to shoulder untenable workload demands and the stress of working in this challenging, high-risk occupation. No amount of “Appreciation” events or champions can begin to soothe the toxic, dysfunctional and unhealthy workplace environment in many MCFD offices, especially at this time when people are disappearing, many jobs are being lost and workers left with more work than they have the resources to handle.

MCFD is also apparently moving forward with the ill-considered plan not to compensate individuals for acting in supervisory roles and sending people back to the frontlines from acting roles. This is harmful in terms of supporting and developing capacity, practice competency and best practices on the frontlines. There is no evidence-based research that would support this kind of de-skilling and loss of supervisory capacity within BC's child welfare system. It is well established ‘best practices’ that having supervision is a crucial component to child welfare practice. This is also a risk that should not be tolerated in an ethical and professional public service with the increased responsibility, workload and professional liability Social Work team leaders assume in a most complex, high-risk and challenging and, importantly, legislatively mandated role. When these systems fail, BC's children can be critically injured and sometimes

lose their lives. The state has a duty of care and must do whatever it can to stop that from happening, which includes developing individual and organizational capacity. MCFD is not doing enough to prevent unnecessary tragedies and that must change.

Recommendations

- It is time for progressive, competent and sound leadership based on best practices in child welfare, labour relations, human rights and social justice within MCFD.
- Ensure that the supervisory structure within MCFD remains intact and is supported to build organizational and employee capacity and competency.
- Incorporate training, professional development and succession-planning in child protection and related services into the resource planning and funding structure of MCFD as it contributes to organizational and frontline practice competency and an improved duty of care.

CUTS TO SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Over a number of months, MCFD has made a number of cuts and claw backs of services and supports to children and youth with special needs and disabilities. It must be plainly stated – the systems of support for this most vulnerable group has been chronically under-funded by government for decades. When analyzing the current trends, it can be concluded that the continuous degradation of services to individuals with special needs is structural and targeted. These cuts are deeply concerning. These include:

- Cutting early intervention intensive autism services for young children. This program has made a difference in hundreds of children's lives and has facilitated development that otherwise would not have occurred.
- Community support service agencies around BC were directed by MCFD to find \$3.6 million in cuts and had funds earmarked for programming clawed back to MCFD.
- MCFD has eliminated valuable clinical specialist and supervisory positions in Supported Child Care and Infant Development programs that helped children with special needs and disabilities access early assessment and intervention.
- Child and youth mental health, and addiction services are woefully inadequate for the numbers of young people who require assessment and treatment in these most crucial early years. Children who have been sexually abused and those who experience mental health crises should not have to wait months, if ever, to receive counselling and support.
- Funding has been cut to the Special Olympics and a program that sought to reduce the number of children born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
- Children, youth and adults in need of services and supports through Community Living BC number in the thousands. We do not know the full scope of the waitlists because CLBC and MCFD are not adequately tracking the numbers of individuals on waitlists, or analyzing service gaps, barriers to receiving their services and how this leads to families going into crisis and requiring child protection interventions, where children may have to come into expensive foster care resources.

It is of great concern that MCFD can offer no explanation as to where the money from these claw backs and cuts will be spent to support the child welfare system and the children, youth and families dependent upon it to support their safety, well-being and health.

Recommendations

- Stop cuts, restore and improve funding to crucial services and the systems of support in the community, in schools and for families of children with special needs.
- Re-allocate the \$20 million going to build an unnecessary autism centre and put these funds into direct services, which will have much more value and will offer life-changing interventions that help children meet their potential. Or, earmark them to support the transition of CLBC Children's services back to MCFD which is going to cost a significant amount.
- Invest funds into development of our social capital, focus on developing the talents and abilities of people with special needs and offer opportunities for social inclusion and contribution to our communities.
- Increase transparency, accountability and oversight of the provision of services and supports to children, youth and adults with developmental disabilities and special needs and ensure that families and caregivers receive the support they require to care for their loved ones.
- Strategically break down barriers to collaboration between child welfare, health, education, mental health and youth criminal justice systems and enhance supports to vulnerable young people. It is the best prevention strategy we can ever have to support healthy beginnings.
- MCFD will report and explain where the clawbacks and cuts will be spent to support, enhance and strengthen the child welfare system.

DEVOLUTION OF CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

The province of BC quite simply cannot afford to spend additional millions to devolve services to regional authorities. The example of Community Living BC's Children's Services is a glaring illustration of the failure and cost of devolution. If the money spent on devolving the entire CLS system, throwing it into chaos and confusion, had been spent on direct care, resources and supports would have saved the province millions. It would have also saved thousands of individuals and families the heartache, confusion and turmoil they've experienced simply trying to receive access to basic public services, support and accountability when things go wrong for their loved ones.

Recommendations

- Put a moratorium on devolving any more child welfare services and consult widely with stakeholders, advocates, regional agencies and other interested parties on readiness for devolution, including adequate planning for organizational infrastructure development and funding.
- Commit to a transparent audit and analysis of the devolution and resumption of CLBC Children's Services back into MCFD to learn from the challenges of devolution and to provide accountability to individuals with disabilities, their families and to the taxpayers of BC.

SUPPORT TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLES OF BC

In his BC Children and Youth Review (2006), the Honourable Ted Hughes made the following statement:

“Aboriginal people alone truly understand their communities and the needs of their children and families. It makes sense that their own wisdom and understanding should guide the way to any change in the governance structure of the child welfare system that serves them, in partnership with the support and experience of the Ministry.”

In 2008, the BC Auditor General reported “while Aboriginal children account for only 8% of children in British Columbia, they make up 51% of children in the province’s care. This is considerably higher than the national average of 30-40%.” Key findings of this audit of the Aboriginal child protection service delivery model included the following:

- The Ministry has not identified the needs and resources required for Aboriginal child protection services.
- The Ministry has not been able to reasonably determine staff resources required specific to Aboriginal children and their families.
- The Ministry has been unable to determine the cost to deliver culturally appropriate child welfare services and there is a shortage of Aboriginal social workers.
- The Ministry’s change management practices are not in step with its current service delivery goals.
- The Ministry does not report on how well Aboriginal child protection services are being delivered.

In November 2008, Kelly MacDonald, an Aboriginal lawyer released a report, *The Road to Aboriginal Authority Over Child and Family Services*, which analyzed progress made to date of the devolution of Aboriginal child welfare services from MCFD to delegated Aboriginal agencies. One key conclusion was “there are serious financial concerns about the restructuring process. The provincial government has spent millions of dollars with few tangible results.” She describes a confusing process, with varying efforts at consultation with Aboriginal communities with little progress made. Aboriginal leaders as well have come forward with their concerns about the pace, process and readiness.

In 2009, it is simply unacceptable that both the province of BC and the Canadian government cannot collaborate with Aboriginal leaders, communities, allies and stakeholders to create a more strategic, effective and empowering system of care. Structural inequities and barriers to health, well-being and empowerment cannot simply be allowed to continue and are a cause of shame to our province and nation on the international human rights stage. We must all work together to make significant improvements in the conditions for First Nations peoples in BC (and Canada). It is a matter of Canadian social justice, integrity and a way of righting the wrongs of the past.

Recommendations

- Ensure that there is inclusive and broad consultation regarding Recognition and Reconciliation. There must be a collaborative effort to create a strategic vision that clarifies and sets out a cohesive action plan for implementation of changes and improvements to the Aboriginal child welfare system.

- The province must prioritize and provide adequate funding to Aboriginal agencies currently engaging in support and child protection services and ensure that it is working with the federal government to ameliorate the third world conditions of poverty and social exclusion far too many Aboriginal children and families face.
- The province must fairly negotiate a commonly agreed-upon governance model, a system of care and funding with Aboriginal delegated agencies, leaders and communities who are assuming greater responsibility for caring for First Nations children.
- The province must fund Aboriginal agencies with an eye to developing human resources, organizational and frontline capacity and practice competence to build on the strengths, capacity and wisdom available within Aboriginal communities around BC in caring for and advocating for the best interests of Aboriginal children.
- There must be improved transparency and accountability on reporting to the Legislative Assembly, to the Child and Youth legislative Committee and the public the costs, successes and challenges of the Aboriginal child welfare program.
- The province must develop and implement a strong place to recruit, retain and monitor Aboriginal foster homes and increase support for kith and kin.

ANTI-POVERTY MEASURES

Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified December 10, 1948)

BC's standing in Canada has been diminished as a result of our failure to implement anti-poverty strategies that have led to decreases in child and family poverty in other jurisdictions in Canada. BC has the lowest minimum wage across the country, with some communities experiencing the highest standards of living in the nation.

An individual on regular (temporary) income assistance through the Ministry of Housing and Social Development receives \$375 for shelter and \$235 for support. A single parent on assistance receives \$570 for shelter and \$375.58 for support for two people, no matter the age of the child. Low income families receive \$123.50 for each child to age 19 years through the BC Family Bonus. Parents with children under the age of six receive \$100 per month from the Canada Child Care.

The situation continues to be bleak for individuals with disabilities, what is called Persons with Disability status by MHSD. A single individual receives \$375 for shelter and \$531.42 for support. A single parent with PWD receives \$570 for shelter and \$672.08 for support.

Family members who open their homes to children who are relatives under MHSD's Child in Home of Relative (CIHR) program receive the following rates for the total care of children, no matter if they have special needs, or disabilities and excluding dental care and any other expenses. These arrangements are generally outside the monitoring and involvement of MCFD and frequently serve as an alternative to children being in foster care.

| Age Group | Maximum Rate |
|------------------|---------------------|
| Birth to 5 years | \$257.46 |
| 6 to 9 years | \$271.59 |
| 10 to 11 years | \$314.31 |
| 12 to 13 years | \$357.82 |
| 14 to 17 years | \$402.70 |
| 18 years | \$454.32 |

Around BC, it is difficult to know exactly how many individuals are homeless, but homeless counts and research put the numbers between 10,000 and 15,000 homeless individuals in the province. The number of people living on the streets or couch surfing has increased by 364 per cent in the Metro Vancouver area since 2002. In their 2008 study on homelessness, addiction and mental illness, the *Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction* reported that it costs at least \$55,000 a year to service one homeless person on the streets. Their analysis includes chronic use of police, ambulance, hospital and other emergency services. In BC, according to the BC Coroners Service, one homeless person dies every twelve days and there were an average of 32 homeless deaths a year from 2006 through 2008.

There is very clear evidence that the inadequacy of a strategic focus and funding across systems of housing, mental health, addiction services and income support that should be able to offer proactive, early intervention to vulnerable citizens is costing much more than the crisis-based, reactive broken system of care that has been the norm over the last decade. Is it really any surprise that BC has had the highest child poverty rate in Canada for six years in a row? We now have more children, youth and families homeless, under-housed and at-risk of homelessness than at any other point in decades in BC. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Recommendations

- Invest more capital funds in affordable social housing for families and an increased continuum of housing options for young people, persons with disabilities and chronic mental illness, including supportive, semi-independent, independent and acute long-term care.
- Advocate with other provinces to ensure the federal government resumes a national affordable housing strategy and invests funds through targeted transfer payments to the provinces and territories.
- Increase the housing stock of affordable rental homes in BC, implement rent controls and offer incentives for municipalities for creating and sustaining affordable mixed-market housing.
- Increase income assistance and disability rates for shelter and support and create a simpler application for Persons with Disability status to remove barriers for those who require PWD to survive.
- Prioritize and offer housing options for vulnerable individuals outside of downtown cores, such as the Downtown Eastside, where they are at-risk of being swallowed up into a cycle of deep poverty, addiction and mental illness.
- Increase the minimum wage in BC and do away with the \$6.00/hr training wage that causes financial disadvantages for young or inexperienced workers.

- Increase Child in Home of Relative rates to ensure that families can adequately care for and support their young relatives.

INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Investment in developing social capital, human resources and investing in social infrastructure is well-established and sound economic and public policy that works in many other jurisdictions in Canada and around the world. The business case is clear – investment in the development of capacity of citizens, all citizens, to reach their potential and to have opportunities for contributing to society pays dividends. We can pay now, or we can pay a much larger bill later, if we have failed to be proactive, progressive and future-oriented where our human potential is concerned.

The Conference Board of Canada states:

“British Columbia is going through a period of rapid change in its workforce. Between 2005 and 2015, 1.1 million jobs will need to be filled due to a combination of new job creation, retirements, and deaths. According to a recent Conference Board study, the province is facing a labour shortage of 160,000 workers by 2015 ... policies to increase the supply and quality of workers must be given high priority.” (Dr. Anne Golden, February 3, 2009).

Recommendations

- Re-institute educational grants for Persons with Disabilities and for other students to support them in accessing and completing post-secondary education. BC requires a home-grown knowledge-based talent pool with well developed expertise to compete in a highly competitive global market.
- “BC must adopt policies that encourage high rates of labour force participation, especially among the six populations that are currently under-represented in the labour force. These are youth, immigrants, women, mature workers, Aboriginals, and persons with disabilities.” (Conference Board of Canada).
- Increase access to job-training, employment programs and support to those transitioning from income assistance to paid employment.
- Provide financial support to low-income individuals to purchase equipment, clothing and transportation they require to become employed.
- Ensure that parents, particularly mothers, can access affordable, flexible child care for infants, toddlers and after-school care for older children. This supports women’s ability to enter and remain in the workforce.
- Continue to invest in specialized educational, language and vocational training for newcomers to Canada, both adults and young people.
- Continue to collaborate with Aboriginal communities in economic development initiatives that include a wider range of stakeholders, including women, youth and Elders.
- Continue to offer funding and work with the federal government to offer supportive educational opportunities to Aboriginal people, particularly young people and women.

CONCLUSION

We suggest that the province give sober second thought as it consults with stakeholders on the 2010 BC Budget. We encourage the BC government to adequately and ethically fund child welfare, child and family serving systems and invest in anti-poverty strategies so that preventable tragedies and damage are averted.

We ask the BC government to dedicate the 2010 budget to the interests of dignity, human rights and respect for all our citizens. The integrity of the BC public service and our provincial systems of care are in peril. It is the duty, mandate and core value of a competent and ethical public service and government to invest in the safety, well-being and protection of its citizens.

In these times of economic uncertainty progressive leaders will look to strengthen our public services, our community support services and our communities. It is crucial to recognize the important contributions of public and social service and community work to local economies. It is sound fiscal, economic and public policy to invest in social infrastructure and continue to nurture our social capital, and provide resources toward building our capacity as a province. Our very future as a successful province depends on this kind of ethical, accountable and effective leadership.

The BC Association of Social Workers appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the 2010 BC Budget consultation in the hope that our report will help contribute to one of the most important budgets in the history of British Columbia.



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