

Poverty Free BC: the Best Place on Earth to Be

Social workers deal with the effects of poverty daily in their practice in child welfare, schools, health care settings, the justice system or in the community. Many are familiar with the research of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and their conclusion that government is paying over twice the social cost for poverty's effects, (family breakdown, school failure, ill-health, and involvement with the criminal justice system), than if they changed policy proactively and removed poverty from our society.

The idea that we can afford to remove the causes of poverty is a stunning one, but not new. Every province in Canada is working on a plan to reduce poverty except for Saskatchewan and BC. This is difficult to understand as BC has the highest poverty rate in Canada.

What are some of the factors that an effective poverty reduction strategy must address?

Support Those Who Aren't Employed. Welfare rates remain well below the amount required to meet basic needs. This punitive approach is counterproductive. It makes it harder for people to progress to independence. Increase welfare rates to the poverty line and index them. Remove barriers that discourage, delay or deny people in need. There are six unemployed Canadians for every vacant job. Isn't it time to stop blaming the unemployed for unemployment?

Make Work Pay. Most people living in poverty are working. People are forced to work at least two jobs to make ends meet. The resultant stress can break families apart and cause ill-health with both personal and social costs. Full time work should lift people out of poverty, not keep them in it. A living wage allows families to escape poverty and severe financial stress, participate fully in their communities and ensure the healthy development of their children. Increase the minimum wage to a living wage.

Focus on Those Most Likely To Be Living in Poverty. Both increase and index disability rates. Restructure funding to better address the needs of Aboriginal people.

Address Homelessness and Lack of Affordable Housing. BC has increasing numbers of homeless people and the worst record of housing affordability in Canada. We used to build 1000-1500 units of social housing every year but from 2005-2010 built only 280! That's a 95% reduction! Start building over 2,000 new units of social housing each year. Increase supported housing for people with mental health or addiction issues. This is a cheaper and more effective approach than what we are doing now with people ending up in more expensive shelters, hospitals or jail.

Provide Universal, Publicly-Funded Child Care. This is the second largest expense for most families after housing. Child care is a necessity for working parents. The research on the importance of a child's first years to later success in school shows that good child care is a requirement. An effective poverty reduction program would make it affordable. Increasing the pay of child care workers, most of whom earn less than a living wage, would bring them out of poverty as well.

Provide Support for Training and Education. The connections between increasing education and reducing poverty are self-evident. This is the road that allows people to access stable, well-paying jobs.

Promote Health. Poverty erodes health. Enhancing and expanding home care and home support, assisted living, long-term care and community mental health services will promote health and further reduce the need for more expensive forms of care.

All Together Now. Any one of these measures will help. Taken together, they will move us toward a society that has little poverty and where social investments are made up front where they are most effective. We are paying more for poverty now because we are spending our dollars on its effects. We can reduce poverty, increase well-being and enable each citizen to make the contribution they can. We can pay to get citizens out of poverty or we can pay twice as much to address its effects on current and future generations.

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