

Submission to the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth

Submitted by the B.C. Government and Service
Employees' Union for the meeting on child
poverty in British Columbia

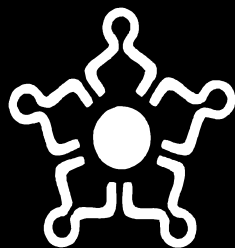
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Introduction

The B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) represents more than 65,000 people working in various sectors and occupations in more than 550 bargaining units across British Columbia. Our diverse membership includes women and men who regularly encounter instances and outcomes of child poverty in their daily work. For example, our members:

- protect children at risk;
- administer provincial income assistance;
- work in child care centres and with vulnerable children and youth;
- provide health and community social services to families;
- work in youth forensic psychiatric services and in the youth criminal justice system.

BCGEU members have a breadth and depth of experience with, and knowledge of, child poverty issues. Some of these members are quoted throughout this submission. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this submission to the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth for its May 21, 2010 meeting on child poverty in British Columbia.

Child poverty in B.C.

Child poverty rates in B.C. have been above national averages since 1999 and the highest of any province for six years in a row.¹ Over the long term, these rates have been rising. The rate of child poverty in B.C. was almost 8 percent higher in 2007 than it was in 1980.²

A number of issues and factors are related to the child poverty situation in B.C., including the following:

- **Income support**

B.C. Ministry of Housing and Social Development data indicate that "there was an average of 27,868 children in families on welfare in 2007."³ The income assistance received by families on welfare leave them well below the poverty line.⁴ In addition, B.C.'s welfare system "systemically discourages, delays and denies" people who need assistance.⁵

Income assistance rates are too low. I have worked with parents who are forced by poverty to make choices about whether to buy food and clothes for their children, or pay their rent and utility bills. Parents should not have to face this impossible choice.

-child protection worker

- **Wages and working conditions**

Most poor children in B.C. live in families with some earned income.⁶ In fact, over half of the children in poverty in B.C. live in households with adults earning at least the equivalent of full-year, full-time work.⁷ B.C. has the "highest proportion of working poor families in Canada,"⁸ and the lowest minimum wage of any Canadian province.⁹ Additionally, certain vulnerable groups of workers, including recent immigrants, temporary migrant workers, women workers, young workers and casual workers, face considerable workplace challenges aside from low wages."¹⁰

¹ First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, *BC Campaign 2000: 2009 Child Poverty Report Card* (Vancouver: November 2009) at 3 [First Call 2009].

² *Ibid.* at 5.

³ *Ibid.* at 12.

⁴ See *ibid.* See also Seth Klein *et al.*, *A Poverty Reduction Plan for BC* (Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2008) at 26-27 [Klein].

⁵ Klein, *ibid.* at 27.

⁶ First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, *BC Campaign 2000: 2008 Child Poverty Report Card* (Vancouver: November 2008) at 12.

⁷ Klein, *supra* note 4 at 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Iglia Ivanova, "BC's minimum wage the lowest in Canada," *Policy Note* (31 August 2009), online: Policy Note <<http://www.policynote.ca/bcs-minimum-wage-the-lowest-in-canada/>>. See also Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Minimum Wage Database: Current And Forthcoming Minimum Hourly Wage Rates For Experienced Adult Workers in Canada* (19 March 2009), online: HRSDC <<http://srv116.services.gc.ca/dimt-wid/sm-mw/rpt1.aspx?lang=eng>>.

¹⁰ Klein, *supra* note 4 at 28.

If children are poor, odds are it's because their parents are poor. Parents, particularly single parents—who are disproportionately women—aren't earning enough to support their families... The wages paid in child care centres and in the community social services sector, traditionally women's fields, are abominable. Workers with disabilities and Aboriginal workers are also disproportionately represented among the working poor.

- women's centre coordinator

- **Hunger and food security**

British Columbia "faces a chronic hunger problem and significant food insecurity."¹¹ For financial reasons, low-income families make poor food choices and go without adequate nutrition.¹² Food bank use is on the rise, and in B.C. approximately one-third of food bank users are children.¹³ Across Canada in 2009, almost half of food bank users were families with children.¹⁴ Due to over-demand for food bank services, many low-income families "rely heavily on other sources of charitable food, such as soup kitchens and drop-in centres."¹⁵

Children in need start and end the day hungry. They lack the essential nutrients to keep their brains and bodies healthy. This means they have less vitality to get them through the day's learning.

-housing worker

- **Housing and homelessness**

British Columbia "has the worst record of housing affordability in Canada, with almost one in three households spending more than 30 percent of their gross income on housing costs."¹⁶ Canada's inadequately housed population is made up of a disproportionate number of children. Children aged 15 and younger "make up half... of the number of Canadians living in core housing—housing that is either unaffordable, substandard, overcrowded or all three."¹⁷

Due in part to unaffordable housing, homelessness "has reached unprecedented levels across urban, semi-urban, and rural communities in British Columbia."¹⁸ A recent homelessness count in Metro Vancouver found 2,660 homeless people in the area, of which almost 6 percent were children under the age of 19.¹⁹

¹¹ *Ibid.* at 19.

¹² See *ibid.* at 19-20.

¹³ Food Banks Canada, *HungerCount2009* (Toronto: 2009) at 4, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 7.

¹⁵ Klein, *supra* note 4 at 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Campaign 2000, *Keep the Promise: Make Canada Poverty-Free - 2009 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada: 1989-2009* (Toronto: November 2009) at 8 [Campaign 2000].

¹⁸ Patterson *et al.*, *Housing and Support for Adults with Severe Addictions and/or Mental Illness in British Columbia* (Burnaby: Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, February 2008) at 8.

¹⁹ See Social Planning and Research Council of B.C. *et al.*, *Still on our streets...Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count* (Burnaby: Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, December 2008) at 11-15.

Too many children live in substandard housing, where they are subjected to black mould, dangerous neighbours, or overcrowding. Of those families that do find suitable housing, many are forced to pay an enormous portion of their income on rent, pushing them deeper into poverty.

- social program officer

- **Child care**

Finding affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care "is as elusive as ever for most families."²⁰ Levels of access to child care in Canada measure well-below international benchmarks.²¹ Those who can find child care are paying too much. A recent Vancouver/Victoria-based study showed that child care fees account for a substantial proportion of family expenses.²² For many parents, particularly mothers, the ability to earn employment income for their children depends on the availability of quality and affordable child care.²³

Early childhood education and care is also critical to social and economic development.²⁴ Currently, "only 71% of BC children arrive at kindergarten meeting all of the developmental benchmarks they need to thrive both now and into the future: 29% are developmentally vulnerable."²⁵ Neighbourhoods "that report higher rates of poverty suffer higher vulnerability levels."²⁶

The current situation isn't good. There are two-year-long waitlists and fees are very high—over a thousand dollars a month. Supports for children with developmental delays are underfunded. And fewer workers are entering the child care field, or staying in it very long, because the pay doesn't match the responsibility.

- early childhood educator

- **Education and training**

Post-secondary education is increasingly viewed as a tool for preventing poverty and "a necessary pathway" out of it.²⁷ Post-secondary graduates "are more likely to be employed, and they earn more than those who did not continue their studies past high school."²⁸ Moreover, "the advantages that post-secondary graduates have in terms of employment and income translate

²⁰ Campaign 2000, *supra* note 17 at 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See Richards *et al.*, *Working for a Living Wage: Making Paid Work Meet Basic Family Needs in Vancouver and Victoria* (Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, First Call: Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria, September 2008).

²³ See Klein, *supra* note 4 at 50.

²⁴ See generally Paul Kershaw *et al.*, *15 by 15: A Comprehensive Policy Framework for Early Human Capital Investment in BC* (Vancouver: Human Early Learning Partnership, University of British Columbia, August 2009).

²⁵ *Ibid.* at 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at 13.

²⁷ Campaign 2000, *supra* note 17 at 9.

²⁸ Joseph Berger and Andrew Parkin, "Chapter 1 – The Value of a Degree: Education, Employment and Earnings in Canada" in Joseph Berger, Ann Motte & Andrew Parkin, eds., *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*, 4th ed. (Montreal: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009) 6 at 7.

into advantages in other areas."²⁹ For example, the poverty rate "is twice as high for families headed by someone without a university degree as it is for those headed by a university graduate."³⁰ Yet, "access to post-secondary education has become increasingly difficult" for students from low-income families, and "one-half of students from low-income families do not continue their studies past high school, compared with one-quarter of those from high-income families."³¹

Additionally, under-funding of public education has meant an increase in school fees, resulting in disproportionate negative and exclusionary impacts on vulnerable and low-income children and families.³²

For young people in poverty, universities and colleges are bridges to a new life; a different life. I've seen students turn their lives around through education. But lower-income students are afraid of the financial cost of going to school.

-adult basic education instructor

- **Health services**

Poverty is "one of the most significant contributors to ill health."³³ Rates of "poor health, hyperactivity and delayed vocabulary development have been shown to be higher among children in low-income families."³⁴ Poverty can also be a barrier to improving health. For example, the cost of accessing prescription drugs, dental care and eye care "are a significant barrier for those living on low incomes."³⁵

In addition, underfunding of community health care services can prevent low-income people (both children and adults) with disabilities from accessing key supports.³⁶

Everything that affects a person from child birth on contributes to good health or not. Families in poverty may not have access to good nutrition information, good dental care... many things they just cannot afford. Without a good foundation... bad habits that last a lifetime develop, for example, into diabetes, obesity, and low self-esteem that can result in alcohol or drug dependency.

-community health worker

²⁹ *Ibid.* at 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Campaign 2000, *supra* note 17 at 9.

³² See Klein, *supra* note 4 at 51.

³³ BC Healthy Living Alliance, *Healthy Futures for BC Families: Policy Recommendations for Improving the Health of British Columbians* (Vancouver: September 2009) at 5.

³⁴ Canadian Institute for Health Information, *Improving the Health of Canadians* (Ottawa: September 2004) at 52.

³⁵ Klein, *supra* note 4 at 52.

³⁶ See generally Klein, *supra* note 4.

Poverty reduction plan for B.C.

B.C.'s child poverty situation requires urgent attention, and the issues and factors discussed above cannot be addressed in isolation. Our province needs a comprehensive and accountable plan to reduce poverty, and we need it now.

At least six Canadian provinces either have such plans or are in the process of developing them.³⁷ British Columbia must follow their lead.

The BCGEU is not alone in urging this action. We are a member of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, a broad and diverse group of organizations that have come together to advocate for a poverty reduction plan for British Columbia. The Coalition is leading a growing call in B.C. for legislated targets and timelines to reduce poverty and end homelessness.³⁸

The following are some of the details of this call:³⁹

1. Targets and timelines

An effective and accountable poverty reduction plan must include legislated targets and timelines. The BCGEU urges the adoption of the following targets and timelines, recommended by the Coalition:

- **Reduce overall rate of poverty**

Reduce B.C.'s poverty rate by 30 percent within four years, and by 75 percent within 10 years.

- **Reduce poverty rates among specific populations**

Reduce the poverty rates for children, lone-mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and recent immigrants and refugees by 30 percent in four years, and by 75 percent within 10 years, recognizing that poverty is concentrated in these populations.

- **Increase income levels**

Within two years, ensure that every British Columbian has an income that reaches at least 75 percent of the poverty line.

³⁷ We are aware of plans or processes in Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba.

³⁸ The Coalition issued an open letter to B.C. political parties in 2009, calling for a poverty reduction plan. It recently renewed this open letter. See Appendix.

³⁹ For additional details and further information, see online: BC Poverty Reduction <<http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/>>. And see Klein, *supra* note 4.

- **End homelessness**

Within two years, ensure that no one must sleep outside. End all homelessness within eight years, ensuring all homeless people have high-quality, appropriate housing.

2. Policy measures and actions

Specific policy measures must be implemented and concrete actions must be taken to meet the above targets and timelines. The BCGEU urges a commitment to the following measures and actions, recommended by the Coalition:

- **Improve income support**

Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed, and remove policy barriers so that recipients can build and maintain assets. For example, immediately and substantially increase income assistance and disability benefit rates.

Income assistance should be higher. It should provide more than the bare minimum for a family to survive. It should be about fairness. Increasing the rates would help children in poverty have the same advantages to succeed as other children.

-child protection worker

- **Improve earnings and working conditions**

Dramatically improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce. For example, immediately increase and index the minimum wage, and eliminate the training wage.

Child care workers, and workers in group homes, residential care facilities and transition houses—they need better wages. They're struggling to survive. Their levels of expertise and responsibility far outweigh what they're paid. We need a much greater commitment to supporting these workers and the sectors they work in.

-women's centre coordinator

- **Improve food security**

Dramatically improve food security for low-income individuals and families, and substantially reduce food bank use.

Fresh food for children is essential... if we wish them to be healthy, contributing members of society.

-housing worker

- **Address homelessness and build affordable housing**

Implement initiatives to address homelessness, and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan.

We need a plan to deal with homelessness, and we need an affordable and supportive housing plan. Shelter and support funds must increase. Until we meet people's basic needs—such as the need for safe and secure housing—there is little chance of people succeeding in other aspects of their lives.

-social program officer

- **Provide universal, publicly-funded child care**

Develop a comprehensive plan and timeframe for the implementation of a high-quality, universal, publicly-funded early learning and child care program for B.C.

We need a safe, affordable, child care that everyone can access. More investment in early childhood education will mean lower rates of child poverty. Finding quality child care is the first step a mother or father needs to take to return to the workforce.

-early childhood educator

- **Support training and education**

Provide support for meaningful, long-term training and education, so that low-income people can access stable, well-paying jobs. For example, immediately increase the availability of post-secondary grants for low-income students.

The education and training opportunities need to be there. We see success stories where there's funding and resources in place. But supports aren't as accessible as they used to be. We need to change that.

-adult basic education instructor

- **Promote the health of all British Columbians**

Enhance community mental health, home support and residential care services, remove financial barriers to accessing health care services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.

Without access to services, there's nothing to help break out of the poverty cycle; poverty begets poverty. Families need hope that they can break the cycle. Mental health services, access to nutrition and hygiene information, respite support for parents, prevention—like access to sports and fitness activities... these types of services and supports are so important.

-community health worker

3. Marginalization lens

Finally, an effective poverty reduction plan must focus on populations with consistently high poverty rates, such as children, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, recent immigrants and refugees, single mothers, and single senior women.

In addition to implementing specific measures targeted at these populations, a poverty reduction plan in B.C. should "incorporate a 'marginalization lens' through which to evaluate all initiatives for their impact and effectiveness in addressing the poverty situations" of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Klein, *supra* note 4 at 35.

Conclusion

The issues and factors discussed above clearly demonstrate that "child poverty is family poverty."⁴¹ As a result, instances and outcomes of child poverty in British Columbia cannot be addressed without implementing measures in a wide range of public policy areas, including income support, low-wage work, food security, housing and homelessness, child care, education and training, and health services.

To effectively address child poverty in B.C., we need a comprehensive and accountable poverty reduction plan, with legislated targets and timelines. There is a growing call in this province for such a plan. The BCGEU urges the Committee to recommend that the government immediately answer this call.

⁴¹ First Call 2009, *supra* note 1 at 3.

Appendix

Text of BC Poverty Reduction Coalition open letter (Spring 2010):

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.