

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition
Submission to the BC Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
October 2007

First Call is a non-partisan, cross-sectoral partnership of organizations and individuals committed to strengthening support for the well-being of children and youth in BC. Our coalition believes children and youth should receive “first call” on society’s resources. Our work is founded on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a host of research evidence. We focus our advocacy around a *4 Keys to Success* agenda for children and youth:

- A strong commitment to early childhood development
- Support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood
- Increased economic equality
- Safe and caring communities

The key points First Call would like government to consider in making choices for next year’s budget are summarized in the final page of this submission. We realize the questions in the government’s consultation paper are largely directed to seeking advice on reaching goals around a sustainable environment. We fully support investments and incentives from government that lead to a healthier physical environment for growing children and youth, especially given their heightened vulnerability to the physiological effects of chemicals and other toxins and hazards.

In my remarks, I will focus on the equally important social supports and investments children and families need in order to reduce long-term costs to the health care, education, and justice systems. **Well-supported children, who are able to reach their full potential, are the best guarantee we have of a bright and truly sustainable future for BC.**

Thanks to healthy revenues, BC’s government now has greater room to make spending choices. Our coalition calls upon government to acknowledge the persistent poverty facing too many BC families and take bold action to **define and commit to a poverty reduction strategy, including specific targets and measures of our progress.** We need comprehensive poverty reduction strategies at both the national and provincial levels. BC could join Newfoundland/Labrador and Quebec in showing leadership with the adoption of a provincial strategy. (See <http://www.budget.finances.gouv.qc.ca/budget/2002-2003a/en/pdf/FightAgainstPoverty.pdf> and <http://www.hrle.gov.nl.ca/hrle/poverty> for other provincial strategies.) The recommendations which follow are all well-identified elements of a longer-term poverty reduction strategy, as well as being measures which will increase the health and well-being of children immediately.

Income supplements

We appreciate the increase made to income assistance rates in 2007, even though the increase was so small as to have little impact in reducing the abject poverty of people affected. Our partner, the Dietitians of Canada BC Branch, have produced an excellent report every year for several years outlining the inadequacy of welfare incomes for a healthy diet for families. To our shame, 26,000 BC

children needed emergency food from food banks in 2006, an increase of 10.0% from 2005. Food insecurity is linked to childhood obesity and other poor health outcomes (reference our publication, *Child and Youth Development and Income Inequality: A Review of Selected Literature (2007)* available on www.firstcallbc.org), which can frustrate the achievement of government's goal to improve the health of children. Income assistance rates must be set in relation to the reality of living costs for families, as opposed to the arbitrary way they are now determined. **We recommend government identify a market basket of good and services as a basis of setting welfare rates, increase rates to reflect the actual cost of the basket and index these rates annually to the consumer price index.**

We further recommend the re-introduction of earnings exemptions for all categories of recipients and allowing parents to keep child support payments, so that they may benefit the children they are intended for.

As federal contributions to low income family income have increased, e.g. through the National Child Benefit Supplement, BC has reduced its contribution to the BC Family Bonus and the BC Earned Income Benefit to the point where they are becoming irrelevant. **We recommend that BC restore the original levels of funding to these programs so they make a difference in the lives of our very poorest children.**

As evidenced by increased levels of homelessness and housing insecurity, barriers to accessing the income assistance safety net need immediate attention. **We recommend government eliminate the 2-year independence rule and 3-week work search requirement, as well as re-examine the barriers specific to immigrant and refugee families who are effectively barred from applying for income assistance when they are in need.**

Wages

As the BC Progress Board noted in their December 2006 report on social conditions, this province had the second worst poverty record of any province in 2005. Seventeen of all family units were living below Statistics Canada's low income cut-offs, after income taxes. **For the fourth year in a row (2002-05) BC has had the highest child poverty rate in the country.** The most recent data shows a child poverty rate of 15.2%, or 126,000 children, using after-tax low income cut-offs from Statistics Canada. (The before tax rate stands at 20.9%) Children living in lone parent families headed by women are significantly over-represented in these figures. Over 60,000 BC children (2004) live in families with at least one full-time, full-year income earner, but are still poor. This reflects low wages. The minimum wage in BC hasn't been raised since 2001 and families' earning power is being eroded. **We recommend that the minimum wage be raised to at least \$10.00 per hour and indexed annually to the CPI. The discriminatory \$6.00 training wage should be eliminated immediately.**

We also recommend that the Employment Standards Act be amended to increase the minimum work call-out from 2 to 4 hours. This is in recognition of the hardship imposed on low wage workers whose pay for very short work shifts that don't even cover their transportation and child care costs.

Child care and early learning

The cuts this year to child care funding have been devastating and raised great concern among our coalition partners. We note that BC is the only province to respond to the federal child care program cuts with cuts to child care program funding. A mere \$15 M was needed to sustain child care operating funding at previous levels, a sum easily found in the multi-billion surplus at the end of the last fiscal year. It has been incomprehensible to the community why these cuts were made at the same time \$95.7 M was being hastily spent on one-time-only grants and new StrongStart programs were being funded that are largely inaccessible to working parents. The result has been child care operators having to raise their fees, with the effect that low income families can no longer afford quality care for their children. Even before these cuts there was a crisis in BC for parents desperate to find quality, affordable care so they can re-enter or stay in the work force and support their families.

It is long past time for this province to develop and implement a plan for child care that respects all children's right to quality care and early learning environments, their parents' right to work, and child care providers' right to wages they can support their families on. We urge you to recommend to government that the 2008 budget include restoration of all the funds cut from child care, and significant investments in building new spaces. The plan must also address the issue of compensation for child care workers, as recruitment and retention problems are at a crisis stage throughout the province. Our continued neglect of this basic support for young families and children is inexcusable and flies in the face of all the research evidence about the importance of the early years, much of it provincially funded.

Education investments

Making sure our public institutions do well by our most vulnerable children and youth is one way to ensure they meet the needs of all children and youth. We are not yet putting this wisdom into practice by our province's continued underfunding necessary supports for school-age children with extra challenges. We know that educational investments produce a significant social and economic return in the long run. **We urge the Committee to recommend that funding in the 2008 provincial budget be increased for public schools so that they may improve supports and services for immigrant and refugee students and families, for Aboriginal students and for students with special needs.**

The high cost of tuition fees and the rising cost of living are making it increasingly difficult for students from low income families to afford a post-secondary education. Even those who can attend find themselves graduating with oppressive debt loads. This is very short-sighted public policy. **We recommend that the 2008 budget contain measures to increase access to post-secondary education for low income students.**

First Call would like to acknowledge the increased funding recently directed to English as a second language training for immigrants and refugees. We understand free adult ESL training for newcomers will now be available up to levels 4 and 5 and we applaud this move. **We recommend funding be extended to level 6, to help parents find and keep jobs that are able to support their families and keep them out of poverty.**



Fax: (604) 875-3569
E-mail: info@firstcallbc.org <http://www.firstcallbc.org>

Housing investments

Homelessness and housing insecurity are increasing problems, despite the booming provincial economy and the commitments announced in the 2007 “housing” budget. We note with approval the increase in the Rental Assistance threshold to allow more BC families to qualify for this rent subsidy. **We look to the 2008 budget to contain increased provincial investments in a range of social housing projects accessible to families and to develop mechanism to encourage the development of affordable market rental housing options for families.**

Ministry for Children and Family Development funding

This Ministry, with its broad-scope mandate from family support and prevention to crisis intervention, and from early childhood development to youth services, is severely underfunded. Every area of its work is starved for additional funds, handicapping its effectiveness in supporting and keeping children and youth safe, and intervening in a timely fashion with adequate supports and services. **We strongly urge the Committee to recommend increased funding for this Ministry, based on the already-identified and unmet needs of children in care, youth at risk, children and youth with special needs and/or mental health problems, young parents and their babies, isolated immigrant families, Aboriginal families damaged by the legacy of colonialism, to name some of the most prominently underserved populations.**

We thank you for your attention to the issues we have raised. We trust you share our concern for making BC a more just and equitable place for families to raise their children, where no child or youth is excluded or denied the help they need to be the best they can be.

2008 Budget Recommendations from First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

Well-supported children, who are able to reach their full potential, are the best guarantee we have of a bright and truly sustainable future for BC. In order to reduce long-term costs to the health care, education, and justice systems, BC needs to invest more in a range of social supports for children and families. Growing up in poverty is one of the strongest risk factors for creating vulnerability in children and youth. We call upon the provincial government to make a comprehensive effort in the 2008 budget to reduce child and family poverty. Some key elements of this effort must include:

- Formal recognition in the budget speech of the importance of fighting poverty
- Establishment of a provincial poverty reduction strategy with specific short-term and long-term targets
- Action to create more good jobs with decent wages and working conditions
 - Increase the minimum wage to at least \$10 an hour.
 - Index the minimum wage annually to the Consumer Price Index.
 - Eliminate the \$6 an hour training wage.
 - Increase the minimum work call-out from two to four hours.
- Realistic and reasonable welfare reforms
 - Identify a market basket of goods and services as the basis for setting welfare rates.
 - Implement an immediate increase in welfare rates to reflect the actual cost of the basket.
 - Index welfare rates annually to the Consumer Price Index.
 - Re-introduce earnings exemptions for all categories of recipients and allow parents to keep child support payments.
 - Replace BC Family Bonus and BC Earned Income benefit clawbacks from federal contributions.
 - Remove barriers to getting access to welfare such as the 2-year independence test and 3-week work search.
- Child care investments
 - Develop a provincial child care plan that commits BC to building a quality, accessible and publicly-funded child care system.
 - Restore all funds cut in 2007 to Child Care Operating Funding.
 - Restore all funds cut in 2007 to Child Care Resource and Referral Programs.
- Education investments:
 - Make publicly funded adult ESL training available to newcomers to at least Level 6.
 - Increase funding for public schools in the following areas:
 - * ESL instruction and other support services for newcomer students and families
 - * Supports and services for Aboriginal students
 - * Supports and services for students with special needs
 - Increase access for low income students to post-secondary education.
- Housing investments
 - Increase provincial investments in a range of social housing projects accessible to families.
 - Encourage the development of affordable rental housing options for families.
- Increase funding for the Ministry for Children and Family Development to reflect the already-identified needs of the children, youth and families it is mandated to support.