

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition
Speaking Notes for Presentation to BC Budget Consultations, September 15, 2011
Presenters: Adrienne Montani and Dr. John Millar
[handout: slides and partner list]

- Thank you for this opportunity to share our information and recommendations with you today. We come representing a broad, non-partisan coalition of 90 partner organizations and hundreds of individuals in communities around the province who want to see the rights and well-being of our children and youth given the highest priority in government's budget deliberations.

- You have asked us to give you our best thoughts on what's important, our recommended priorities for next year's budget, and what government can do to help families. In answering we start from the assumption that we all want what is best for BC's children and youth, while recognizing that there will be disagreements, sometimes within our coalition, and sometimes with the government of the day about which public policies, including budget priorities, will best serve families with children.

- As a coalition, First Call is united in an understanding, based on research evidence and the expertise of our coalition partners, of the many factors that contribute to healthy child development. We call it our four keys to success agenda: a strong commitment to early childhood development, support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood, increased economic equality and safe and caring communities.

- These are the conditions and social determinants of health that we know must be attended to for all children.

- We also speak from a commitment to promoting and protecting the rights children are promised under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, such as the right to education, to child care, to protection, to health, etc.

- Part of our job as a child rights coalition, is to monitor how well we are doing on implementing the Convention's (and BC's) promises and how well we are doing in BC on delivering on those 4 keys to success.
- Many BC children are well-supported and thriving. Too many are not. Too many families with young children or teens are struggling to find supports. Too many children are growing up in poverty. Too many children with special needs are waiting for help and equitable access to care and education. Indicators of our failures in these areas are the high numbers of children in care, health inequities, unacceptable school drop out rates among certain youth populations, youth with disabilities and mental health problems ending up in the criminal justice system, and so on.
- A theme underscoring all of these observations is that too little effort and public investment is directed to preventing avoidable problems and preventing problems from getting worse. Children, youth and families are paying for this underinvestment with their health and happiness, and we are all paying for it in escalating social costs.
- Growing up in poverty is known to be one of the most significant risk factors to children's long-term success and well-being. BC's had an unconscionably high rate of child poverty for several decades, through good economic times and bad and various governments. We have yet to bring it down to what it was 3 decades ago.
- We also know that the heightened vulnerability created by living in poverty is disproportionately affecting Aboriginal families, lone mother families, immigrant and refugee families and families with children with disabilities. This should shame us all.
- A recent study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, estimates the annual cost of maintaining the status quo of poverty in this province at \$8 to 9

billion dollars, twice as much as it would cost to implement a comprehensive poverty reduction plan.

- When we look at the trend of growing income inequality over the last 20 years, and the increasing rates of vulnerability among children upon school entry (nearing 30%), we have the evidence we need to call for something other than letting the market work and trying to make the economy grow. We cannot continue to ignore the consequences of allowing so many BC children to be left behind.
- **We are calling for this committee to recommend that BC adopt such a plan, with legislated timelines and targets for the reduction of poverty and homelessness.**
- **Some of our detailed recommendations** for the areas of public policy that need governments attention and have budget implications that will help families and bring down the rate of child and family poverty are listed in the handout we've given you. They cover 4 areas – work, education, income supports and social supports.

Regarding work, we need to enhance the quality of parents' jobs. Our specific recommendations:

- Continue to raise and index the minimum wage to bring it closer to a living wage.
- Make sure living wages are paid to all government employees and employees working for government-funded contractors.
- Enforce and enhance employment standards to ensure safe and decent working conditions, fairness and reduce workers' exposure to material hazards, work-related stress and other health risks.

Regarding education, we need to improve children's access to and the quality of education. This is clearly the best investment we can make for BC's future health and prosperity. Our specific recommendations:

- Start early. Invest in a publicly-funded system of high quality, affordable, accessible, not-for-profit child care. Besides providing the quality care and learning environments young children have a right to, this will address the crisis for parents who cannot work because they can't find or afford child care, and those who are working and paying more than they can afford.
- Restore funding for public schools to enable all students, including those with extra challenges, to get the support they need.
- Remove barriers to post-secondary access for lower income people through tuition fee reductions, grants instead of loans and interest free loans.

Regarding income supports, direct government income transfers through programs and the tax system are a critical part of the social safety net we all want to be there for us if we find ourselves in need. We need to ensure that our income support programs and policies are provide sufficient income to live a healthy life, respect the dignity of recipients, and don't contribute to trapping people in poverty. Our specific recommendations for families include:

- Reform BC's income assistance policies to allow parents to have enough money to support their children's healthy development. Raise inadequate shelter and support rates, index them to inflation, and restore earnings and child support exemptions. Revise the rates for parents/grandparents with children with disabilities to better reflect their extra needs.
- Change claw-back policies and tax rates for families with children in the \$35,000-\$50,000 income range to bring fairness to the marginal effective tax rate they pay. Many important government subsidies and benefits have

income thresholds that are much too low, and are clawed-back so quickly that modest income families face some of the highest marginal effective tax rates in the province. For example, many modest-income families (despite struggling with a bare-bones budget), do not qualify for the low-income carbon tax credit, the sales tax credit, the Rental Assistance Program, MSP premium assistance, or provincial child care subsidies.

Regarding social supports, prevention is the key principle we would like you to consider in your budget recommendations to government. Over the past decade, explicit and de-facto cuts to child and family services and relevant ministries (when allotments don't match actual program costs, e.g. in education and social services) have been short-sighted. Failing to meet children's and families' needs for help costs us all more later when problems get worse or developmental windows are missed. Specifically we recommend:

- Ensure the Ministry of Children and Family Development has sufficient funding to carry out its child protection mandate with integrity, based on high standards of practice. The budget should be enhanced to allow them to eliminate wait lists, reduce social workers' caseloads, and properly support the community-based agencies contracted to do the crucial prevention and intervention work with children and families – things like therapies for children with developmental challenges, parenting support, and specialized services for 'at-risk' youth.
- Make sure a provincial mental health plan includes improved supports for children and youth with mental illnesses and investments in preventative supports.
- Provide public coverage for dental care and prescription drugs to all British Columbians. These are essential parts of health care, and the inequities in access based on income are unconscionable.

- Increase government's efforts to end homelessness and increase the availability of safe and affordable housing for low-income families. We need significant new investments in the stock of affordable housing for families with children.
- **In conclusion**, BC's fiscal policy must take the mounting evidence about the importance of early years investments, investments in prevention, and reducing inequities created by growing income inequality into account if we are serious about improving outcomes for children and building a healthier, more prosperous society for all.
- You have also asked about **how to increase revenues**. Many of our policy recommendations, if adopted, we are confident will result in real savings to the public purse over time. "A pound of prevention is worth an ounce of cure." Giving our children first call on the province's budget is the best investment we can make, a point frequently made by esteemed economists and business organizations – not just people in human services.
- Some of our other recommendations are aimed at addressing the growing inequality in our society through a fairer tax regime. Income tax cuts have contributed significantly to the loss of government revenue and the growth of inequality. They have been of little benefit to low income families and served to reduce their access to necessary social services. This is simply an unsustainable model.
- Thank you again for your attention and we welcome your questions. First Call will also be submitting a written brief to the committee by the October deadline containing additional data and links to relevant research.