



## Notes

### First Call: BC Child & Youth Advocacy Coalition Meeting with Federal Official Opposition Children's Critic – July 26, 2011

Family Services of Greater Vancouver  
202-1193 Kingsway, Vancouver

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#### In attendance:

Kim Adamson – Success By 6, BC  
Rishima Bahadoorsingh – Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies (AMSSA)  
Calinda Brown – Jean Crowder's office  
Jean Crowder – MP Nanaimo-Cowichan  
Rachel Douglas – Public Health Agency of Canada  
Gaye Ferguson – Vancouver East CAPC/Nobody's Perfect  
Kasari Govender – West Coast LEAF  
Dianne Liscumb – Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre

Andrea Lemire – Society for Children & Youth of BC  
Lindsay Matthysen – Jean Crowder's office  
Lynn McBride – BC Aboriginal Child Care Society  
John Millar – First Call  
Adrienne Montani – First Call  
Maya Peled – McCreary Centre Society  
Karen Seraphim – BC Aboriginal Child Care Society  
Iris Yong – PeerNetBC

#### Purpose of the meeting

First Call hosted this meeting as an opportunity for coalition partners to meet with the new federal Official Opposition critic for children's issues, NDP MLA Jean Crowder, Nanaimo-Cowichan, to brief her on the many federal policy issues our coalition has an interest in which affect children, youth and families.

A [briefing document](#) was prepared for Ms. Crowder canvassing the range of issues our coalition is monitoring at the federal level. It was designed to serve as a resource document for future reference, with multiple links to relevant reports and websites for more in-depth information on various issues.

#### Dialogue

Ms. Crowder shared some information about her current and previous critic roles in Parliament. She is currently the Official Opposition Critic for Human Resources and Skills Development (HRSDC). Monitoring children's issues are part of her responsibilities. Issues and policy impacting children and youth span many ministries, so other critics can also be engaged.

Despite the lack of a children's ministry or minister of state within the current federal government, it would be helpful if the responsibilities of the Opposition Critic for monitoring children's issues was made more visible in the critic's title.

Ms. Crowder invited participants to advise her on action they would like to see taken related to child and youth issues, particularly what the Opposition can do in the context of a Conservative majority in Parliament. It appears that Government is divesting itself of service delivery responsibilities. Examples include cuts to youth program funding for Aboriginal Friendship Centres. There is no comprehensive federal policy on early childhood development supports. Various tax credits and federal children's benefits are complex, not integrated and leave gaps for many families. It was pointed out that tax credits are generally of little benefit to low income families, both because of the low levels of tax they pay or because the credits are for expenditures low income families can't afford in the first place.

A full spectrum of early childhood programs are needed to meet the diversity of family needs, from child care to seasonal and drop-in programs to outreach, and so on.

Attention was drawn to the recommendations in the briefing note under “Parliamentary Oversight” that seek the Official Opposition’s support in bringing government and civil society reports on Canada’s implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Committee on the Rights of Children reviews and recommendations to Canada into Parliament for debate and action.

Participants discussed different possibilities for ways to frame desired policy and program initiatives that will engage the public and Conservative MPs. Examples included the way the Jordan’s Principle resolution in the House of Commons was successful in receiving all-party support, or a “prosperity agenda” that connects the needs of a successful economy to children’s well-being and optimal development. There is an opportunity to mobilize civil society organizations around common values we’d like to see in federal policy-making.

The renegotiation of the Health Accord for 2014 is an opportunity to move the federal government to insist that the provinces be accountable for spending in ways that frees up money for prevention programs. There is concern that the federal government may sign individual deals with provinces, weakening national standards and accountabilities for health care.

Building public support for public investments in early childhood is still a challenge. There is low public awareness of how little Canada invests in early care and learning compared to other industrialized countries and how this is impacting important indicators of child health and development.

Women’s poverty is closely connected to children’s poverty and this link needs to be kept visible. A women’s equality strategy will benefit their children.

Short-term program funding, disconnected to any larger integrated strategies, can re-victimize vulnerable children, youth and families when their connections to supports and services are severed when programs end.

The new Option Protocol to enable the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to receive and examine communications from children and their representatives alleging violation of their rights is coming to the UN General Assembly for ratification this fall. Ensuring Canada’s full support for this protocol is crucial.

Children’s advocates are also seeking the Opposition’s support for establishing a mechanism within government for assessing the impacts of legislation and policies on Canada’s children prior to their adoption. Models in other jurisdictions, such as the UK, can be examined.

Additionally, it is helpful in raising visibility of children’s rights if MPs regularly cite the articles in the UNCRC that are violated or needing attention in Parliamentary debates. Canada has been chastised by previous UN reports and UN recommendations have not been acted upon. These UN recommendations need greater attention brought to them in Parliament.

The wastefulness of federal spending on an ineffective “law and order” agenda (e.g. building prisons, proposed changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act) can be contrasted with the benefits of investing in prevention initiatives and children’s healthy development. Other important themes that are resonating

with the public, including the business community, are the need to reduce inequality and inequities (e.g. in health outcomes). Excessive military spending is being questioned.

Focus is needed on federal policies that do not work well for immigrant families and children. Participants shared their knowledge of connections to national organizations working on child and youth issues.

There are serious concerns about how well children's health is being protected under current federal regulation of toxic substances and other environmental pollutants. Prevention of childhood obesity is an important issue, and relates to food insecurity, access to healthy food for low income families, and marketing of unhealthy food to children.

Support is needed to sustain and enhance program funding through the Ministry of Health and other ministries for targeted programs such as the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP), and Aboriginal Head Start (AHS). These programs are part of a fragile web of funding sources supporting vulnerable families and children. AHS program expansion in BC was financed by cuts to existing programs.

There is an anticipated political cycle to government spending: major cuts early in a mandate, followed by some restorative or additional spending in years prior to elections.

Participants were all urged to find opportunities to meet with their MPs to help educate them on child and youth issues and to build relationships and their knowledge of local programs and organizations.

Early childhood planning tables in BC are very useful resources for MPs to connect with in their constituencies.

Additional issues that require attention include child and youth mental health and sexual exploitation of children and youth. Senator Romeo Dallaire chairs the Senate Committee against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth and a report should be forthcoming.