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SOME GOOD NEWS, BUT HARDLY THE “GOLDEN DECADE”

The 2005 British Columbia budget provides much-needed assistance to many families, but does little to help the poorest of the poor, First Call, the BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, said today.

One of the highlights of the budget was a new non-refundable BC Tax Reduction Plan for low-income people in the paid labour force with taxable income. However, people on welfare got no relief from the hefty cuts and restrictions imposed on them in the last several years.

The budget also contained promises of more funding for programs for children, more social housing and measures to fight homelessness, and more money for child care if a pending agreement with the federal government becomes a reality.

This year's budget comes in the wake of three years of sharp cuts in social spending, including many cuts in programs for children and youth and their families. Overall, it appears that the new funding will fall short of what is needed to offset many of these budget cuts completely.

“The budget does take some important steps forward,” said First Call Chair Michael Goldberg, “but we're not nearly as close to the Golden Decade as the provincial government would have us believe.”

“Too many people are still suffering in the midst of plenty.”

While the budget offered some help to many British Columbians, it totally ignored the needs of people struggling to get by on welfare. A single mother with one child on welfare had income from all sources of only \$13,673 a year, according to the latest estimates of the National Council of Welfare. That was \$11,072 BELOW the poverty line for Vancouver.

The budget offered no hint of any rollback of the many other punitive welfare changes enacted since 2001, including measures that make it harder for people in need to qualify for welfare and the end of earnings exemptions for many recipients - a change that actually discourages people on welfare from doing paid work.

People on disability assistance will continue to fall well below the poverty line, even with the additional \$70 a month previously announced by the provincial government. A single person with a disability could still wind up \$9,143 BELOW the poverty line.

Increased funding was promised for family law, but there were no assurances of renewed funding for poverty law – an area of vital importance for low-income British Columbians.

There was no end to the \$6 an hour “training wage” and no change in the province’s policy of allowing children 12 to 15 to work with no real government efforts to look after their well-being.

Three of the government ministries of special concern to First Call do not appear to have funding large enough to usher in the “golden decade” mentioned repeatedly in the throne speech and the budget speech.

“The provincial government promised to build the best systems of support in Canada for people with disabilities, people with special needs, children at risk and seniors,” said Steve Kerstetter, a member of the First Call co-ordinating committee. “The measures in the budget fall far short of that glowing rhetoric.”

Funding for the Ministry of Children and Family Development will rebound to \$1.577 billion in the coming fiscal year from \$1.544 billion in the 2001/02 fiscal year. After accounting for inflation, however, the new budget is actually lower than the budget for 2001/02.

Funding for the Ministry of Human Resources is estimated at \$1.367 billion next year, well below the total of \$1.929 in 2001/02. Welfare caseloads are down sharply, in part because of measures that made it difficult or impossible for some people in need to qualify for welfare and in part because of a stronger economy and more jobs.

Funding for the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services will be down to \$470 million next year from \$559 million in 2001/01.

Among the announcements in the 2005 budget speech are the following:

- \$76 million for infant and early childhood vision, dental and hearing screening initiatives;
- \$26 million to support prevention and out-of-care options to keep children safe within their families and communities;
- \$134 million to enhance services to children and youth with special needs, including developmental behavioural conditions and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder;
- \$48 million by the 2007/08 fiscal year to address homelessness, including funds for emergency shelters and support services;
- \$36 million for social housing that focuses on helping people find stable housing arrangements;
- \$14 million for B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants, a program to help new British Columbians find work in their fields of expertise; and
- \$37 million for transition homes, outreach programs, counseling and related services for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Few details of the initiatives were contained in the budget speech or the papers that accompanied the speech.

First Call is a non-partisan coalition of provincial and regional organizations, mobilized communities, and individuals and groups concerned about the well-being of children and youth.

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