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May 16, 2011

Honourable Harry Bloy
Minister of Social Development
PO Box 9058 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Honourable Mary McNeil
Minister of Children and Family Development
PO Box 9057 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Dear Minister Bloy and Minister McNeil,

On behalf of the First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition I am writing to express our appreciation for the May 3, 2011 changes made to income assistance regulations relating to shelter allowance amounts for families whose children have been taken into state care.

The immediate reduction of the shelter allowance for families when their children were placed in care has been a long-time concern for our coalition partners because it had the effect in many cases of prolonging the separation of parents and their children, increasing the instability and trauma in families' lives and discriminating against children from families on income assistance.

The decision to allow the shelter allowance to be maintained at the previous rate helps to put the best interests of the child first and decreases the pressure on parents who are already in emotional turmoil. We are hopeful that this policy change will result in earlier family reunifications, where appropriate.

The wording of the policy places a great deal of power and responsibility in the hands of the child protection social workers. They are tasked with confirming in a timely fashion that an extension of the current shelter allowance is justified, an additional administrative duty that will require diligent execution.

Additionally, the power to determine if a parent is "no longer actively working on the return of the child" is known to be fraught with difficulty. Viewed positively, this regulatory change gives social workers back the ability to protect parents' who are addressing concerns from losing their housing. However, it also adds an additional consequence for parents on income assistance who are judged to be deficient or non-compliant – the reduction in their shelter allowance. Professional support, training and supervision for child protection social workers in exercising these additional responsibilities will be crucial.

Acknowledging that many organizations and community advocates were instrumental in bringing the harm done by the previous policy to the attention of government, we thank your government for a constructive response.

Sincerely,

Adrienne Montani
Provincial Coordinator

Copies: Shane Simpson, Critic, Social Development
Nicholas Simons, Deputy Critic, Social Development
Claire Trevena, Critic, Children and Family Development
The Hon. Christy Clark, Premier
Adrian Dix, Leader of the Official Opposition
Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, Representative for Children and Youth