

Provincial & Regional Partners:

Aboriginal Mother Centre Society
ACT Autism Community Training Society
Adoptive Families Association of BC
Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies
Alternate Shelter Society
Association for Community Education BC
Autism Society of BC
BC Aboriginal Childcare Society
BC Assoc. for Child Development & Rehabilitation
BC Association for Community Living
BC Association for Play Therapy
BC Association of Child Care Employers
BC Association of Family Resource Programs
BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs
BC Association of Social Workers
BC Council for Families
BC Crime Prevention Association
BC Farm Women's Network
BC Federation of Foster Parents Association
BC Government & Service Employees' Union
BC Institute Against Family Violence
BC Pediatric Society • BC Recreation and Parks Association
BC School Trustees Association
BC Teachers' Federation
BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses
Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland
Boys & Girls Clubs of BC
Canadian Association for Young Children
Canadian Jewish Congress, Pacific Region
Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division
Canadian Red Cross • Capilano Student Union
Caring for First Nations Children Society
Centre for Safe Schools and Communities
Cerebral Palsy Association of BC
Child & Family Counseling Association
Child & Youth Care Association of BC
Child Care Advocacy Forum
Children's & Women's Health Centre of BC
Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC
Council of Parent Participation Preschools BC
Deaf Children's Society of BC
Dietitians of Canada, BC Region
Developmental Disabilities Association
Early Childhood Educators of BC
East Kootenay Childhood Coalition
Family Services of Greater Vancouver
Federated Anti-Poverty Groups
Federation of BC Youth In Care Networks
Federation of Child & Family Services of BC
Health Officers Council of BC
Hospital Employees' Union
Infant Development Program of BC
Invest in Kids • Immigrant Services Society
Justice Institute of BC
Learning Disabilities Association of BC
Literacy BC • McCreary Centre Society
MOSAIC • National Council of Jewish Women
Pacific Association of First Nations Women
Pacific Community Resources Society
Pacific Legal Education Association • PARCA
Parent Support Services Society • PeerNetBC
Penticton & District Community Resources Society
Phoenix Human Services Association
Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society
Public Health Association of BC
Social Planning & Research Council BC
Society for Children & Youth of BC
Society for Public Education of BC
Society of Special Needs Adoptive Parents
Sunshine Coast Community Services Society
Toxic Free Canada
United Way of the Lower Mainland
Vancouver Coastal Health – Population Health
Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre
Westcoast Family Resources Society
Working Group on Poverty • YWCA of Greater Vancouver
...and 26 Community Coalition Partners.

April 10, 2009

Honourable Rich Coleman
Ministry of Housing and Social Development
Room 128
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Minister Coleman,

Thank you for your March 13, 2009 letter in response to our request to meet with Premier Campbell to discuss your government's priority for children.

While we do not dispute that relatively few people earn minimum wage in BC, this does not mean this group of people should be ignored. There are many types of people working for minimum wage who are not "youth living at home with parents." According to the Labour Force Survey, there are 9,900 people in BC earning minimum wage that are sole-wage earners with at least one dependant, and 42% of minimum wage earners are over 25 years old. We also must remember that although many minimum wage earners are youth living at home, this does not mean that these people do not have expenses that are integral to become successful adults. For example, many youth are paying for their own post-secondary education, which is increasingly more expensive.

On April 15 of this year, British Columbia will officially have the lowest minimum wage in Canada (tied with two other provinces). We will also be the only province that has not increased their minimum wage in the last eight years. This is especially disturbing considering housing in Vancouver is ranked the fourth least affordable in the English-speaking world according to Frontline Center for Public Policy. Victoria is ranked seventh.

You also point out that the average hourly wage in BC has risen to \$22.04. You are probably aware that the income gap in BC is widening according to a study released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives on March 10, 2009. This study found that earnings, before taxes and transfers, had decreased in the bottom 60% of families between 1976 and 2006; only the top three deciles saw actual increases in their earnings over the last thirty years, and the top 10% of people now earn more than the entire bottom 50%. The earnings of the richest people grew so much as to increase the average wage of the province despite losses for a vast majority of people in British Columbia.

Your letter continues by pointing out the increases to income assistance that took place in April 2007. These increases were very welcome and needed; however, they did not go far enough. A report released by the Dietitians of BC after these increases found that almost 50% of low-income families reported food insecurity. This should not come as a surprise, considering 28,000 children used food banks in 2007. It is unacceptable for even one BC child to have to rely on a food bank to meet their nutritional needs.

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Good nutrition is especially important for children and youth as it is linked to better school performance, fewer behavioural problems, and better health later in life. Using 2007 figures, a family of four on income assistance would need to spend 42% of their income in order to provide nutritious meals for their children. Combined with the cost of housing, these families would spend over 100% of their income on shelter and food alone. This leaves no room for other costs such as clothing, transportation, or necessary household items.

As you can see, despite the increases made two years ago, income assistance rates remain far too low to lift families out of extreme poverty; and of course, we know that the cost of food has increased since 2007. Statistics Canada reported that the cost of food increased by 7% in the last year (between February 2008 and February 2009) and there has also been an increase of almost 2% in the cost of rental accommodation.

Lastly, in our original letter we made three suggestions which would immediately improve the lives of children and youth in British Columbia. You responded to two of them (increases to income assistance and the minimum wage), but did not comment on the third, a living wage for those employed in agencies and programs funded by government. We believe this is a critical step in reducing poverty for working families and an excellent way for the government to lead by example. We urge your government to set compensation standards and provide sufficient funding in service contracts which ensure these employees can be paid a living wage that will help lift their families out of poverty.

British Columbia has had the highest rate of child poverty in Canada for five years in a row. This is unacceptable to us, and it is almost certainly unacceptable to you. Early Development Instrument trend data from the Human Early Learning Partnership point to increasing levels of vulnerability among kindergarten-age children in BC. It is time to look more closely at the failure of some of our policies and actions in recent years and see what we must do differently.

First Call is a non-partisan coalition with over 85 community and regional partner organizations dedicated to improving the lives of BC's children. We aim to bring our considerable expertise to assist government to make the best decisions based on current knowledge and research evidence. We know that reducing poverty and children's vulnerability will take concerted effort on many fronts. In this dialogue, we have focused on three policy suggestions and would welcome an opportunity to meet to discuss the research data that support them.

Sincerely,

Julie Norton
Provincial Chair

Copy: Premier Gordon Campbell