

Submission on the Development of a BC Poverty Reduction Plan

Submitted to: bcpovertyreduction@gov.bc.ca

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Thank you for this opportunity to share our recommendations regarding the development of a Poverty Reduction Plan for British Columbia. The Pacific Region of the Canadian Union of Postal (CUPW) is pleased to present this brief on poverty reduction.

Most CUPW members work for Canada Post as letter carriers, rural and suburban mail carriers, postal clerks, mail handlers and dispatchers, technicians, mechanics and electricians.

But CUPW doesn't just represent postal workers. We also represent cleaners, couriers, drivers, vehicle mechanics, warehouse workers, printers, emergency medical dispatchers and other workers in the private sector.

CUPW is a democratic union. Our members elect all representatives, set the priorities for bargaining, and have the final say on contract demands and settlements. We are proud of our history and the achievements of our members.

In British Columbia, the Pacific Region of CUPW represents approximately 7,200 members. These include letter carriers, clerks, and technical services personnel who work for Canada Post, Rural and Suburban mail Carriers who deliver mail in suburban and rural environments, and private sector bargaining unit members who work as couriers.

CUPW is presenting this brief for the following reasons:

- We are committed to working for a better life for all.
- Many of our members see poverty on a daily basis while they are at work. They serve impoverished citizens at postal counters, and deliver to neighbourhoods where financially struggling families live.
- Our experiences organizing rural and suburban mail carriers and our private sector members have given us new understanding about poverty.
- Some of our members have struggled with poverty, others are currently experiencing it, and others have friends and family members with lived experience of poverty.
- We believe that Canada Post can expand its services and provide services to address financial inclusion, awareness of programs etc.

Section 1 - We believe Canada Post can play a role in decreasing social isolation, providing information, and reducing financial exclusion

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers believes that Canada Post should expand and improve their services. We know that people still rely on mail. We recognize that in small centres the post office is the heart of the community.

CUPW has been asking Canada Post to develop a wide range of services to reduce financial exclusion, increase social inclusion, and to address the needs of various communities.

We know from our day to day experiences how important Canada Post is. Many British Columbians cannot afford either computers and/or access to the internet and have to rely on Canada Post to receive bills, socio-economic cheques, and for other forms of communications. We were glad when the Federal government recently announced an end to Canada Post's plan to end door to door mail delivery and to replace it with mail delivery to community mail boxes. We were disappointed that the Federal government decided not to restore door to door mail delivery to those households in Campbell River, Fort St John, Sidney and Williams Lake that lost it in 2014.

Canada Post has the largest network of retail outlets in the country. Canada Post provides a way to easily communicate and connect with every household in BC. Canada Post also provides a logistical network that can mobilize people and move materials to every corner of the world's second-largest country.

We are asking the provincial government to work with Canada Post and the federal government to use Canada Post to provide the following services:

- a. Postal Banking. We know that many low income community members are unbanked. This is for a variety of reasons and includes the inability to establish bank accounts at major financial institutions, and the fact that there are no banks in their communities. Banking is crucial to financial inclusion. When households open an account at an established financial institution, they establish a mainstream banking relationship that provides them the opportunity to deposit funds securely, conduct basic financial transactions, accumulate savings, and access credit on fair and affordable terms. In most communities in British Columbia there is a strong Canada Post presence, but there may not be a bank. People may have to drive to another nearby community to bank or they may only have access to electronic banking. This is difficult for low income people. In addition many low income people are forced to rely on so called "alternative

financial institutions” such as payday loan companies for their banking services. These “alternative financial institutions” take advantage of low income people. Canada Post could work with some mainstream financial institutions to provide affordable loans with flexible eligibility criteria. This is why we are asking the provincial government to work with Canada Post and the federal government to develop and install postal banking in selected BC communities. This could take many different forms, and we would be pleased to discuss these different forms with you.

- b. Providing information to low income people, seniors etc. about their entitlements. Some low income persons are unaware of the programs and services they are entitled to. The BC Seniors Advocate has noted that many low income seniors are unaware of federal and provincial programs that could assist them. Canada Post could play a role in this. This could include:
 - i. In smaller centres where people have to go to pick up their mail, for example Smithers, there could be posters, brochures and other forms of communication to provide information.
 - ii. In some of these centres Canada Post could partner with community organizations to provide space on a regular basis to provide information and assist people with forms.
 - iii. In communities where there is a post office and few other provincial services, postal workers could be trained to assist people in filling out forms for social assistance, and other government programs. Canada Post workers have experience in providing assistance to people filling out passports and student loans.
 - iv. Postal clerks, letter carriers and MSC’s could be trained and tasked with providing brochures or other information about provincial government programs to people they interact with.
 - v. Canada Post could work with the provincial government to develop flyers to be distributed by letter carriers and Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers to all people on their routes about government programs.

Section 2 – Employment and other work related issues

- a. CUPW is advocating that the minimum wage be increased to \$15.00 immediately. According to the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, that would lift 421,400 working people in BC out of poverty. It also protects our Union wages. Employers often compare the work we do to non-union low paid workers. Increasing the minimum wage also means that when people retire they will receive a higher monthly CPP amount.

- b. Restore and expand coverage of the Employment Standards Act.
- c. Amend labour and other legislation to provide more protection for “independent contractors”. For many years, RSMCs were considered “contractors” rather than employees, which meant that they had no rights, no benefits and inferior working conditions. RSMCs were often told to accept a contract for less money or else they would lose their route and their job. After they deducted their expenses from their earnings, many earned minimum wage or less. Things changed for the better on September 30, 2003, when RSMCs ratified a collective agreement making them CUPW members with rights.

CUPW is aware that Employers are calling people contractors, when in fact they are employees, and in many cases are getting the agreement of the worker. This has been noticeable in the courier sector. We know that the courts have developed tests to determine if a person is an employee or a contractor. Some of these tests include how much direction and control the worker is subject to, whether the worker operates their own business and has their own clients, whether the worker has a chance of profit or a risk of loss, whether the work they are doing is integral to the business and whether there is an ongoing relationship.

- d. Improve the BC Labour Code to make it easier for workers to join a Union and negotiate collective agreements. Unionization and collective bargaining raises the wages of workers. In 2013 unionized workers in BC earned on average \$5.60 more an hour than non-unionized workers.

Section 3 – Improve Income Assistance

Many of our members have delivered and continue to deliver income assistance cheques to people in all parts of the province. They see on a first hand basis the inadequacy of the amounts of these cheques. They see people barely scraping by and when it comes to the last week in the month they see people on real need. This is why we are recommending a significant increase of the welfare and disability rates to the Market Basket Measure. We want these rates to be regularly increased to the cost of living.

Section 4 – Housing and Homelessness

- a. Many letter carriers are in a unique position to see housing in an up close and personal way. They deliver mail to multimillion dollar homes and they deliver mail to homes where people live in poverty. They regularly interact with people who are worried about having to move and the consequences that will have on them receiving important mail. Letter carriers deliver to housing co-ops and other social

housing locations, and while some of the latter are problematic, they see on a daily basis how decent housing affects and improves peoples' lives. This is why we are recommending that the province recommit to building thousands of new social and co-op housing units per year. BC should be bringing on stream 10,000 such units per year.

- b. A large portion of CUPW membership lives in the Greater Vancouver area. Many of them are not able to live near where they work due to the high cost of housing. This includes both buying a house and the high cost of rent. They have to travel for considerable periods of time to go to work and come home from work. This is acute for a number of our members and is exacerbated when it comes to temporary and part time workers. A small proportion of our members live in housing co-ops and they speak in glowing terms about the affordability, and sense of community they gain from living in these co-ops. This is why we believe that the province should work with all levels of government to build affordable rental housing, including co-ops.
- c. Some of our older members, in the Lower Mainland, face a conundrum. Their children and grandchildren cannot afford to live in the neighbourhoods that they grew up in. Because their children are unable to find affordable housing many parents have been forced to move in order to be near their children and grandchildren, others have made renovations so their families live with them, and yet others help their families out financially. This is an additional reason why we recommend that the province should work with all levels of government to build affordable rental housing, including co-ops.

Section 5 - Childcare

- a. Our members, who are parents, regularly speak about the high cost and lack of availability of childcare. Many of them have had to cobble together various and multiple arrangements in order to ensure their children have childcare. The situation is worsened for our members who start work before 8 am, who work shifts, and who finish work after 5 or 6 pm. This is why the CUPW Pacific Region is recommending the province adopt the \$10 a day child care plan produced by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC, which will provide free child care for those earning less than \$40,000 per year, increase the number of child care spaces, support high-quality programming and ensure early childhood educators are paid a living wage.
- b. Since our members all over BC do not work 8 to 4 or 9 to 5 jobs, and since increasingly newly created jobs in many industries do not have standard work hours, CUPW is recommending that the province look at how affordable, publically

run and delivered, accessible, and high quality childcare can be delivered outside the hours of 8 am to 6 pm.

- c. CUPW members in both the Urban Operations and Rural bargaining units have access to a Special Needs Project which provides monetary assistance and support to parents with special needs children and adults. The Special Needs Project (SNP) is an initiative of the CUPW Child Care Fund, and is a one-of-a-kind program. It was launched in 1996 after a union-sponsored study found that parents of children with disabilities face more barriers to workforce participation than others. The project provides information, resources and financial support to families with children who have special needs, to help reduce the emotional, physical and financial stresses and improve their quality of life. This is why CUPW is recommending additional financial, childcare and other supports to parents of special needs children and adults.

Section 6 - Education

- a. The cost of a post secondary education is an expense that many of our members struggle with both in terms of being parents of students and being students themselves. However, people see this as an important expense as it increases confidence, skills, and earning abilities. Access to post-secondary education should not be denied because people cannot afford it. This is why CUPW is recommending that the province should reduce tuition fees by 50% and increase the availability of post-secondary grants for low-income students. We are also suggesting that changes be made to allow welfare recipients to attend post-secondary education and get apprenticeships.
- b. CUPW members who have school aged children are concerned about the education their children are receiving in the public school system. They speak about lack of supplies, no libraries, and in some locations the lack of teachers. We know that education is crucial for children to become fully involved citizens. This is why we are recommending the province adequately fund K-12 education to mitigate inequalities and to ensure adequate library, special needs and programs.

Section 7 - Health and Mental Health

- a. In 2010, CUPW and Canada Post carried out a joint survey of mental health in the work place. The results showed that many workers were impacted by mental health issues, either personally, within their families, with their friends, and in the workplace. The survey also indicated that there is significant stigma surrounding mental health issues. We know that this is not isolated. This is why we are recommending that the province expand mental health services in a major way.

- b. As in many other workplaces, some postal workers struggle with substance misuse. While some residential treatment programs are free, others have a high cost to them. People need access to free or very affordable substance misuse rehabilitation programs in order to address their addictions. Gaining entrance to substance misuse rehabilitation programs should not be determined on the basis of one's financial situation. This is why we are recommending that the province improve access to and expand substance misuse rehabilitation programs and ensures these programs are either free or very affordable.
- c. Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers in BC currently are required to pay for their own BC Medical Service Plan premiums. Even though the cost of these premiums were recently reduced, we are urging that these be eliminated.
- d. Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers in BC currently have no post retirement extended health benefits. This means they have to struggle to pay for dental care, vision care, hearing aids etc. In addition, many of our members are subsidizing the dental costs for their adult children and grandchildren. People should not have to have poor teeth and dental pain, inadequate vision care, or be unable to hear because they cannot afford hearing aids. This is why CUPW is recommending dental, optical and hearing care be determined to be part of essential medical services.

Section 8 - Equity and Inclusion

CUPW strongly believes in a just and equitable society. This is why we are recommending the province restructure federal and provincial funding to better address the needs of all Aboriginal people, including the large off-reserve population. We are also asking the province to guarantee access to income assistance for all regardless of citizenship status.

Thank you for your consideration of our proposals. We hope you will find them helpful in drafting an effective poverty reduction plan for British Columbia.