

## Raise the Rates' Poverty Reduction Plan Submission, March 2018

Raise the Rates is a coalition group made up of nearly fifty different activist and service provider groups concerned about the fatal levels of poverty and homelessness in the province of BC. We have been working since 2006 to push the government to raise welfare rates, amongst other policy changes to end poverty.

In the past decade that Raise the Rates has been organizing, we have seen homelessness levels soar, claw backs on income assistance devastate families, use of food banks and survival services increase drastically, rents spiral out of control and more violence and stigma (what we call poor-bashing) against poor people who live in neighbourhoods being gentrified at rapid fire pace. Through this, we have also seen and supported countless rallies, protests, actions and op-eds countering the mainstream idea that poor people 'deserve it', or simply need to 'budget better', as well as calling for real, concrete solutions to change the material conditions of almost 600,000 peoples' lives. We have sponsored the annual Welfare Food Challenge to show government and the public that welfare rates are too low to live on.

The consequences of poverty are far-reaching, from the devastating realities of children growing up in poverty, low literacy rates, to cycles of violence being perpetuated against vulnerable communities, to billions of dollars spent (wasted) on incarcerating people for living outside/survival activities as well as crimes of desperation, higher hospital bills, lower life expectancy for low income people, and expensive fast fixes to issues of homelessness. The cost of poverty is too high. The cost of inaction is too high, clocked at around \$8-9 billion per year. Comparatively, according to the CCPA's 2011 report "The Cost of Poverty in BC", a comprehensive poverty reduction plan is between \$3-4 billion per year.

For us, the main demands for the BC government's Poverty Reduction Strategy absolutely **must** include:

- Raising welfare rates to the federal market basket measure (about \$1600 for a single person in a city); with disability rates about \$300 a month higher;
- Bringing in real rent control so landlords can't raise rents as much as they like between tenancies; if this is not done probably at least half on any extra money that low income people get through minimum wage increases or welfare increases will go to landlords;
- Building about 10,000 units of social housing a year that low income people can afford; while the government has talked about social housing, they haven't committed to building enough to end homelessness and BC Housing wait lists;
- Ending homelessness right away with modular housing; and
- Restoring taxes on the rich to pay for these; Since the year 2000 the Liberals have been reducing taxes so that now government doesn't have the revenue to meet people's needs for services. Unless taxes are restored we can't get what we need.

These must be included in the legislation, in order to ensure action and funding to follow through on promises to 'reduce poverty'. Depth of poverty (i.e. how far below the poverty line people are) must be tackled through raising income assistance and disability rates, ending punitive claw-back measures on welfare, and raising the minimum wage for *all* workers. We support all of the recommendations put forward in the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition's submission, and strongly encourage the government to consider implementing their poverty reduction plan, with its strong and necessary targets and timelines for tackling major points that lead to ending poverty.

## Speaking to the Community

Over the course of a few weeks, we spoke to over 80 people. Average age was around 50 years old, with around 33% of people living in social housing, 21% in single room occupancy hotels, 33% homeless or living in shelters, and the rest living in other housing (Native housing, with parents, or one person in a condo). The survey was conducted in a way that allowed folks to approach the volunteers to answer the questions. Women made up 33% of the people we talked to, with 65% being men, and one person who was transgender. These numbers don't reflect the adverse affects poverty has on women and gender minorities, likely a fault of our methodology. We didn't collect information on people's ethnic or racial make-up, but the diversity was fairly well reflective of much of the downtown eastside community.

The top issues that people said they wanted to see in a poverty reduction plan: raising welfare and disability rates (as well as concern for pension and seniors living on fixed income), building social housing for low-income people, raising the minimum wage and providing more support for finding and keeping jobs, and taxing the rich.

### On Welfare: "It's Not Fair the Way They Treat Us"

*When asked if they believed rates should be raised to the Market Basket Measure of \$1600/mo for a single person in Vancouver on income assistance (\$1900 for disability), **88% of people responded yes**. The other 12% were not outright "no", but rather had concerns that if rates went up, then so would rent. This was such a resounding factor in the conversations we had, that rent control *must* be a (low-cost) move the province includes in a poverty reduction strategy. Folks living in subsidized housing found that disability was adequate for what they needed, but recognized that it would be impossible if you had to live in market rentals.*

Asked if folks had applied for welfare before, 86% replied they were currently on assistance or PWD. There was a large number of people who had applied "a while ago", over 20 years, and they did not have issues with the application. Some of the issues that were raised around applying for assistance include:

- long wait-times, especially on the phone
- clawbacks of income from other sources (especially pension, and being forced onto an early pension) are extremely punitive and make it very difficult to live on
- long period before receiving first cheque
- a very difficult to understand application process, "It's like you have to be a lawyer to apply", and people saying that even with advocates it is hard
- crisis grants are too small and impossible to get, "you have to beg and cry"
- not being able to talk to a person; and the flip side of that, which is having to tell your story to too many workers

The biggest issue, on top of the totally inadequate rates, that people reported was the attitude they were met with in the office. Stigma, poor-bashing, discrimination, tone, lack of empathy: "the whole process is very degrading", "talking to the workers they make you feel like crap", "very rude and ignorant staff", being some of the comments we heard. This is not to be read as the worker's fault so much as it is the government's policies of diversion, and management culture, at fault. Vulnerable, marginalized people, carrying the weight of survival on their shoulders, deserve dignity, equity, to be treated like a human being and not a burden or a strain on the system. A robust social welfare net looks after people who are struggling, and does not cast them out on the street like that's all they deserve.

### Recommendations:

- guaranteed raise to income assistance and disability rates to meet \$1600/month for a single person;
- end policies of diversion and stigmatizing work culture practices in ministry offices; engage in empathy training;
- bring back the system of “20 years ago”, with individual case workers, well-funded crisis grants, and more supports and advocates available to help with applications;
- end punitive clawbacks on income assistance and disability cheques;
- work with community groups and clients to reform the entire ministry’s service-delivery model to provide dignified service

### **On Housing: “Not Just Container Housing”!**

Without fail, housing was the biggest concern people were facing. This emphasizes the **necessity** of having a *robust, cross-ministerial* poverty reduction plan, that cuts across government silos and looks at comprehensive solutions. When asked if the government needs to commit to more social housing for low-income people, **96% of people responded YES**, and that it was a top priority for them. The 3 other people stressed it was important to have the housing be across neighbourhoods (i.e. not focused solely in the Downtown Eastside), and to be culturally relevant and at rents that would not strain a fixed income.

Again, the importance of rent control was brought up. This is a measure the government can implement immediately that would have profound effects on the stability and availability of housing options for people in poverty. Many people brought up concerns around supports for people struggling with mental health, and folks with addictions being able to access support *should they want to*. Raise the Rates supports the building of temporary modular housing as fast and efficiently as possible, in order to reduce BC Housing Waitlists, but we know that what people need are permanent homes, in good repair and in safe condition. The appalling comments of people living in SROs, and also in some social housing units (both non-profit and government run), about their housing conditions underlines the necessary measures needed to enforce maintenance by-laws and provide a standard of upkeep that allows people to live with dignity.

Concern was expressed for women, children, and families, and that having stable housing to allow families to “get back on their feet” to ensure their children aren’t being apprehended was a major concern.

### **Recommendations:**

- invest in and immediately commit to building 10 000 units of social housing per year (at welfare and pension rates), to accommodate the massive need that has been gutted in the last 40 years of austerity policy
- implement vacancy control; that is, rent that is tied to a unit and not to a tenant, to protect what few remaining homes are available at affordable rates
- end homelessness right away by building temporary modular housing units
- end discriminatory rental policies, which disproportionately affect single mothers with children, racialized people, people with disabilities and LGBTQ2S people

### **Comments: “Everybody in this world counts”**

When asked how governments can end poverty, a majority of respondents replied “they can’t”, “they won’t”, “they don’t want to”. One thing that was made clear in the weeks we did this survey, was how much distrust/mistrust has grown between people and the government. Years and years of hearing talk but no action has led to a very understandable level of cynicism.

Homelessness has rampantly increased, cost of living is through the roof (if people can even afford to keep one over their head), the overdose crisis is killing thousands of valuable lives, police brutality is increasing against poor and racialized communities, and in all of this, the rich are getting richer.

Other issues that must be addressed include:

- free transit for low-income people, or a subsidized transit program
- training for people to take programs that will increase their employability, and more programs to support them into the workforce
- better paying and better quality jobs
- need better pharmacare for low-income people
- more education, and easier access to education
- less wait times for accessing all services (healthcare, detox, mental health supports, housing):  
“You can die waiting for help”
- end tax evasion, and push the federal government to close tax loopholes
- “government wants to keep people stupid”
- better support for, and less discrimination against, people with addictions
- crackdown on landlords/slumlords breaking laws and exploiting people
- an overhaul of police systems, and create more community accountability and less police on the streets
- end drug trafficking
- going to the “root cause” of problems, which different people defined as: capitalist system making real solutions impossible, dealing with people’s trauma of residential schools and colonization, breaking cycles of poverty and violence in children’s lives, “to make sure babies aren’t being ripped from their families”, “governments aren’t supposed to raise kids”, better care for mental illness
- charity and charitable businesses take advantage of the poor and make money off of them, instead of focusing on solutions that will *end* poverty
- tax the rich, and make them pay their fair share in progressive income taxes
- can’t afford to build any pipelines, expand fish farms, build site C or engage in any damaging environmental project; support investment into green technology that doesn’t violate Indigenous sovereignty
- higher earnings exemptions
- need more health clinics and overdose prevention sites, as well as counselling services and treatment centres on demand (not 6 months after someone wants to get clean)
- better coordination between municipal, provincial and federal governments
- need stronger unions and better jobs back
- housing as a human right, not a commodity
- control gentrification and provide more affordable services, especially food grocers, in poor neighbourhoods
- more drop-in centres
- more native housing for elders and families
- better public education on classism and poor-bashing
- support outreach centres and local groups doing community organizing

We strongly support and echo the calls of the community for self-determined solutions to poverty, and we urge the government to work hard, internally and externally, in policy, legislation and conduct, of commonly held belief that: “the government are the people making this problem, and they don’t listen to us”. Listen closely, and then take bold action to change business-as-usual. Give us something to thrive on.