

From: Charley Beresford [<mailto:Charley@columbiainstitute.ca>]
Sent: January 20, 2009 3:57 PM
To: Jan Johnston
Subject: Poverty Reduction in British Columbia

Dear Mayor Shepherd,

Later this month, Columbia Institute will be a signatory to a Public Call for a Poverty Reduction Plan in British Columbia.

The plan is to ask all political parties to commit to legislating targets and timelines to dramatically reduce and ultimately eliminate homelessness and poverty in our province. You'll find below (and attached), an Open Letter to British Columbia Political Parties.

This open letter is the collective effort of an ad hoc coalition that includes community and non-profit groups, faith groups, health organizations, First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, businesses, labour organizations, and social policy groups like ours. It will be released at a news conference in early February, where the full list of signatories will be made public.

The aim is to show all political parties the high level of community support for a bold and realistic plan to reduce poverty in BC. The public appetite for this kind of initiative is strong: in a recent poll conducted by Environics, 87% of British Columbians said both the Prime Minister and the Premier should set concrete targets and timelines to reduce poverty.

The deadline for signing on to the statement is Thursday, January 29. (There are plans for an on-line petition for broader participation after the public release of this statement.)

If you or your council are willing to add your name to the Open Letter (or you have questions), please email Thi Vu thi@policyalternatives.ca at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Thi will confirm your endorsement and keep you informed regarding the letter's public release.

Thank-you for your consideration.

Sincerely

Charley Beresford
Executive Director, Columbia Institute

An Open Letter to British Columbia Political Parties:

BC Needs a Poverty Reduction Plan with Targets and Timelines

It is time for British Columbia's provincial government to launch a comprehensive poverty reduction plan — a detailed and accountable strategy with concrete and legislated targets and timelines to dramatically reduce homelessness and poverty in our province. Five Canadian provinces either have such plans or are in the process of developing them, but so far, not BC.

As we approach the May provincial election, we are calling on all BC political parties to commit that, if elected to government, they will implement a comprehensive poverty reduction plan.

By any measure, BC has the highest rate of poverty in Canada. BC has recorded the highest child poverty rate for five years running. Despite years of strong economic growth and record low unemployment, over half a million British Columbians — 13 per cent of the total population — live in poverty, and homelessness continues to rise. As we head into a global economic downturn, poverty risks getting worse unless action is taken.

We all pay for poverty. Study after study links poverty with poorer health, higher justice system costs, more demands on social and community services, more stress on family members, and diminished school success. Effective poverty reduction will require the efforts of all segments of society (all levels of government, the private sector, non-profits, and citizens generally), but the provincial government must take the lead.

The policies needed to make a dramatic difference are known, and other jurisdictions that are setting clear targets and timelines are getting results. A comprehensive approach needs to boost the incomes of those living in poverty, but also build the social infrastructure, public services and assets that are vital to providing a path out of poverty.

We, the undersigned, urge all provincial political parties to pledge to adopt and legislate poverty reduction targets and timelines, and commit to implementing a comprehensive action plan.

We recommend the following targets and timelines:

Targets and Timelines:

- Using Statistics Canada's low-income cut off after tax (LICO-AT), reduce BC's poverty rate from 13 per cent to 9 per cent in four years, and to 3 per cent in ten years (meaning, effectively, a one third reduction within the mandate of the next government, and a 75 per cent reduction within a decade).

- Ensure the poverty rate (using the LICO-AT) for children, lone-mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and recent immigrants likewise declines by 30 per cent in four years, and by 75 per cent in ten years, in recognition that poverty is concentrated in these populations.

· Within two years, ensure that every British Columbian has an income that reaches at least 75 per cent of the poverty line (using the LICO-AT).

· Within two years, ensure no one has to sleep outside, and end all homelessness within eight years (ensuring all homeless people have good quality, appropriate housing).

In order to achieve these targets, we call upon political parties to commit, prior to the May election, to specific policy measures and concrete actions in each of the following policy action areas. Special attention should be focused on the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty (single mother households, single senior women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and recent immigrants and refugees).

Policy Action Areas:

1. Provide adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed.
2. Improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce.
3. Improve food security for low-income individuals and families.
4. Address homelessness and adopt a comprehensive affordable housing and supportive housing plan.
5. Provide universal publicly-funded child care.
6. Enhanced support for training and education for low-income people.
7. Enhance community mental health and home support services, and expand integrated approaches to prevention and health promotion services.

There is nothing inevitable about poverty and homelessness in a society as wealthy as ours. If we commit to a bold plan, a dramatic reduction in poverty and homelessness within a few short years is a perfectly achievable goal.

Signed,

List of names (organizations and individual community leaders)