



Submission to Select Standing Committee On Finance and Government Services

October 2018

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

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BC Budget 2019 Consultation, October 2018

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By First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

WHAT IS FIRST CALL?

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a non-partisan, cross-sectoral coalition of 105 provincial and regional organizations, individuals and local community networks who share the belief that children and youth should have “first call” on our province’s resources. We are committed to achieving the following 4 Keys to Success for B.C.’s children and youth:

- A strong commitment to early childhood development
- Support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood
- Increased economic equality
- Safe and caring communities

First Call does not receive funding from any level of government. First Call members are listed in Appendix A.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief discusses why it is important to focus on children and youth and reminds us of our commitments to child rights and other human rights.

Our submission raises concerns and makes recommendations affecting children youth and families in BC that have been raised by our research and our member organizations regarding:

- poverty and income inequality
- early childhood development, care and learning
- support for parents and other caregivers
- children and youth in and from government care
- public schools and post-secondary institutions
- access to public transit, and
- mental health and addictions

We highlight four recommendations:

- 1) Enhancing and expanding BC’s child benefit to reduce family poverty
- 2) Advice on the continued investments in a quality child care system
- 3) Improvements to the supports for youth aging out of care, and
- 4) Access to public transit for minors and low-income families

These recommendations are followed by a list of four areas of interest with accompanying recommendations.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

The protection of children's rights and well-being is a moral imperative for all of us, including for governments. Of course most children are raised in families, so it is incumbent on us to craft a provincial budget that supports families in all their diversity, in particular those who struggle with poverty, systemic discrimination and other challenges to their physical and mental health.

There is ample evidence that socioeconomic position is one of the most important social determinants of health. Children who are raised in poverty face risks to their health over their life course.¹

We also have extensive knowledge about how children's brains develop and how crucial their early years' experiences are to their later chances of becoming successful, contributing members of our communities.²

Healthy, well-supported children and youth are more likely to become the engaged contributing citizens that are essential for creating a healthy, sustainable society.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SUPPORT ALL CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Canada and B.C. have both signed the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, promising to uphold their rights to special protections, education, health, child care and family supports, and to have their best interests taken into account in all matters affecting them.

Additionally, Government has committed to implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission *Calls to Action* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Many of these calls to action have direct impacts on Indigenous children, youth and families, while others will have a major impact on their circumstances over time.

In developing the province's 2019 budget, all ministries and Treasury Board members must make sure the budget's provisions uphold the commitments with a view to improving all children's well-being and ensuring we do no harm to them through unintentional consequences of budget decisions.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT SITUATION?

We preface what follows with the acknowledgement of the significant investments made in the 2018 budget in supports and services for children, youth and families, particularly in starting to create a universal child care system with accountability for public funds and the recent introduction of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Act that includes a legislated 50% target for child poverty rates over 5 years. Additional funding for social housing,

¹ World Health Organization, Commission on Social Determinants of Health, *Closing the Gap in a Generation, Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, 2008.

http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/69832/1/WHO_IER_CSDH_08.1_eng.pdf

² Harvard University, Centre on the Developing Child, *Brain Architecture*,

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

children and youth with special needs and mental health challenges, post-secondary education and the reduction in MSP premiums are other examples of welcome investments that, if sustained, should start to change the picture described below.

POVERTY

According to First Call's *2017 BC Child Poverty Report Card*,³ B.C. has a child poverty rate of 18.3%. Half of all B.C. children in lone-parent families are poor. Despite the fact that children in lone-parent families make up only one fifth of all BC children, they make up over half of the poor children in the province, and the majority of these families are female-led. The majority of poor children live with parents in paid work either full or part time. Low wages and precarious work are important causes of family poverty.

Census data show that Indigenous children have a 31% poverty rate, and these statistics do not include the likely higher poverty rates for children living on reserves. The high rate of Indigenous children coming into government care is very much tied to the poverty experienced by many Indigenous families.⁴

In spite of recent increases, income and disability assistance rates remain below the poverty line, with severe consequences for the health of parents and children depending on this income.

Regardless of their source of income, B.C.'s poor families with children are living on median incomes that are \$10,000 to \$12,000 below the poverty line.

For many B.C. families the impacts of poverty are compounded by the housing affordability crisis. The 2017 homelessness count in Metro Vancouver tallied 386 homeless children and youth under 25 years, 52% of them (201 children) under the age of 19. Children accompanied by their parents accounted for 59% of the under-19-year-olds, leaving 82 children or youth who were unaccompanied homeless.

Food insecurity continues to increase, and children and youth in poor families are missing school because they can't afford transit fares.

BL Larson is a single mother raising two children, 4 and 15, on disability assistance in a drafty BC Housing unit in Surrey. She knows all too well the challenges of low welfare rates, poor quality child care, and aging housing stock that drives up the energy bills. Too often she has had to approach welfare and 'beg' for an emergency food voucher to feed her family. "They belittle me so terribly...I have nothing to fall back on. When unforeseen things happen, you are stuck. I had to beg and cry for two hours for a \$20 food voucher for my kids."

First Call, 2017 Child Poverty Report Card.

³ First Call. *2017 BC Child Poverty Report Card*. Vancouver: First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2017

⁴ Representative for Children and Youth, *B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy Submission*

https://rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/rcy_poverty_reduction_strategy_submission_-_march_29_2018_-_final.2.pdf

CHILD CARE

The last year has seen bold and welcome investments by the provincial government to address the child care crisis faced by so many B.C. families. Lowering parent fees, investing in raising early childhood educator wages and education and creating more licensed spaces are important steps to building the high quality, affordable child care system families need.

The vast majority of eligible child care providers are now participating in the Fee Reduction Initiative and families of more than 50,000 children are paying less in child care fees than they did 6 months ago.⁵ Parents of school-age children are not yet benefiting from fee reductions, nor are parents with children in child care programs that have chosen not to opt in to this initiative.

The Affordable Child Care Benefit is providing more families with larger child care fee subsidies. For many lower-income families who qualify for the maximum benefit and are benefiting from the Fee Reduction Initiative, fees are being eliminated, consistent with the \$10aDay Child Care Plan. However, raising child care subsidies increases the risk that child care fees will rise as well.

New investments through the Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy are aimed at addressing the severe shortage of well-qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) available to work in the expanding new child care system. Given the low wages for so many ECEs working directly with children, additional wage enhancement investments are still needed to solve the hiring crisis for child care providers.

An expansion of Aboriginal Head Start programs both on- and off-reserve are also among the important commitments announced.

Capital investments to build additional child care spaces are also needed and welcome, with the proviso that these investments should prioritize publicly-owned facilities.

Government is also offering incentives to unlicensed child care providers to become licensed and funding to improve child care options for shift workers, young parents and children with additional support needs. There are a number of other provincial child care-related initiatives also in the works.

Some of these initiatives are still in the process of rolling out and others will take several years to produce measurable impacts. At present, too many families are still scrambling to put their children on wait lists for spots in existing child care programs and to find quality care that will allow them to return to work after the birth of their child.

⁵ https://www.10aday.ca/policy_brief_child_care_affordability_in_bc_whats_working

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS – EARLY INTERVENTION

We are pleased to note that with the help of the bi-lateral federal-provincial agreement on child care, an additional \$30 million is being allocated over three years to enhance Supported Child Development and Aboriginal Supported Child Development programs, with the intention of reducing wait lists for access to these programs. This sounds like a lot of money, but government knows this will be insufficient to eliminate wait lists around the province. And wait lists for other early intervention therapies and programs remain.

Early intervention services for children should not have to rely on short-term funding agreements. Rather they should be an entitlement for all families to access for their young children prior to school entry. When young children with special needs languish on long wait lists for assessments and early intervention therapies or access to child care, they are missing irreplaceable developmental opportunities. When they get to school age they may go on another wait list for a proper assessment and find that school-based services to meet their learning needs also remain in dire need of restoration.⁶

PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING

Given the chronic underfunding of public schools for much of the past two decades, First Call welcomes the re-investments in public education in late 2017 and the 2018 provincial budget. The reduction in class sizes due to the hiring of more teachers is a very positive trend for BC's students. Investments in capital funding for needed new schools, seismic remediation and playgrounds are also welcome news.

However, the deficit in public education funding remains, meaning restoring funding for special education assistants, lost programming in the arts, libraries, counsellors, school psychologists, custodial services, and deferred maintenance, among other areas, still require urgent attention in next year's budget.

It is unacceptable that parents are still being expected to fundraise and districts are relying on international education student fees for essentials, resulting in large inequities between schools and districts.

The right to inclusive education for students with special needs is still significantly impaired. Supplemental special education grants to BC's school districts represent on average just 58% of what they spend on special education.⁷ This has left more parents scrambling to find the learning supports their children need. Parents of students with extra support needs regularly report that their children have been sent home because the school lacks the resources to meet their needs.⁸

⁶ http://inclusionbc.org/sites/default/files/KidsCantWait-2016%20ECI%20Summit%20Report_0.pdf

⁷ <https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Briefs/BCTFEducationFundingBrief2018.pdf>

⁸ <https://bccpac.bc.ca/upload/2017/11/2017-11-03-Full-Day-Summaryresults.pdf>

Additionally, the area standards used for new schools are resulting in schools that are 30% smaller than older schools resulting in dramatic restrictions or even elimination of music and arts programming, and no room for non-enrolling classrooms, quiet rooms and other educationally important uses.

The current Area Standards provisions do not allow sufficient space for school facilities that reflect best educational practices or the aspired educational goals of the new curriculum.

BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils

BC last revised its area standards for public schools in 2004.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN AND FROM GOVERNMENT CARE

We know that many children in British Columbia are removed from the care of families who cannot keep them healthy and safe. As of March 31, 2018, 6,698 children and youth were living in government care and 2,668 more were living outside the parental home in kinship care or on their own with some government support. The trend since 2015 is a steady decrease in the number of children and youth in care.

However, we also know that 63% of children in care are Indigenous, a gross over-representation compared to their small share (10%) of the child population and the decrease in the percentage of Indigenous children and youth in care is much slower than the decrease for non-Indigenous children and youth.⁹

We know that these children will need special help to overcome the trauma of their life experiences, and that they have not had the benefit of stability to support their development.

We know that many extended families are willing to help, but they need adequate financial and service supports in order to do so. There are thousands of children in B.C. being raised by their grandparents, doing their best to keep things on track when the children's parents cannot properly care for them, or are incarcerated.

Supports for some youth transitioning out of care have improved, notably with the implementation of tuition waivers at public institutions. However, among youth leaving government care at age 19, over 50% are on income assistance within six months of aging out of the system.¹⁰ According to the 2018 Youth Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver, 50% of homeless youth surveyed reported they were currently or had been previously in care, a group home or under an independent living arrangement.¹¹ Clearly we are failing in our role as parents for these youth by allowing this extreme situation to exist.

⁹ Representative for Children and Youth, *Annual Report 2017-18 and Service Plan 2018/19 to 2019/20*.

https://rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/rcy-arsp-2017-18_web.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.fosteringchange.ca/> and *On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth as They Leave Government Care*, 2014. <https://www.rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/reports/monitoring-reports/their-own-examining-needs-bc-youth-they-leave>

¹¹ BC Non-Profit Housing Association, *2018 Youth Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver*, October 2018

<http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/regional-planning/homelessness/homelessness-taskforce/youth-homeless-count/Pages/default.aspx>

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

First Call is encouraged by the new investments in expanding Foundry integrated youth services centres around the province to provide core health (mental health, substance use, primary care and peer support) and social (income assistance, housing support, developmental disabilities) services for youth. We look forward to seeing the results in improved youth health in future years.

However, according to Simon Fraser University Children's Health Policy Centre director Charlotte Waddell, "We are currently reaching only 30% of children with mental health disorders."¹²

Parents are still struggling to find the supports they need for children and youth who struggle with mental illness and substance use addictions.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

While there have been some significant investments in post-secondary educational institutions, such as improved and expanded facilities and programs, tuition fees remain unaffordable for too many lower income students and student debt continues to be a burden on young people and their families. Students who must borrow to attend post-secondary school are paying thousands of dollars more for their education, compared to those who do not have to borrow.¹³

WHAT DOES FIRST CALL RECOMMEND BE INCLUDED IN BC BUDGET 2019?

Our [2017 BC Child Poverty Report Card](#) and our [submission to Minister Simpson's poverty reduction consultations](#) contain a comprehensive list of recommendations to reduce and eliminate child and family poverty. These include measures to prevent poverty through significantly bigger investments in early childhood development and public education, two areas of investment that have the most significant impacts on child and youth health and well-being and accrue the largest downstream savings over the long term.

In this submission, we highlight four recommendations for next year's budget, starting with an important targeted poverty reduction measure.

¹² <https://childhealthpolicy.ca/banff-behvioural-science-conference/>

¹³ British Columbia Federation of Students, *Connecting the Dots, a framework for a high quality, affordable post-secondary education system in British Columbia*, 2017. <http://www.wearebcstudents.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/GR-BC-Budget-2018-Submission-1.pdf>

1) Recommendations to reform BC's Child Benefit:

- a) Redesign the BC Early Childhood Tax Benefit into a BC Child Benefit that covers children under 18, increase the maximum benefit to \$1,320 per child per year and index it annually to the cost of living.
- b) Ensure that households with an annual net income of up to \$80,000 receive the full, increased child benefit and phase out the benefit for households with annual net incomes above \$100,000.

This one measure will reduce the depth of poverty for the majority of children in working poor families and for families on social assistance. Part of the cost of this measure would be recouped by lowering the threshold for eligibility currently in place for the existing benefit. Our [research report](#) comparing our benefit to other provinces' has been presented to government.

2) Recommendations on child care investments:

First Call is strongly supportive of the initial investments made in universal child care as outlined above. We recommend that these investments be sustained and that government ensure that the ongoing rollout of universal child care in BC is consistent with the broadly-supported and evidence-based \$10aDay Child Care Plan, specifically:

- a) Starting in fiscal 2019/20 re-allocate funding from the planned expansion of the Affordable Child Care Benefit to an expansion of the Fee Reduction Initiative.
- b) Transfer remaining capital grant funds into a new, separate child care capital budget for purchase/building of public assets, beginning with the immediate bulk purchase of custom-designed modular buildings to house new child care facilities.
- c) In the Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy, implement an additional wage lift for early childhood educators of \$1/hour effective April 1, 2019 (in addition to the \$1/hour increase already committed for 2018/19 and 2020/21).
- d) Transfer the Child Care Branch from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education.

For more detail on the rationale for, benefits and costing of these recommendations we refer you to the submission from the [Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC](#).

3) Recommendations to improve supports for youth aging out of foster care:

The existing Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) program under the Ministry of Children and Family Development has been accessible to too few youth as they transition out of care, as well as inadequate in the supports provided. Despite some increase in the number of youth on AYAs, recent data indicate only 24% of youth from care succeed in getting on an agreement in the year after they turn 19. AYA is the primary tool for government support post-19. The most vulnerable youth are the least likely to be able to access an AYA due to eligibility criteria. Informed by the youth from care community, First Call recommends:

- a) Budget 2019 must contain the necessary funds to reform and enhance the cross-government approach to supporting youth aging out of care, including those on Youth Agreements in independent living arrangements, so they can rely on universal, comprehensive supports. This includes providing adequate and accessible financial, social, emotional and community resources.
- b) For the Tuition Waiver Program, eliminate the upper age limit (26 years) and the minimum two-years in care eligibility criteria.

The Premier has promised a cross-ministry action plan in response to this and other recommendations for youth transitioning from government care and we look to Budget 2019 to contain additional investments to realize this promise.

4) Recommendations regarding access to public transit:

Increasingly we are hearing from low income families with children that public transportation is inaccessible to them even where it exists because it is unaffordable. This prevents them from reaching medical appointments, public services, school and job interviews.

Additionally, low-income youth with 'transit debt' for fare evasion are profoundly impacted in their transition to adulthood when they are unable to pay these debts

- a) The provincial government should work with local governments and transit authorities to develop a plan that will provide free public transit for minors (ages 0-18) and free or reduced transit access for low income families.
- b) Explore eliminating the practice of ticketing minors for fare evasion on public transit and eliminate the 'transit debt' accrued by ticketing minors that is blocking low-income youth, including youth in and from care, from getting their driver's licenses.

Beyond these four highlighted recommendations, our broad coalition shares many other areas of concern giving rise to the following additional recommendations for Budget 2019.

5) Recommendations on early childhood investments in addition to child care:

- a) Eliminate wait times for young children with developmental challenges who need access to assessments, therapies and early childhood education and care programs.
- b) Provide stable, enhanced funding for parent/family support programs that are accessible and welcoming for the diversity of B.C. families.
- c) Restore universal home visits from a public health nurse for all new infants and their parents and no-barrier access to prenatal classes for expectant parents.

6) Recommendations on public education:

- a) Continue to restore funding to the K-12 public school system: in addition to more teachers, provide increased operating funding and resources to support the early identification, designation and appropriate educational programming for students with diverse learning needs and to restore other educational programs that have been decimated by inadequate funding to school districts, such as libraries and arts programs.
- b) Ensure funding of public schools is adequate to reduce pressure on parents to fundraise to cover school expenses, a key goal for reducing inequities between schools and students and families of different income levels.
- c) Provide adequate capital funding for facility repair and maintenance, including seismic upgrades, as well as building new schools for growing districts.
- d) Amend the area standards for school buildings to reflect the needs of students for non-enrolling classes, arts programming and allow schools to achieve the aspirational goals of the new curriculum and other aspects of best educational practices.

7) Recommendations on post-secondary education:

- a) Reduce post-secondary tuition fees, re-introduce a robust needs-based provincial grant program and provide interest free student loans.

8) Additional recommendations on poverty and income inequality:

- a) Build more social and affordable rental housing, while better protecting renters from rent-related or renovation evictions.
- b) Immediately increase funding for First Nations child welfare, education and community health services and services for urban Indigenous people and develop a long-term poverty eradication strategy in collaboration with First Nations and other Indigenous organizations and communities.
- c) Increase efforts to help immigrant and refugees adjust to life in Canada by improving employment assistance, removing barriers to qualifications for professionals trained abroad, enhancing language training, including classes with child care provided, and improving employment standards and human rights protections and enforcement.
- d) Ensure all direct government employees and government contracted staff are paid a living wage.
- e) Raise and index social assistance rates significantly to bring them in line with actual living expenses.
- f) Expand the Single Parent Employment Initiative to include two parent families and allow people to take post-secondary programs that are longer than 12 months.
- g) Ensure that the Ministry of Children and Family Development has sufficient resources to support more services to keep children at home with their families when it can be made safe to do so, and to strengthen the system of guardianship workers, foster parents and other caregivers when it is not.
- h) Provide kinship care providers with the benefits and supports available to foster parents.
- i) Establish an independent commission on tax reform to study taxes levied in BC and recommend ways to make the tax system fairer and reduce income inequality.

Appendix A: First Call Coalition Members

ACT – Autism Community Training	Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC	Pacific Immigrant Resources Society
Adoptive Families Association of BC	Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC	Parent Support Services Society of BC
Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies	Columbia/Kootenay Advocacy and Education Resource Society	PeerNetBC
Alternate Shelter Society	Communities that Care – Squamish	Penticton & District Community Resources Society
Association for Community Education BC	Community Action Toward Children's Health	Phoenix Human Services Association
Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia	Council of Parent Participation Preschools BC	PLEA Community Services Society of BC
Aunt Leah's Independent Life Skills Society	Deaf Children's Society of BC	Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society
Autism Society of BC	Developmental Disabilities Association	Provincial Association of Residential & Community Agencies
Baobab Inclusive Empowerment Society	Directorate of Agencies for School Health BC	Public Health Association of BC
BC Aboriginal Child Care Society	Dr. C.J. Patricelli, Inc.	Single Mothers' Alliance of BC
BC Association for Child Development & Intervention	Early Childhood Educators of BC	Sea to Sky Community Services
BC Association of Family Resource Programs	East Kootenay Childhood Coalition	Social Planning & Research Council of BC
BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs	Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver	Society for Children and Youth of BC S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
BC Association of Social Workers	Family Services of Greater Vancouver	Summit Negotiations Society
BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils	Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks	Sunshine Coast Community Services Society
BC Council for Families	Federation of Community Social Services BC	Take a Hike Youth At Risk Foundation
BC Council of the Canadian Federation of University Women	Foster Parent Support Services Society	United Way of the Lower Mainland
BC Crime Prevention Association	Five Family Place Partnership – MPFCS	University Women's Club of Vancouver
BC Federation of Foster Parents Association	Health Sciences Association	Vancity Community Foundation
BC Government & Service Employees' Union	Health Officers' Council of British Columbia	Vancouver Coastal Health Authority – Population Health
BC Play Therapy Association	Helping Spirit Lodge Society	Vancouver Community College – Early Childhood Care & Education, Cont. Studies
BC Recreation and Parks Association	Health Sciences Association of BC	Victoria Child Abuse Prevention & Counselling Centre
BC Retired Teachers' Association	Hospital Employees' Union	West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund
BC Schizophrenia Society	Immigrant Services Society of BC	Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre
BC Society of Transition Houses	Inclusion BC	Westcoast Family Centres Society
BC Teachers' Federation	Indigenous Perspectives Society	Western Society for Children
Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland	Justice Institute of BC	Women Against Violence Against Women
Boys and Girls Clubs of BC	Kamloops and District Elizabeth Fry Society	YWCA Metro Vancouver
Breakfast for Learning	Kelowna Child Care Society	
British Columbia Federation of Students	Kiwassa Neighbourhood House	FIRST CALL LIAISONS
Cameray Child & Family Services	Learning Disabilities Association of BC	BC Representative for Children and Youth
Canadian Association for Young Children	McCreary Centre Society	Public Health Agency of Canada
Canadian Mental Health Association BC	Métis Commission for Children & Families BC	Ministry of Children and Family Development
Canadian Red Cross – Respect Education	Mom to Mom Child Poverty Initiative	Human Early Learning Partnership, UBC
Capilano Students' Union	MOSAIC	BC School Trustees' Association
Centre for Child Honouring	National Council of Jewish Women of Canada – Vancouver Section	
Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs	New Westminster Family Place	
Cerebral Palsy Association of BC	Pacific Association of First Nations Women	
Check Your Head: The Global Youth Education Network	Pacific Community Resources Society	
Child and Youth Care Association of BC		