

Altogether better.



THE FEDERATION

of COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES of BC

2018 Select Standing Committee Presentation

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. My name is Rick FitzZaland and I am the Executive Director of The Federation of Community Social Services of BC. I am honoured to be here with you on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Kwakwaka'wakw speaking peoples, in particular, the Wei Wai Kum, Homalco, and K'ómoks.

My organization, The Federation of Community Social Services of BC, represents a group of over 130 community-based social services organizations serving over 250 communities across BC, both on and off recognized First Nations territories. Our members span the entire province and offer a broad range of services to families, to people living with physical and mental challenges, to vulnerable children, youth, and seniors, to new immigrants, to people living with addictions or mental health issues, to those living in poverty, and more.

I would like to begin today by acknowledging some positive steps this new government has already made to improve the lives of the people in our communities. Commitments to poverty reduction, Indigenous language revitalization, and child care are long overdue, and give us hope for the future. I would also like to recognize the recent collective agreement for the social care sector that began to address stagnant wages and decades of austerity our sector has faced. Thank you for understanding that the well-being of our province is tied to the well-being of its people.

That said, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

The current government has set some ambitious but worthy goals. There have been promises made about improving services, reducing inequality, and supporting families. And there is an understanding that things like poverty reduction, universal child care, housing affordability, and child welfare are complex and systemic issues that have been made worse because they were ignored for far too long. That's why I am here to urge you to continue making social services a funding priority in BC.

NASA astronaut James A. Lovell famously said that going to the moon wasn't a miracle, they just decided to do it. That's what we want from our government—a government that commits wholeheartedly to this new direction and then does whatever it takes to get there. We know this won't be easy, but we will do whatever we can to help you along the way.

With that in mind, I would like to draw your attention to the state of community social care in BC. As you consider the next phase of goals and objectives for this government—goals like improving services for people, making life more affordable, and building a strong, sustainable economy—we would like you to think carefully about the role community social services will play in achieving those goals.



About Community Social Services in BC

Many of the services that the provincial government provides to the people of BC are actually done so through contracts with social services organizations. These include services and supports for families, for young people involved in the child protection system, for people with disabilities, for those trying to find jobs, for newcomers to BC, and for our older adults. This is what I am referring to when I speak about community social services or the social care sector.

Given the decisions you have to make, it is important that you understand the unique, precarious space this sector occupies among other government services.

We have to abide by and work within procurement regulations that are often intended for those building physical infrastructure, such as bridges and roads, rather than those building social infrastructure like family support programs, residential care for children and youth, or transition houses for women fleeing abuse.

We are an integral part of the system of care provided by a number of government ministries—the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, the Ministry of Mental Health & Addictions, and the Ministry of Public Safety to name a few. But at the same time, our agencies are also separate entities with our own organizational structures, bylaws, histories, and cultures. Some are 100% contracted-based, some rely wholly on fundraising, some are private companies.

We address issues that many people simply want to ignore or deny, and we challenge the status quo so that we might leave the world better than we found it. Unfortunately, these efforts are poorly understood and, as a result, our sector has been historically neglected and underfunded.

The State of Community Social Services in BC

In British Columbia, we devote a pathetically small amount of money to community social services—to women fleeing abuse, to young people living in the care of the government, to adults with developmental disabilities. We have for decades.

Our members represent some of the most creative, passionate, and caring people in this province. Every day they help the people of BC in amazing ways with far, far too little. And it has taken a toll.

For many, many years, The Federation has presented to this committee and made clear the need for increased investment in social services. Our concern and outrage about the fact that social services in BC continue to be vastly underfunded is a matter of public record. It is our assessment—after years and years of tracking provincial budgets—that the economic prosperity of our province has been built on the backs of vulnerable children and people with disabilities.

That's why I sincerely hope you continue leading us in this new direction. To help you do so, I am going to speak about a few of the biggest issues we are facing: sustainability, recruitment and retention, and service delivery.

In February, The Federation hosted a Social Policy Forum in Victoria. We do so each year, but this one was different.

It was different because the success of this new government is dependent upon a healthy and robust social services sector. For that reason, we specifically focused this year's Social Policy Forum on issues and actions related to the strength and sustainability of BC's social care sector. Social services organizations and academics from across the province participated. Members of this government participated. And since then, some of those issues (like sector wages and WorkSafeBC rates) have been addressed. But others (like procurement, recruitment and retention) have not.



These issues—the things I’m going to discuss today—will not be new to you. This won’t be the first time you’re hearing them. But I need to take this opportunity to re-emphasize their importance given the decisions you will be making. The Federation has aided and supported the government’s efforts thus far, and we will do everything we can to help address the ones that remain. But before you decide how and where to allocate resources, we also need you to understand the very precarious position our sector is in.

Sustainability

To be fair, this government has been in power for little more than a year, and it inherited a number of serious crises and a social care system reeling from decades of neglect. After meeting and working with the government over the past year, we believe there is a sincere commitment to making real, lasting change.

And change is needed. BC’s social services sector has been asked time and time again to do more with less. We are at a point now where that is no longer possible. Sustainability was both the impetus behind this year’s Social Policy Forum and a central theme of those two days in Victoria. Because the truth is that our entire sector—the hundreds of services and supports that people depend on every day—has been left fragile. BC’s social care system is in jeopardy.

The recently-announced Employer Health Tax offers a good example of what I mean. Let me be clear. The Federation is fully supportive of the decision to remove and replace the regressive and unfair MSP tax. However, the proposed implementation of this change will have a significant impact on social services organizations across the province and a profound effect on the many, many people they serve.

Many of our member organizations (those without multiple locations, those that provide fee-for-service, those that are proprietorships, those utilizing HUB models, and those that receive funding from non-provincial sources) currently expect to face significant increases in cost. This will affect counselling services and supports for seniors. This will hinder the current commitment to making daycare more accessible and affordable. It will discourage organizations from seeking donor, corporate, and foundation fundraising (even though they rely on those funds to sustain their services). And it will most acutely affect private organizations that provide social services (these same organizations have been the most neglected and ignored during this process).

We recognize that these are unintended consequences of an otherwise positive change. But they need to be mitigated, and I hope this committee will strive to do just that.

The organizations that are now at risk serve important, long-standing needs. They provide services in communities that are remote and have few other options. They provide specialized resources that children and families depend on. They are already struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff, and now they may have to cut services and close programs in order to cover unexpected costs.

That’s why we are asking the government to exempt the community social services sector from the Employer Health Tax. The current exemptions provided for non-profits are good, but they do not go far enough. Our already fragile sector needs to be protected from any additional cost pressures. For us, that is one of the next steps that needs to be taken.

Recruitment and Retention

We want to continue heading in this new direction. Already, there have been a number of steps taken since the Social Policy Forum in February that have addressed other issues that were raised. The wage increase in the recent collective bargaining agreement is one such example.

But there is still much more to be done—especially in relation to recruitment and retention. This was the focus of many discussions over those two days in Victoria. It remains the largest human resources challenge we’re facing.



The community social services sector has a highly educated workforce where most positions require post-secondary education. But compensation has been too low for too long. Year-to-year contracts have left staff in precarious positions. Training and professional development are largely nonexistent. Positions for youth workers, counsellors, and support workers are going unfilled.

Childcare operators have been making this point very clear over the past few months, but the truth is that recruitment and retention is a sector-wide issue.

Our sector has a workforce that is stressed, overworked, and strained with high turnover. We can't keep relying on our staff to do these jobs simply because they are good, caring people. They very much *are* good, caring people, and they do demanding, difficult work where people's livelihoods—and lives—are at stake every day. These workers, like all of us, deserve to feel safe and supported in their positions.

The status quo is not sustainable. So as this government considers its resource allocation for next year, we ask that you consider the current, state of these important services. As you decide on funding priorities, we ask that you consider ways in which employment in this vital sector can be made more attractive and service delivery can be made more sustainable. We ask you to consider things like training, compensation, and pension plans. And we ask that you continue to include our sector in important decision-making processes regarding this issue.

Service Delivery

We can be a great partner and an invaluable resource as the government tackles the items on its agenda and strives to improve service delivery across the province. I encourage you to take advantage of our wisdom, energy, and ideas—the lived experiences of front-line staff and the insight of program managers with multiple funders. We can help. We want to help.

As some of you know, back in 2012, The Federation released a joint report with the Ministry of Children and Family Development on what is known as residential services for children in care. These are children who cannot safely live with their parents and have to come into the care of the government. These are children that the government of BC has a duty and an obligation to care for as best as it can.

That report included 32 recommendations that would improve the system of care for young people needing support. The report was signed off by The Federation and MCFD and then released. But since then, MCFD has remained caught between ongoing fiscal pressure to 'do more with less,' and the belief held by some that the changes required are somehow simple and straightforward.

Before I go further, I would like to acknowledge the work Stephanie Cadieux did in the service of children and families in this province. I know that Stephanie worked hard to have the needs of our communities addressed. And I know how difficult it was to do so in a province where social services have simply not been a financial priority for over a decade.

And the truth is that most of those changes aren't simple. They aren't straightforward. But they are very much possible. We don't need a miracle to make them happen, we just need the government to decide to do it—to make them a priority worth funding. We need a government that commits to fixing BC's child welfare system, and then does whatever it takes to realize that commitment. We need a government that improves compensation for foster caregivers. We need a government that makes a plan to house all the kids that come into care and then invests in that plan. And we want to help you make that happen.

That's what improving service delivery means to us. It means committing to culturally safe, trauma-informed care. It means committing to community-based planning and procurement. It means considering and supporting a child's full lived experience in care and making sure that child gets what



they need when they need it. It means finally acting on each and every one of those 32 recommendations. And, more than anything, it means paying attention to the issues facing BC's community social services and acting on opportunities to strengthen and support this vital but fragile sector.

Conclusion

At the end of these consultations, you will be making recommendations on government priorities for spending. These choices will impact the lives and well-being of the people The Federation and our member agencies care deeply about: children and youth, vulnerable families, adults, and seniors. These spending priorities will impact services such as foster care, youth housing, parenting programs, employment support for people with disabilities, and shelters for those fleeing abuse. And it is incredibly important for you to know that the need for these services is not diminishing; in fact, it's growing.

Yes, it's possible to make change where change is needed. This government has already shown that and we're grateful for the efforts that have been made thus far. But the kind of problems that still lay ahead of us will not be solved with the same tools and tactics that have been tried before—and you won't be able to solve them on your own. That's why we remain committed to working with this government to make those changes.

The Federation, this committee, and this government all understand that healthy, supported communities make good economic sense. And healthy, supported communities require strong and sustainable community social services.

Thank you.

