



Submission to Select Standing Committee On Finance and Government Services

June 2019

putting children and youth **first**

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ABOUT US

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a non-partisan, cross-sectoral coalition of 107 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

Introduction

Our 2018 BC Child Poverty Report Card contains 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 five recommendations for next year's budget, starting with important targeted poverty reduction measures for families living in deep poverty.

We preface our following recommendations by acknowledging the significant investments made in the 2019-2020 budget in supports for children, youth and families, particularly in the improvements and expansion of the province's child tax credit benefit. The BC Child Opportunity Benefit announced in the budget earlier this year will have real and positive impacts on families. We applaud continued investment's in child care but are wary about the extent to which public funding is flowing to for-profit operators.

The announcement of BC's first Poverty Reduction Strategy with a legislated reduction target of 50% for child poverty rates over five years is also a positive step forward.

Government must also be commended for additional funding for social housing, more support for youth in and from care, greater investment in and coordination of mental health and addictions services for youth and the upcoming reduction in MSP premiums.

We note that while increased support for kinship caregivers is a step in the right direction, the changes announced will only benefit a small group of families because barriers to enrolling in the programs are prohibitive.

Lastly, we recognize government's recent efforts to address administrative barriers that prevent people from accessing benefits and services, and encourage government to continue this work across all ministries.

Our Responsibility to Support All Children's Rights

Canada and BC 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 budget, all ministries and Treasury Board members must make sure the budget's provisions uphold our commitments to improving all children's well-being and ensuring we do no harm to them through unintentional consequences of budget decisions.

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 and child care
- support for parents and other caregivers
- children and youth in and from government care
- public schools, and
- access to public transit

Key Recommendations

1. Increase income supports for families living in deep poverty

According to 2016 data, not only were many families with children in British Columbia living in poverty many families were typically living far below the poverty line, based on the Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM) after tax.

For example, a two-parent family with two children with both parents working full-time for the whole year at minimum wage would have only earned \$38,514 in employment income, leaving them \$3,214 below the poverty line.

A single-parent with one child working full-time, full-year at the **current** BC minimum wage (\$13.85/hr or \$25,207/yr) would have employment income leaving them \$4,000 below the **2016 before-tax** poverty line of \$29,207 for this family type.

For a couple with two children on welfare in 2016, their total income was \$24,602, just 60% of the poverty line, leaving a poverty gap of \$16,245.

For a couple with two children on income assistance at **the new 2019 rates**, their total income including government transfers and credits is around \$28,500, still just 60% of the **2017 after-tax poverty line** (Low Income Measure), leaving a poverty gap of over \$18,000/yr.

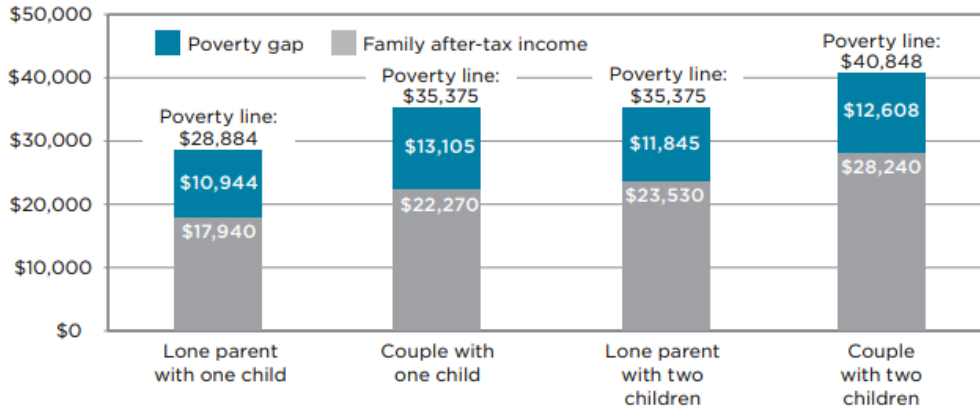
While the Child Opportunity Benefit is a welcome initiative, it will not be enough to lift families living in deep poverty over the poverty line. Similarly, recent modest increases to welfare and disability rates are not enough to mitigate poverty in those families.

In 2016:

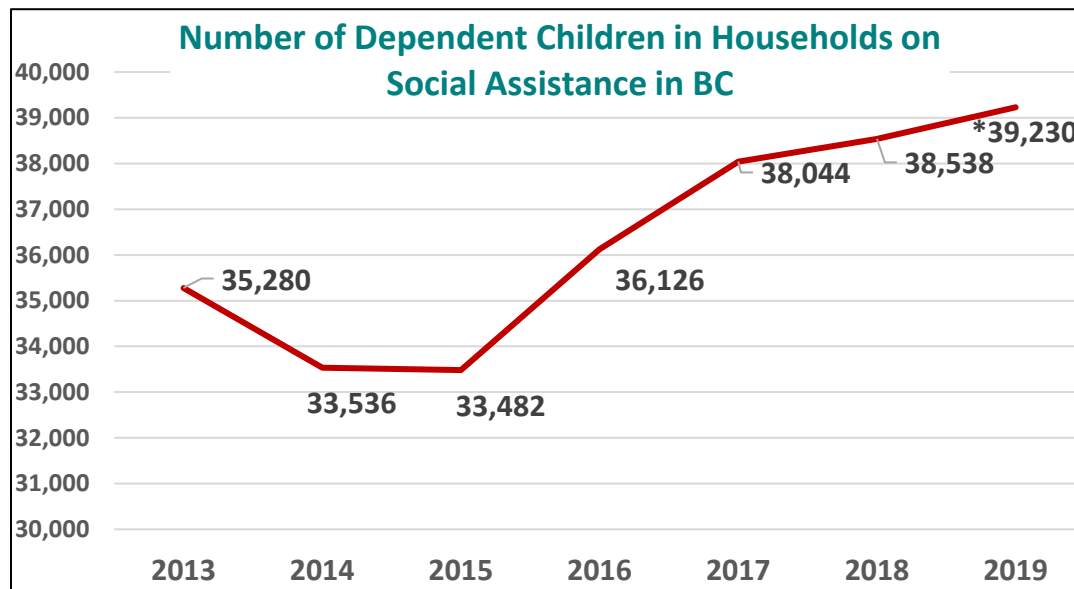
- The median after-tax family income for poor lone-parent families with one child was \$17,940, or \$10,944 below the poverty line of \$28,884 for a family of two;
- Poor couple families with one child had a median after-tax income of \$22,270, a full \$13,105 below the poverty line of \$35,375 for a family of three;

- Poor lone-parent families with two children had a median after-tax income of \$23,530, \$11,845 below the poverty line of \$35,375 for a family of three; and,
- Poor couples with two children had a median after-tax family income of \$28,240, falling \$12,608 below the poverty line of \$40,848 for a family of four.¹

Poverty Gap for Poor BC Families with Children, Based on Median After-Tax Income and CFLIM After tax (Poverty Line), 2016



Unfortunately, the number of children living in households dependent on social or disability assistance has been trending upwards since 2015² in both the number and as a percentage of the general population. And, since 2015, the percentage of children under 18 using BC’s food banks has hovered at or above 30%.



**average to April 2019*

¹ Source: For median after-tax family income: Statistics Canada. Table F-20 After-tax low income status of census families (census family low income measures, CFLIM-AT) by family type and family composition, adjusted methodology, 2016. For CFLIM (Census Family Low Income Measure – After Tax) Income Thresholds: Statistics Canada. Technical Reference Guide for the Annual Income Estimates for Census Families, Individuals and Seniors, T1 Family File, Final Estimates, 2016. Table G. P.11

² Source: Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction BC Employment and Assistance Summary Report April 2019

Poverty is the most important social determinant of health. The impacts of living in deep poverty are devastating for children and youth. In the short-term they are at a higher risk of being food insecure, becoming homeless and, potentially, being removed from their families and placed in government care.

Data shows that even access to universal medical care cannot overcome the likelihood that growing up poor will lead to life-long, persistent health issues.

The Health Disparities Task Group of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security estimated that over 20% of health care spending may be attributable to income disparities.³

Further, they reported:

Socio-economic status, Aboriginal identity, gender and geographic location are the most important factors associated with health disparities in Canada. The consequences of health disparities are most pronounced in the lowest 20% of the socio-economic status scale and for Aboriginal peoples.

Poverty permanently harms Canadian children; its neurocognitive and psychological effects further perpetuate the poverty cycle.¹

Cal Robinson, pediatrics resident at McMaster University

Recommendation 1:

We ask that government accelerate the scheduled increases to the minimum wage to reach \$15 per hour by June 2020, make sure all workers in BC are covered by the minimum wage by the end of 2019, and index it annually to the cost of living.

Recommendation 2:

The provincial government should significantly raise income and disability assistance rates to bring them in line with actual living expenses and index them to inflation.

2. Invest in early childhood

Greater investment in infant and early childhood development

Earlier in this year, BC's Public Health Officer raised concerns⁴ about the decade-long trend away from provincial targets related to the percentage of children who are not vulnerable on any dimension in the Early Development Instrument reporting.

Analysis by the Provincial Health Services Authority found "45.3 per cent of children vulnerable on more than one EDI indicator were in the lowest income groups, compared to 27.1 per cent in the highest income groups." and notes, "More supports will be needed across all health authorities to be able to reach provincial targets."

³ *Reducing Health Disparities – Roles of the Health Sector: Discussion Paper*, Health Disparities Task Group of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security, 2005

⁴ *Taking the Pulse of the Population an Update on the Health of British Columbians*, Provincial Health Officer's Annual Report 2019

First Call echoes the Health Officer's third recommendation in her Annual Report to government to "Increase support for programs and policies across government that focus on health among women (including pregnant and postpartum women), children, youth, and families in BC."

All young children and their families must have access to a basic set of Early Childhood Development (ECD) supports and services as needed. This means addressing the specific barriers that face certain families and the systemic barriers that limit the overall availability, affordability and integration of ECD programs.

There must be full inclusion of young children at risk of developmental delay and children with disabilities. These children require specific strategies and supports to ensure that they can participate in their local ECD community programs alongside their peers.

ECD services, strategies and supports must be:

- a) designed to actively engage children and families and meet their immediate, longitudinal and transitional needs in a culturally appropriate way;
- b) based on research, quality standards and community needs;
- c) regularly evaluated to ensure progress towards improved ECD outcomes;
- d) planned and delivered in a seamless way at the community level within a clearly articulated provincial ECD plan;
- e) adequately resourced through an integrated funding mechanism;
- f) publicly accountable at the community and government levels.

These goals and principles, along with key assumptions, were further developed and affirmed in our 2015 publication, *Make BC's Young Children and Families a Priority: A Call to Action*.

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.

Recommendation 3:

The provincial government should ensure that BC's youngest children and their families have access to the programs and resources that support early childhood development.

Targeting population and public health system programming to these life stages and considering the needs of this population in all public policies are particularly critical because experiences during the preconception, prenatal, infant, and childhood periods have the strongest effect on health later in life. This includes supporting the needs of parents of young children as well as those parents who are caring for both children and aging parents.

Build an accessible, quality, and publicly-run child care system.

While First Call is strongly supportive of the initial investments made in universal child care to date, we recognize that many families cannot find child care at all in their community.

More investments through the Early Care and Learning Recruitment and Retention Strategy are needed to address the severe shortage of well-qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) available to work in an expanded 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.

We are also concerned that a significant transfer of public funding to private, for-profit operators may undermine long-term efforts to build a public, accessible child care system. We support the \$10aDay Child Care plan and support their recommendations including moving the management of child care to the Ministry of Education and strengthening efforts to build child care capacity within the public system.

Recommendation 4:

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) Develop and fund a separate child care capital budget, using these funds to create new \$10aDay child care programs in every community, just like schools.
- b) Increase child care operating funding by an additional \$200 million each year, using these funds to continue raising educator wages and lowering parent fees, with additional \$10aDay prototype sites.

3. Ensure K-12 public education funding is sufficient to mitigate inequalities and support inclusion

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.

Additionally, 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 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. 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.

The lack of supports for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs in the public school system is of great concern to parents and educators. Some children have had access to speech, physio, occupational or behavioural therapies in their preschool years, that then drop away in the school system. Some enter school having never received the therapeutic services or inclusive child care experiences they would have benefited from because they languished on wait lists. They then wait years for an assessment through the school, only to be told there are few if any services for them in the system.

It is time to fundamentally reform a system in which the least advantaged children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs are the least likely to get the help they need in a timely way.

Recommendation 5:

The provincial government should ensure K-12 public education funding is sufficient to mitigate inequalities and to ensure appropriate inclusion of students with diverse learning needs.

4. Improve supports for youth in and aging out of care and kinship caregivers

We know that many children in British Columbia are removed from the care of their parents. 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.

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.

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. Clearly we are failing in our role as parents for these youth by allowing this extreme situation to exist.

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.

Recommendation 6:

The provincial government should review and enhance supports to grandparents raising grandchildren and other kinship care providers and reduce the administrative barriers for access to these supports.

Recommendation 7:

With the advice and direction of youth in and from government care, the provincial government should develop, resource, and maintain a universal and comprehensive social safety net dedicated to the specific needs and circumstances of the approximately 1,000 youth who 'age out' of care annually and all young adults who have spent time in the care system, without age and activity eligibility criteria and length-of-care requirements.

5. Ensure free access to public transit for minors and low-income families

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.

Recommendation 8:

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-fee transit access for low income families.

Conclusion

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.

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.

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

Appendix 1: 2018 BC Child Poverty Report Card: Comprehensive list of Recommendations

Federal and provincial government commitments must be ambitious and fully-funded to ensure poverty reduction targets are met or, preferably, exceeded.

Recognizing that children of recent immigrants and refugees, Indigenous children, children of female lone-parent families, children in racialized families, children affected by disabilities, youth transitioning out of government care, and LGBTQ2S youth are at greater risk of living in poverty, efforts should be targeted to achieve major reductions in poverty levels for these populations.

First Call offers the following recommendations as concrete steps that federal, provincial and local governments can take to achieve or exceed their stated poverty reduction targets.

Tax Fairness and Income Support

1. The provincial government should increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour and make sure all workers in BC are covered by the minimum wage by the end of 2019, and index it annually to the cost of living.
2. Governments at all levels should ensure their direct and contract employees are paid a living wage that allows them to meet their basic needs, properly support their children and avoid chronic financial stress.
3. The provincial government should significantly raise income and disability assistance rates to bring them in line with actual living expenses and index them to inflation.
4. The federal government should ensure the Canada Child Benefit, in combination with other income measures, raises all families with children above the CFLIM after-tax poverty lines calculated through taxfiler data and ensure access to the benefit for families in groups with higher rates of poverty.
5. The federal government should ensure maternity and parental leave benefits are universally available to all new parents (regardless of work status) and that the benefit levels are not less than the CFLIM after-tax poverty lines.
6. The federal government should enhance Employment Insurance to expand access, duration and levels of benefits to prevent and reduce child and family poverty.
7. The provincial and federal governments should address growing income inequality by continuing efforts to increase fairness in the personal income taxation system and re-introducing the principle of taxation based on ability to pay.

Targeted Initiatives for Groups Over-Represented in Poverty Data

8. Collaborate with First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments and Indigenous organizations to develop plans to prevent, reduce and eradicate child and family poverty in Indigenous communities. Comply with the rulings of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal by providing adequate funding for child welfare services on reserve and ensure the full application of Jordan's Principle for First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

9. The provincial government should expand the post-secondary program options eligible for support under the Single Parent Employment Initiative and, in the absence of enhancements to BC's refundable post-secondary grants, allow all those on income assistance to retain benefits while attending a post-secondary institution.

10. With the advice and direction of youth in and from government care, the provincial government should develop, resource, and maintain a universal and comprehensive social safety net dedicated to the specific needs and circumstances of the approximately 1,000 youth who 'age out' of care annually and all young adults who have spent time in the care system, without age and activity eligibility criteria and length-of-care requirements.

11. The provincial government should review and enhance supports to grandparents raising grandchildren and other kinship care providers. The federal government should allow grandparents on CPP Disability who are raising their grandchildren to continue to receive the CPP children's benefit after they turn 65 and remove administrative barriers to receiving the Canada Child Benefit for kinship care providers.

12. The federal and provincial governments should intensify their efforts to help immigrants and refugees adjust to life in Canada by enhancing employment assistance, removing long-standing barriers to qualification for professionals trained abroad, making more language training available, and improving employment standards and human rights protections and enforcement.

13. The federal government should immediately cancel all outstanding refugee transportation loan debt and cease seeking repayment of transportation costs for all new refugees coming to Canada. This budget adjustment should not reduce the number of refugees targeted for resettlement.

Lower Barriers and Improve Lives Through Universal Programs

14. Both the federal and provincial governments should continue to prioritize new child care investments in their 2019 budgets and beyond to establish universal access to a system of high-quality, inclusive child care for BC children and families that has no parent fee for families with annual incomes under \$45,000, creates enough licensed child care spaces for all who choose them, ensures early childhood educators are paid compensation that reflects their education and the importance of the work they do and ensures there are adequate resources and support for the implementation of the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

15. The provincial government should ensure K-12 public education funding is sufficient to mitigate inequalities and to ensure appropriate inclusion of students with diverse learning needs.

16. Federal and provincial government support for access to post-secondary education should be increased both to remove financial barriers for low-income students and lower student debt levels. Policy options include reducing tuition fees at public colleges, institutes and universities, interest-free student loans, and more non-repayable grants for low- and middle-income students.

17. The federal, provincial and local governments should scale up their funding to build thousands of new social and affordable rental housing units and maintain existing affordable housing stock to reduce the number of families in core housing need and to eliminate homelessness.

18. The federal and provincial governments should work together to introduce universal coverage for all Canadians for prescription drugs, dental care, vision care and hearing aids as essential aspects of health care.

19. 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-fee transit access for low income families.

Appendix 2: First Call Coalition Members

ACT – Autism Community Training	Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC	PeerNetBC
Adoptive Families Association of BC	Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC	Phoenix Human Services Association
Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies	Columbia/Kootenay Advocacy and Education Resource Society	PLEA Community Services Society of BC
Alternate Shelter Society	Council of Parent Participation	Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society
Association for Community Education BC	Preschools BC	Provincial Association of Residential & Community Agencies
Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia	Deaf Children's Society of BC	Public Health Association of BC
Aunt Leah's Independent Life Skills Society	Developmental Disabilities Association	Raffi Foundation for Child Honouring
Autism Society of BC	Directorate of Agencies for School Health BC	Sea to Sky Community Services
Baobab Inclusive Empowerment Society	Dr. C.J. Patricelli, Inc.	Single Mothers' Alliance of BC
BC Aboriginal Child Care Society	Early Childhood Educators of BC	Social Planning & Research Council of BC
BC Association for Child Development & Intervention	East Kootenay Childhood Coalition	Society for Children and Youth of BC
BC Association of Family Resource Programs	Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver	SOS Children's Village BC
BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs	Family Services of Greater Vancouver	S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
BC Association of Social Workers	Family Support Institute of BC	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
British Columbia Federation of Students	Kiwassa Neighbourhood House	
Cameray Child & Family Services	Learning Disabilities Association of BC	FIRST CALL LIAISONS
Canadian Association for Young Children	McCreary Centre Society	BC Representative for Children and Youth
Canadian Mental Health Association BC	Métis Commission for Children & Families BC	Public Health Agency of Canada
Canadian Red Cross – Respect Education	Mom to Mom Child Poverty Initiative	Ministry of Children and Family Development
Capilano Students' Union	MOSAIC	Human Early Learning Partnership, UBC
Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs	National Council of Jewish Women of Canada – Vancouver Section	BC School Trustees' Association
Cerebral Palsy Association of BC	New Westminster Family Place	
Check Your Head: The Global Youth Education Network	OneSky Community Resources	
Child and Youth Care Association of BC	Options Community Services	
Childhood Connections - Okanagan	Pacific Association of First Nations Women	
Family & Childcare Society	Pacific Community Resources Society	
	Pacific Immigrant Resources Society	
	Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education	
	Parent Support Services Society of BC	