



2019 Select Standing Committee Submission

The Federation of Community Social Services of BC

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this committee's important work. My name is Rick FitzZaland and I am the Executive Director of The Federation of Community Social Services of BC.

The Federation 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 the positive steps this government has taken over the past year to improve the lives of the people of BC. Commitments to poverty reduction, mental health, community inclusion, and child care are long overdue and give us hope for the future. This government clearly understands that the well-being of BC is tied to the well-being of its people and, on behalf of our entire organization, I want to thank you for moving our province in this positive direction.

However, there is still a lot of work to be done. And the kind of large-scale systemic change this government is attempting to undertake—the goals and priorities of this government has set—will also require changes to the underlying systems, structures, and mechanisms within each ministry. This work will be difficult, but it will be necessary in order to reach your intended outcomes. And it will be made easier if you include the community social services sector with care and intention.

So as you consider the next phase of goals and priorities for this government—improving services, making life more affordable, and building a strong and sustainable economy—we urge you to think carefully about the role BC's community social services sector needs to 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.

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. After years and years of tracking provincial budgets, it has become quite clear that the economic prosperity of our province has been built on the backs of vulnerable children and people with disabilities.

It's no secret that social services are almost always underfunded and it's no secret that social services are usually the first areas to get slashed when cuts need to be made. I hope this committee and this government understands that this is our baseline—this is where we're starting from today. Ours is a sector that has to fight tooth and nail to provide basic supervision and training for people who work with traumatized children. Ours is a sector where losing one contract means organizations are faced with the prospect of having to close their doors for good. That's the sad, scary state in which we all find ourselves.

At this very moment, The Federation of Community Social Services of BC is currently focused on a number of issues that have had—and are continuing to have—a profound and significant impact on our member organizations and the province's social services sector more broadly. Many of which result from unintended consequences of government actions and policy decisions. Like, lost liability insurance, additional business taxes, and procurement practices that favour low-wage multinationals and penalize community-based organizations are tearing apart the already frayed social fabric that is holding our communities together.

Our sector has been weakened by decades of underfunding and neglect. As a result, our province's social care system functions more out of necessity than by design and can't easily change to accommodate unilateral decisions or agendas; there are many gaps and deficits that also need to be considered and addressed. I sincerely hope you understand this is a more precarious and fragile position than our sector has ever been in before.

The strength and sustainability of this sector are critical to the economic and social prosperity of this province, and we have been neglected for too long. There needs to be a different way forward and that path needs to be decided together—with the government and the social services sector at the same table. We're in this together so we need to work together.

The Future of Community Social Services in BC

It is absolutely possible to fix these problems and get out of this mess. The current government is already paying attention to areas that have been neglected for too long and we are very glad to see time and money and effort being put towards things like poverty reduction, affordable childcare, child and youth mental health plan, and community inclusion for people with disabilities. These

have been the focus of advocacy efforts for decades and in many areas, the need has become dire. So we are grateful for the early steps that have been taken, and we are excited to see further progress on these (and other) important initiatives.

We are also encouraged by the new approach to our sector that we have experienced. The current relationship between the social services sector and the government is stronger and more collaborative than it has been in the past. However, there is still much room for improvement—especially considering how critical social services are to the well-being of our province. When it comes to the kind of important, systemic changes we are talking about, details and considerations must be attended to at every level and at every point within the system. Because no matter how well-intentioned an agenda may be, the ways in which changes have been implemented in the past have had incredibly harmful—albeit unintended—consequences.

And that is because decisions about us have been made without us; for far too long we have been kept at arm's length (at best) or completely ignored and left in the dark (at worst).

Every single ministry and crown agency that is connected in any way to social services delivery in BC—including the Ministry of Finance—needs to have the sector in the room when important decisions are being made. The truth is that our insight, experience, and understanding are necessary if the government wants important decisions to actually have the intended impact.

We know that, deep down, this government is committed to delivering on its promises to provide the services that people depend upon and create a balanced economy that benefits everyone. We need you to know that fully supporting and collaborating with BC's community social services sector is the only way that is going to happen. And we also need to know that you will work with us to ensure that funding decisions and policy development are done in a way that respects and supports the organizations that deliver those services—big or small, urban or rural, Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

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.

This government has already shown that it's possible to make change where change is needed and we are grateful for the efforts we have seen 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; the government won't be able to solve them on its own.

We encourage the government to engage with the sector in constructive conversations about how we can address the many issues we are facing in ways that work for the government, for the sector, and of course, for the people we all ultimately serve. Let us help you make sure that your good intentions lead to good results.

Invite us to the table. Use our knowledge and experience to your advantage. We all want what is best for the people of BC and we look forward to forging a new and more productive relationship with this government. There remains a lot of work to do and we are fully committed to working collaboratively with our government colleagues in order to achieve lasting, positive change.

The Federation, this committee, and our government all understand that healthy, supported communities make good economic sense. But healthy, supported communities are not possible without a strong and sustainable community social services sector.

Thank you.

Rick FitzZaland
Victoria, BC