

2016 Select Standing Committee Presentation

The Federation of Community Social Services of BC

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 B.C.

The Federation is a group of community-based social services organizations that influence decision-making in order to improve the wellbeing of our communities. Our mission is to act as a catalyst for positive change when it comes to British Columbia's social policies and community programs.

We represent more than 140 member agencies serving over 250 communities across B.C. both on and off recognized First Nations territories.

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

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.

It is important to know that the need for these services exists. And what's more—the need is not diminishing. It is also important to understand that social care, and the systems we have developed to provide social care are complex. It isn't just that social care deals with challenging human issues. And it does. It is that the actual system is, of necessity, complex.

Sometimes the words complicated and complex are used interchangeably. It is important to understand that they are actually very different. A complicated issue is one that has a degree of predictability. Success relies less on relationships than it does on creating and following a sequence of actions that will lead to success.

On the other hand, a complex issue is one in which the future is unfamiliar and not predictable. Cause and effect are far apart. Success relies on collaborative relationships between people with different perspectives and agendas.

In the 1980s, B.C. began a process of closing down the institutions for people with disabilities. This was the right thing to do. It was the result of years of work on the part of self-advocates and their allies to fight for the civil rights of people with disabilities.

Today the impacts of that move are being addressed as our current systems work to help children and adults live meaningfully in their communities. Today we are faced with the pressing issues of how to best support young people with disabilities in attending their local school and how to ensure that adults have the opportunity to work, have friends, date, marry, and live in safe, affordable housing.

There are a multitude of perspectives and agendas at play in this example. A young person wants their independence. Their family is worried about their safety. A community worker wants to offer support but also wants to follow the rules.

As elected officials, you know well what it takes to juggle the opinions and needs of a vast and diverse constituent. You understand complexity.

I am speaking to you today about complexity because as a participant and observer of our social care system I see a worrying trend of treating social care issues as though they are anything but complex. Phrases like “finding the low-hanging fruit,” looking for “simple solves,” or “finding efficiencies” seem to be included in the marching orders for social care ministries. I am speaking to you today in the hopes of influencing a change in this direction.

When social care ministries are told to fix things quickly or to respond to tragic circumstances or to manage risk or to prevent public outcry, it can lead to solutions that often fail to address the complex underlying issues—and can often make those issues worse.

Another example is the recent hiring of more social workers within MCFD. The hiring of more social workers addresses one pressing issue: the fact that there were not enough social workers employed at MCFD resulting in high case-loads. However, what this does not address is the fact that the community programs where social workers refer families are at their capacity and significantly under-funded. We very much support hiring more MCFD

social workers—they are needed—but hiring them without adequate community supports and services means that vulnerable families are still not getting the support they need.

In 2012, The Federation released a joint report with BC's Ministry of Children and Family Development on what is known as residential services for children in care. When a child cannot safely live with their parents, the government accepts an obligation and a duty to care for these children. Many families who find themselves in this situation may themselves have been raised in families that struggled to care for them. Many of these parents and children have experienced a great deal of trauma.

The 2012 report includes 32 recommendations to improve the system of care for young people needing support. The report was signed off by The Federation and MCFD and then released. But MCFD was told to implement the recommendations within their current budget. Since that time, MCFD has attempted to do just this while caught between huge fiscal pressures to “do more with less” and with a perception to those outside the system that the changes required are somehow simple and straightforward.

We know what is needed to better serve young people in care. It takes creativity and attention to the interconnectedness of the various parts of the system. It takes working together and recognizing all parts of the system. And it requires an opportunity to try some new ways of working. There are people already attempting to work in this way. But they need the government's support. They require support to address complex social issues with approaches that are collaborative, systemic, and open to testing new ideas.

There is a danger in trying to make the social care system more efficient. The social care system should certainly be easier to understand and navigate, and available resources should be used to their best effect, but this is not what I mean. What I mean is that frequently the social care sector is asked to find efficiencies as a way of doing more with less.

The social care sector, like any steward of public funds, must be accountable for its spending. It must spend responsibly. And thoughtfully. But insisting on efficiency can come at the expense of it being effective.

We understand this when it comes to public health. We immunize everyone in a target population. Even though we know not everyone will get sick without the immunization. It is not efficient but it is effective.

Here is an example of what I mean. When a child is taken into care they need somewhere to live. Sometimes this is a foster caregiver's home, and sometimes this is a home that is operated by an organization and staffed by employees. Unless a young person is using a bed in that foster home or staffed home, that resource (the bed) does not get paid for. This is considered efficient because the tax payer is not paying for a bed that isn't being used.

However, it means that when a child comes into care there is a scramble to find a place for that child. It means that people who choose to work in supporting these young people frequently move on to other more, reliable, opportunities. And it means that young people often get put wherever there is space, regardless of whether it is a good fit for them. It means the system is always in crisis. And frequently what it means for young people is even more disruption and trauma in their lives, sometimes with tragic outcomes.

In order for the system to be effective, a certain amount of inefficiency must be expected and allowed. That means having program spaces at the ready.

Conclusion

The social care system was developed out of innovation, creativity, and the hard work of citizens who care about their children, their families, and their neighbours. The best of our social care system was created by challenging the status quo in order to make lives better.

Government has a role to play in ensuring this system is accessible to all our citizens. Government working together with concerned and informed citizens to develop thoughtful solutions to complex challenges results in the most cost-effective use of public funds.

Thank you for your time today. It was important that I come here today and speak on behalf of our 140 members. And it was important that I paint an accurate picture of the work they do, and the environment in which they do it. The lives of every person in this province have been touched by social services. For some, the link is much more personal. But all of our communities are healthier places because we have systems of social care in place.

Thank you for your role in helping to ensure they can continue to respond in timely, effective ways.