



Response Paper: Building BC's Recovery, Together

July 17, 2020

On behalf of The Federation of Community Social Services of BC, I want to thank you for the opportunity to help inform the government of BC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and our province's economic recovery plans. This paper makes two primary recommendations.

1. That the provincial government ensures reconciliation is truly and structurally at the heart of our economic recovery.
2. That the provincial government prioritizes investments in BC's community social services sector as part of the economic recovery.

In February, for the first time that I can recall, a BC Finance Minister made specific mention of the importance of community-based social service workers in a provincial budget speech. Only weeks later, in the early days of the pandemic, BC's Provincial Health Officer explicitly called on BC's social services to keep doing what we have been doing for years—showing up and caring for our clients, supporting those in need, and ensuring that vulnerable people were not made even more vulnerable by multiple, compounding public health crises.

The essential services order that was put in place specifically included the work of community social services. The temporary pandemic pay BC announced also specifically included the social services workers (among others) that continued to support the people of BC through unprecedented times. At the same time, and as the discussion paper noted, "the people who have been most affected work in the services sector, especially in public-facing jobs like retail stores, restaurants, tourism, and social services."

It's true—social services have been exceptionally affected by this crisis. And, at the same time, government officials have made it very clear how absolutely necessary our sector has been since the pandemic began. As other businesses closed or transitioned to working from home, social services staff across the province kept shelters for women open and continued running their residential programs for youth in care and people with disabilities. They found new ways to support struggling families and opened up spaces to care for the children of other essential workers.

Thousands of social service workers combined flexibility, creativity, and compassion to make sure that no one was left behind. Our sector leaders found ways to keep their organizations operating, making tough decisions in a time of incredible uncertainty in order to provide

guidance and security to their staff and clients. As the discussion paper notes, the COVID-19 pandemic helped make clear the fact that ‘front-line’ workers are not just on the front lines of health care; that category also includes “the thousands of other essential workers who have kept BC moving in challenging times.”

As such, rebuilding our economy must include investments in all of those “essential” and front-line sectors. BC’s recovery plan must strengthen the services and supports that people need the most when they are going through hard times. It should now be very clear that community social services are just as essential to our province as health care and education—two sectors explicitly mentioned in the list of priorities within the discussion paper.

One of the messages that The Federation has been using for many, many years describes our sector as one of three legs of a stool. This metaphor helps us make the point that without a stable social care sector, the other two legs—health and education—aren’t able to keep our province strong and steady. All three are all intricately inter-related. Strengthening and improving BC’s social services sector needs to be just as important as strengthening our health care system and improving education.

1. Strengthening and improving our social care system

Community social services are absolutely essential to the health, wellbeing, and quality of life of British Columbians. A sector that has been historically ignored and underfunded—and often the first in line when there are funding cuts—accomplished remarkable things over the past few months in impossible circumstances.

As our province begins to rebuild and invests in an economic recovery, strengthening and sustaining BC’s social care system will go a long way to make sure that we’re prepared for future emergencies. We make sure that people can always get the care and support they need—including mental-health services, food security, employment assistance—in times of crisis or not. This government clearly understands that healthy, supported communities make good economic sense. But healthy, supported communities are not possible without a strong and sustainable community social services sector.

2. Improving the quality of life in British Columbia

The people that our entire province has been relying on most are some of the lowest-paid people in BC. Many folks in the social services sector earn barely more than minimum wage. And, like those in retail and service sectors, they often have to work in more than one setting to make ends meet.

Investments in childcare and housing are certainly priorities. These are areas that have been neglected for too long and we are very glad to see time and money and effort being put towards these issues. But investments in other sections of the social safety net—substance use treatment, services for women fleeing violence, community inclusion for people with disabilities, supports for young people in care—are also a priority.

“The pandemic has exposed underlying gaps in our economy and society. We all now better appreciate the importance of workplace safety, strong public services, and our collective responsibility to take care of each other.” Addressing these gaps in our social care system will not just create jobs; it will also improve life both for vulnerable people across the province and for the thousands of those who work in our sector caring for those vulnerable people.

3. Improving work prospects and job opportunities

The discussion paper affirms that “reconciliation and clean growth will be at the heart of our recovery” (p. 9). The Federation’s commitment to reconciliation and resurgence means raising awareness of, and making recommendations to address, the structural inequity that exists in Canada and BC. Indigenous people and communities (both urban and land-based) faced daunting systemic inequity and steep social barriers prior to the pandemic. Rebuilding our province must not unfairly affect Indigenous peoples in any way.

There are a number of important things that need to be done as part of BC’s economic recovery and reconciliation is a part of each and every one. The simple truth is that you can’t be in favour of reconciliation and ignore a procurement system that is biased against Indigenous organizations. You can’t be in favour of reconciliation and allow inequitable wage structures that make it impossible to hire Indigenous staff for community-based programs. Addressing these kinds of systemic barriers is a big part of what reconciliation looks like. Our Indigenous friends, colleagues, and community members deserve action not just words.

4. Our concerns and needs

While this crisis has demonstrated the importance of a strong social care system, it has also laid bare some of the gaps in the system that still exist. The fact that social services have been more urgently needed than ever does not mean the inequities and barriers that challenge our sector have magically disappeared. In many ways, our province’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a shining example of how to handle a crisis. But BC’s social services sector has been in crisis for decades.

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. In spite of all these barriers and risks, BC's social services sector accomplished remarkable things over the past few months in unprecedented conditions. But issues related to wage gaps, funding structures, and procurement continue to cause stress and, if not addressed, could weaken this essential sector at a time when it is most needed.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent the strength and potential of BC's social services sector but it has also exposed the frailty and vulnerability of this essential sector in ways that are hard to ignore. As you consider the goals and priorities for this recovery, we urge you to (1) ensure reconciliation is truly and structurally at the heart of this recovery and to (2) include BC's community social services sector as a key partner in achieving those goals.

Thank you,

Rick FitzZaland, Executive Director
The Federation of Community Social Services of BC