



Select Standing Committee Submission

The Federation of Community Social Services of BC

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in 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 140 community-based social services organizations serving more than 250 communities across BC both on and off recognized First Nations territories. Our member organizations span the entire province and offer a broad range of services and programs that support BC's families, people living with physical and mental challenges, vulnerable children, youth, and seniors, new immigrants, people living with addictions or mental health issues, those living in poverty, and much more.

I would like to begin today by acknowledging the context in which we find ourselves during these consultations. The provincial state of emergency regarding the COVID-19 pandemic has been extended. BC has an essential services order in place that includes the work of community social services. Temporary pandemic pay has also been announced for the social services (among others) that have remained open and continued to support the people of BC through these unprecedented times.

I also want to commend this government for having the vision and resolve to create the Community Social Services Sector Roundtable chaired by Honourable Minister Shane Simpson. Having a truly collaborative cross-sector initiative active and engaged throughout this pandemic was invaluable. I want to thank and acknowledge our government colleagues and sector partners for creating the Roundtable with us and for continuing to show up over the past few very difficult months.

But the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. There is still a lot of work to do before the state of emergency can be lifted and there will still be a lot of work to do after that. I believe we are headed in the right direction. But the goals and priorities this government has set will require significant changes to the underlying systems, structures, and mechanisms within each and every government ministry.

This work will be especially difficult in the months ahead and hard decisions will have to be made. But the community social services sector continues to be a willing partner and is ready to help rebuild our province. So as you consider the goals and priorities for this government, we urge you to think carefully about the role BC's community social services sector needs to play in achieving those goals.

Community Social Services in British Columbia

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 programs 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 mean 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. 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 a vital part of the system of care provided by various 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 unique entities with their own organizational structures, bylaws, histories, and cultures. Some are 100% contracted-based, some rely wholly on fundraising, some are private companies.

Our sector addresses issues that many people simply want to ignore or deny. We care for those who need care and advocate on behalf of vulnerable populations 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 misunderstood, neglected, and underfunded for decades.

The Strength of the Community Social Services Sector

When the COVID-19 pandemic is over, we are going to look back at this moment and we are going to remember several important things. We're going to remember that our province handled this unprecedented crisis more deftly than many other jurisdictions. We're going to remember the dedicated health care workers who isolated themselves from their families so they could care for the sick. And we're going to remember the remarkable job that social services workers did in these unbelievable circumstances.

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 in spite of the risks. They rarely had the support or guidelines that were needed but they showed up and did what was needed because that is what this sector has always done.

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 and made tough decisions in a time of incredible uncertainty in order to provide guidance and security to their staff and clients.

There should be no doubt in your mind that BC's community social services are absolutely essential. 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. This sector is strong and resilient and incredibly competent and it deserves to be treated as such.

This committee has the ability to make the work of BC's community social services sector easier and more efficient. You can help make this sector—a sector full of essential programs, services, and staff—stronger and more sustainable in the future. Doing so is both necessary and perhaps more possible than ever before. For the first time in a long time, I feel like the provincial government is a true partner in the work we are doing—at both the political and bureaucratic levels. I also believe that the government now sees this sector as a true partner as well. And I sincerely hope that the decisions made in the next budget reflect how things have changed. Because as strong as this sector is, we also find ourselves in a very vulnerable and precarious situation.

The Vulnerability of the Community Social Services Sector

The other thing we are going to remember when this pandemic is over is how vulnerable and frail BC's social services sector is at the moment. 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. And the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the frailty and vulnerability of this essential sector in ways that are hard to ignore.

A number of the issues that The Federation has been talking about for years—procurement practices, pay inequity, health and safety—have been put in sharp focus. Some of the lowest-paid staff in the sector are the ones that our entire province has been relying on the most.

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 folks often work in more than one setting just to make ends meet. 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. Recognizing these contributions is important. Learning from them is absolutely vital.

Our province needs to do things differently. That fact should be eminently clear. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the professional, competent, and committed social service workers across BC deserve to be compensated fairly and at the level of equally qualified workers in other sectors. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that procurement practices that favour low-wage multinationals and penalize community-based organizations need to be addressed.

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. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown exactly how essential these services and supports are at the same time as it highlighted many problems that urgently need to be addressed. As our province prepares to rebuild, I sincerely hope you understand this is a more precarious and fragile position than BC's social services have ever been in before.

What is Needed

In February, for the first time that I can recall, a BC Finance Minister made specific mention of the community-based social service workers in a provincial budget speech. Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, BC's Provincial Health Officer explicitly called on our sector 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 are not made even more vulnerable by this public health crisis.

While this crisis has demonstrated the importance of a strong social care system, it has also laid bare some of the biggest gaps in the system. The fact that we are urgently needed does not mean the inequities and barriers that challenge our sector have magically disappeared.

1. Reconciliation-Informed Changes

There are a number of things that need to be done to strengthen and support BC's social services sector 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 systemic barriers is a big part of what reconciliation looks like. Our Indigenous friends, colleagues, and community members deserve action not just words.

2. Support and Fund the Social Services Sector Roundtable

Many of the other things that need to be done are already in the works. The items and issues in front of the Social Services Sector Roundtable are some of the things that most urgently

need to be addressed. We urge this government to fully support and fund the roundtable and its important work around procurement, pay equity, health and safety, and human resources. We are already seeing the results of certain initiatives related to health and safety which prove that there are clear benefits to leveraging our insight, experience, and understanding. I urge you to ensure that this important piece of work is fully supported funded so that we can continue to make sure this government's good intentions actually have their intended impact.

3. Trust and Collaboration

The current relationship between the social services sector and the government is stronger and more collaborative than it has been in a very long time. 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.

That is because too often decisions about us have been made without us. For decades, the social services sector has been kept at arm's length (at best) or completely ignored and left in the dark (at worst). But that relationship is changing and it is truly inspiring. For perhaps the first time, it feels like we are working with friends and partners. There is trust and respect and collaboration. The next step in this relationship is to extend that trust and respect down to the service delivery level.

We understand why different ministries exist. But those ministries don't always understand that on the ground and in communities, silos and segmentation and the resulting lack of coordination is hindering this government's commitment to its people. Improving service delivery—checking the biggest box on this government's to-do list—has to allow for better integration and organization at the community level.

That will require the government to extend that trust and respect a little further. It will require the collaborative development of new funding and procurement strategies that respect the competence and experience of our sector. We all want what is best for the people of BC. So trust us to do the jobs you have given to us.

Conclusion

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.

This government has proven that it knows how to do what needs to be done—that it's possible to make change where and when change is needed.

It is absolutely possible to rebuild our province and it is absolutely possible to fix these problems and repair BC's social services sector. 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. Commitments and funding to address homelessness and substance use and to support women fleeing violence are all steps in the right direction and give us hope for the future.

We know that 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. But we also need you to know that fully supporting and collaborating with BC's community social services sector is the only way those things are going to happen. Use our knowledge and experience. Invite us to your tables. Let us help you ensure that funding decisions and policy development are done in a way that respects and supports the organizations that are delivering those services and living out those policies—big or small, urban or rural, Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

There remains a lot of work to do but we are fully committed to working with our government colleagues in order to achieve lasting, positive change. We 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.

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