



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, children in care, youth, families, seniors, immigrants, people living with addictions or mental health issues, those living in poverty, those seeking employment, and much more.

Before I speak about our priorities, and recommendations for the next provincial budget, I would like to acknowledge the context in which we find ourselves during these consultations.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Yes, our province is re-opening and the government is rolling out its economic recovery plan but the threat of COVID-19 is still in our communities. And on top of the threat to our physical health, the pandemic has also pushed our mental health crisis to a breaking point. These crises, compounded by the overlapping and ongoing overdose crisis, mean we still have a lot of work to do.

I want to commend this government for its continued support of the Community Social Services Sector Roundtable chaired by Honourable Minister Nicholas Simons. Throughout the pandemic, this collaborative cross-sector initiative has been an invaluable mechanism for communicating and problem-solving. It has helped us to support our member organizations so they could continue to deliver essential services in their communities. 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 18 very difficult months.

I also want to thank this government and the Premier for including myself, as a representative of BC's community social services sector, on his Economic Recovery Task Force. We are one of two social service organizations at the table drawing attention to the way the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing issues that BC's community social services have been facing. And it has allowed us to help the government and other business-focused organizations around the table to understand the importance of our sector when it comes to the economic recovery of our province.

And the importance of this sector is what I urge this committee to consider as you make recommendations for the next provincial budget. I believe we are headed in the right direction. But the goals and priorities this government has set will require significant investments and changes to the underlying systems, structures, and mechanisms within each ministry.

About Community Social Services in British Columbia

Many of the social services that the provincial government provides to the people of BC are actually done through contracts with community 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 people struggling with mental health issues, for newcomers to BC, and for older adults. This is what I mean when I speak about community social services. And given the decisions this committee has to make, you must understand the unique and precarious space the community social services sector occupies.

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, the Ministry of Health, 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.

Our sector has to abide by procurement regulations that are often intended for those building physical infrastructures such as bridges and roads rather than those building social ‘infrastructure’ like family support programs, substance use services, or transition houses for women fleeing abuse. Our sector addresses issues that many people simply ignore or deny. We care for those who need care and advocate for systemic change so that we might leave the world better than we found it. Unfortunately, our work and these efforts are poorly understood.

The Strength of BC’s Community Social Services Sector

After the past 18 months, there should be no doubt in your mind that BC’s community social services are essential to the economic and social prosperity of this province. This sector was specifically recognized by BC’s Finance Minister in last year’s budget speech. As other businesses closed or transitioned to remote work, BC’s Provincial Health Officer explicitly called on us to keep doing what we have been doing for years—showing up and caring for our clients, supporting those in crisis, and ensuring that services were there for those that needed them.

A sector that has been historically ignored and underfunded—and often the first in line when budget cuts have been made in the past—accomplished remarkable things in impossible circumstances. Thousands of social service workers kept open shelters for women and residential programs for youth in care and people with disabilities. 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.

They combined flexibility, creativity, and compassion and found new ways to support families and immigrants. They opened up spaces to care for the children of other essential workers despite the risks. They rarely had the support or information that was needed, but they did what they have been doing for years—caring, supporting, helping, showing up.

This committee can make their work easier and more efficient. You can help make BC's community social services sector—a sector full of essential programs, services, and staff—stronger and more sustainable by investing in those programs and services. Doing so is both necessary and perhaps more important than ever before. Because as strong as this sector is, we also find ourselves in a very vulnerable and precarious situation.

The Frailty of BC's Community Social Services Sector

Unfortunately, British Columbia, like all provinces, devotes a pathetically small amount of money to social services. We have for decades. And the past 18 months have exposed the frailty of this essential sector in ways that are hard to ignore. Many of the issues that The Federation has been talking about and bringing to this committee for years (procurement practices, wage inequity, reconciliation) have been put into sharp focus. Some of the lowest-paid staff in the sector are the ones that our entire province has been relying on the most during this global pandemic.

We are an essential part of BC's system of care, delivering programs and services funded by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (among others). But ours is a sector where losing one contract means agencies are faced with having to close their doors for good. 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 at multiple locations just to make ends meet.

Professional, competent, and committed social service workers deserve to be compensated fairly and at the level of equally qualified workers in other sectors. Procurement practices that favour low-wage contracts and penalize knowledgeable and community-based organizations need to be addressed and corrected. Organizations that have been delivering services for decades should be trusted with more than precarious and impractical year-to-year contracts.

The truth is that as a result of decades of underfunding and neglect, our province's social care system is like a house on a shifting foundation. It is unstable and fragile; it does the job but it could do that job so much better. Investments from last year's provincial budget have begun some initial important and long-awaited improvements, but the pandemic has shown both how essential our sector is and how many problems urgently need to be addressed.

What is Needed

Many of the people and demographics that our sector serves are what the government and the media often refer to as “vulnerable” groups or populations—low-income families, people with disabilities, kids in care, seniors, people struggling with their mental health. But the language of “vulnerability” is a misnomer.

In truth, “vulnerable” groups or populations are simply those who have been left out of policies and practices that primarily cater to the dominant groups and thus have no choice but to fend for themselves. Their vulnerability is a symptom of colonialism, racism, bureaucracy, and stigma. It is our fault they are vulnerable and it is our duty to right those wrongs and address that inequity.

So what is needed? Invest in righting those wrongs. Address that inequality. Invest in strengthening our province’s social care system and social safety net. Bring those children, families, adults, and seniors out from the shadow of neglect. People should not have to fall deeper into crisis in order to qualify for services. Children should not have to travel across the province for the treatment they need. We need to do better.

Our overall priorities for the next provincial budget can be summarized by the three following recommendations.

1. Investments in a Strong and Sustainable Social Services Sector

I urge this government to increase its support and investment in BC’s community social services sector. We are an invaluable part of this province’s system of care and we deliver many of the services that this government is responsible for and takes credit for in media releases and on the election trail.

Given how essential our sector is to the health, safety, and wellbeing of the children, families, adults, and seniors of BC, this government should fund as many community social service sector positions as it does government positions and at equivalent rates. Administration costs should be covered in all contracts. Downstream dollars should be matched with upstream prevention and early intervention investments. After decades of cuts and underfunding, our programs require an across-the-board 5% increase in funding to their core operating costs, sector-wide—it can be done and it would have a profound impact.

Our staff, like other front-line workers, have been called heroes over the past year and a half. And yes, they have absolutely done extraordinary things in challenging circumstances. But simply calling them heroes is a symbolic reward where a structural one is needed—it’s a rhetorical sleight of hand that justifies their risks and sacrifices while preventing others from having to internalize how much they benefit from those sacrifices.

So rather than simply calling them heroes, consider that many community social service workers may not have had a choice but to show up for work in-person throughout the pandemic. Think of what the past 18 months would have been like without mental health counsellors, day-cares, family resource programs, employment services, or food banks. And then ensure the next BC budget includes the kind of investment we should have received years ago. Because it's time our staff and organizations are fairly compensated for the vital and challenging work that they do 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

2. Investments in Structural Reconciliation-Informed Changes

The Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action were released in 2015. Over half a decade ago, provincial governments like ours were directed to (among other things) fully implement

Jordan's Principle, develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Indigenous families, ensure that social workers are properly educated about the history and impacts of residential schools, and provide adequate resources to keep Indigenous families together regardless of where they reside. Not acting on those calls perpetuates the racism that allowed the residential school system to exist until as recently as 1996.

Indigenous children face far more disadvantages than non-Indigenous children and experience worse outcomes; that needs to be addressed. Resource extraction projects continue to be prioritized over the rights and jurisdiction of Indigenous communities and the safety of Indigenous community members; that needs to change. There is a severe lack of supports for the Indigenous families, women and children affected by violence; that needs to be remedied.

There is a lot of energy focused on the work of anti-racism right now and an array of calls to action available. At this point, inaction is a willful choice. This committee may not be responsible for the racist laws and policies and systems that exist in this province, but you have a responsibility to change them.

Because the simple truth is that this government can't be in favour of reconciliation and ignore a procurement system that is biased against Indigenous organizations. You can't claim to be pursuing reconciliation while allowing inequitable wage structures that make it impossible to hire Indigenous staff in community-based programs. There are many things that need to be done to strengthen BC's social services sector and reconciliation plays a part in every one.

3. Mental Health Focused Investments

A growing mental health crisis has been exacerbated by the overlapping COVID-19 pandemic and opioid epidemic and now demands significant action and investment—both to serve the general public and to support BC's increasingly burnt-out frontline social services workers. Existing crisis lines and counselling programs are stretched to the breaking point.

Increased investments over the past year have been very much welcome and are long overdue. And while apps and online resources have served as a stop-gap, new spending on mental health supports will be required to help young people, struggling mothers, burnt-out frontline workers, and everyone else. BC needs more and new services and supports that are accessible, dependable, and trauma-informed.

And these investments need to focus on community-based approaches rather than existing institutional and colonial models. There are networks of services that are based on community relationships—some represented by The Federation, others organized by Indigenous-led organizations. Where we have seen successes is in these relationship-based services and models. In contrast, institutional, colonial systems and approaches have failed and will continue to fail.

Conclusion

The world is changing faster than we may have been prepared for and in order for this government to deliver on its promises, drastic and brave investments in our social care system will be needed. Our children, parents, families, seniors, and communities will depend on it. The good news is that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven that this government knows how to make substantial, meaningful change where and when change is needed.

Yes, there remains a lot of work to do but we are fully committed to working with our government colleagues to achieve lasting, positive change. 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.

Every single ministry that is connected 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. Our insight, experience, and understanding are necessary if the government wants important decisions and policy changes to actually have their intended impact and desired effect.

So as you consider the future of this province and goals and priorities for this government, I urge you to think carefully about the role BC's community social services sector needs to play in achieving those goals and realizing that future. Because 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 sincerely hope that the decisions made in the next budget reflect that change and reflect how important our work is to the province of British Columbia.

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