

Time limited income assistance

Just how little income can a family in BC live on?

For families on income assistance this question is a crisis, and one that will become much worse in April 2004, less than four months away, when the Liberal government's law of time limited income assistance takes effect.

By now most people are aware that single persons with "employables" status and "employable" couples both of whom have received benefits for the past two years will be cut off benefits completely. The penalties for families have been less well publicized. Single parents will have their benefits cut by \$100 per month, and two parent families by \$200 per month.

Where will this leave parents in their efforts to feed their children? When the Liberals came to power in May 2001 a single parent received a support allowance of \$376 per month and a two parent family received a support allowance of \$401 per month. The shelter allowance, \$520 for 2 people, \$610 for 3 people, \$650 for 4 people . . ., was never enough to cover rent, phone and utilities. Almost all families spent part of their support allowance for shelter, and even with the federal and provincial child support programs there was not enough to cover food, clothing, school, transportation, medical, and other expenses.

The first response of the Liberal government to this was in April 2002 when they cut benefits for families:

- the single parent support allowance was cut by \$51 per month,
- the \$100 per month exemption for family maintenance payments was eliminated, and
- the \$200 per month exemption for earned income was eliminated.

Then, in July 2002 the government cut shelter allowances: by \$55 per month for a family of three, and by \$60, \$75, \$120 per month for families of 4, 5, and 6 persons.

Some families, such as single parent families who received family maintenance and had earned income, saw their monthly family budget of \$1,400, including child benefit programs, fall by over \$350. The further cuts of \$100 or \$200 per month that will take affect in April raise the question of just how little a family in BC can live on. Recipients would state that income assistance was never adequate.

The Dietitians of Canada would agree. Their report of October 2002, The Cost of Living In BC, concludes that a single parent family of three is currently \$27 short of being able to afford their rent and an adequate diet. After April 2004 they will be \$127 short.

Currently in Victoria a single parent family with one child living on income assistance is \$19 short of being able to pay the rent on the average priced two bedroom apartment

(Canada and Mortgage Housing figures) and the food recommended by the Dietitians of Canada. They would have no income for other expenses such as hydro, heat, phone, clothing, transportation and so on. A two-parent family with two children, using information from the same sources, is currently short \$98 of paying rent and food alone each and every month. In April of 2004 these families will, respectively, be \$119 and \$298 short for food and shelter.

The government's response has been to state that there are many exemptions to the time limit and therefore not to worry about it. If this is the case, why has the government refused to provide the numbers of people who face the end or reduction of their benefits? The city councils of both Victoria and Vancouver requested this information, and have been ignored by Minister Coell. On November 6th, Vancouver City Council passed a resolution calling on the provincial government to rescind the legislation, and Victoria City Council will consider passing a similar resolution on December 11th.

Section 13(1)(h) of the Child, Family and Community Services Act states that a child needs protection "if the child's parent is unable or unwilling to care for the child". Caring for a child clearly requires the ability to provide food, clothing and shelter. While the blame is put upon the parents, clearly the children require protection from a Liberal government that in April will cut further the money that families need to feed their children.

This is the season of giving to food banks. They and the hungry citizens they serve need your donations. But where is the humanity or adequacy in offering a bag of grocery for families while we watch our government cut their income for each and every month by several hundreds of dollars? In September 2001, all but one or two of the Liberal MLA's voted for the April and July 2002 income assistance cuts and the two year time limit. Murray Coell, Jeff Bray, Sheila Orr, Ida Chong and the others have shown no pangs of conscience about the further hunger and hardship they will impose in April 2004. They claim to represent us and to be acting in our interest. Those that disagree should voice their opposition.

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