

# Its Time to Stop the Welfare Time Limit Policy

Since 2002, the BC government has announced many cuts to individuals and programs. The Welfare Time Limit Policy is the most radical. This rule denies income assistance to some people even if it means that they will be unable to meet their basic needs – just because their period of need lasted longer than the government would like. The time limit rule is unprecedented in Canada where the provision of welfare to people in need is considered a basic human right. The impact of this next round of welfare reform will truly create a New Era in BC. Starting April 1<sup>st</sup> we are all subjects of a radical social experiment.

## What's happening?

The Welfare Time Limit policy totally cuts some people off of welfare and reduces the welfare cheques for some parents. The rule limits “employable” people without children to only two years of social assistance during any five-year period. Once they hit the two-year limit, they will be completely off assistance. Employable people with children over three-years-old will not be cut off, but instead have their cheques reduced – single parents lose \$100 and two-parent families lose \$200.

## Why is this happening?

The government says it is supporting people by moving them – forcing them – from income assistance to work. However, the rule is clearly more punitive than helpful, and creates deeper poverty not greater independence. The Minister says he wants to end “the culture of welfare dependency”, although 80 percent of recipients are on welfare for under a year and leave voluntarily. The government has a goal of “caseload reduction” – each year the Ministry’s deputy minister receives performance bonus pay for successfully reducing caseloads. Forcing people off of welfare will mean success for the ministry, even if reduced caseloads mean increased poverty and hardship for individuals. Finally, and most importantly, the BC government’s welfare restructuring must result in reducing the operating budget of the Ministry of Human Resources by 30 percent. Expect the Ministry to announce success in achieving its (short-term) budget savings through these cuts to welfare benefits.

## What will the impacts be?

For *individuals* in need who are forced off of welfare the result will most likely be dire poverty. Individuals could become less “employable” as they lose not only their phone and their food budget, but also their home. As their poverty increases it will be harder for them to get out of poverty. Expect more people in BC to be homeless, hungry and in crisis. The Provincial government is creating a dangerous situation as they remove people from welfare during a period of economic slowdown, while also reducing employment incentive programs and community supports.

The reduced assistance to *families* is clearly not enough money to live on. What’s left after food and shelter are paid? A typical family of four (2 adults, 2 kids) would end up \$217 in the hole every month and a single parent with two kids, would end up \$50 in debt every month after paying for food and shelter alone – with no money to purchase other necessities such as clothing, transportation, telephone, personal hygiene items, etc. The policy clearly puts children at risk. (*Based on the Dietitians of Canada’s “The Cost of Eating in BC: Low-income families are more desperate than ever.” 2003*).

Increased demand on reduced *Community Services*. With cheques reduced, families unable to pay the rent and feed the kids will be seeking help from community services that are also being cut by the Provincial government. As such, the services set up to help families in crisis may be unable to help. Also, there is no agency that can provide income to people in need – that’s what the Ministry is responsible for. That’s why we pay taxes!

### **What about the “exemptions”?**

In the face of mounting criticism by mainstream society, the Ministry has tried to soften the Time-Limit Rule by increasing the number of reasons that will exempt recipients from the harsh penalties. However, most of these “exemptions” are only temporary and simply delay the two-year rule. The result of these temporary exemptions is that the impact of the cuts will be less immediate, more spread out over time, and less noticeable to the public and critics. It is expected that there will be many recipients who cannot function in the workplace but whose social disabilities do not fit into the Ministry’s categories of exemptions. Most important, these “exemptions” are simply window dressing on a truly ugly and unethical policy that should apply to no one. Just because the Minister created twenty-two exemptions to an unethical policy does not make the policy more ethical or just.

### **How many people will be affected by the time-limit policy?**

There has been ongoing speculation as to how many people will be affected by this policy, a discussion that distracts attention from the actual policy. The debate as to how many people will lose their benefits on April 1, 2004 ignores the critical fact that the number of people affected by the time limit will continue to increase after this date. With each passing month, more and more people will reach their two-year time limit. It remains wrong to completely deny assistance to even one person in need without regard to their individual circumstances. Regardless of the numbers, the complete denial of social assistance to a person in need most probably is a violation of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which safeguards the inherent worth and dignity of each of us.

### **What should happen now?**

The Provincial government should repeal the two-year time limit rule. It violates basic human rights and abandons the most vulnerable people. It is an inhumane law, inappropriate for any British Columbian. While this law is the most dramatic, it is not the only punitive ruling introduced by the Provincial government since 2002. The Province needs to engage the public, including people living in poverty, in creating a progressive welfare agenda that takes care of those in need, that respects human rights, and reduces poverty. We need a Ministry that reduces poverty, not welfare.

**Sources:** For more information on the Time Limit Policy and poverty in BC, go to [www.vipirg.ca](http://www.vipirg.ca). Sources of information for this handout came from; Canadian Centre on Policy Alternatives (CCPA BC), Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC), BC Association of Social Workers (BCASW), the Poverty and Human Rights Project, the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre (BC PIAC), Dietitians of Canada-BC Region, BC Ministry of Human Resources.

**VIPIRG** *The Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group is a student-led non profit group dedicated to research, education and action on social and environmental issues.*