

Here's what putting family first entails ^[1]

Premier Clark needs to understand what poverty does to children, and take steps to correct B.C.'s record

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EXCERPTS.

Dear Premier Clark, Congratulations on your new job. It's wonderful that your new government will be "putting families first." And we were heartened to hear you say on the night of your election victory that fighting poverty will be among your top priorities.

...

But what more does "putting families first" require? We offer the following recommendations for a bold child and family agenda:

- Recognize the toxic role poverty plays in undermining healthy childhood development, and adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with legislated targets and timelines, and annual public reporting on progress.
- Create a provincial non-profit child care system that offers high quality, affordable and accessible care for all families. This is a vital employment support, and necessary to enhance child development. Parents pay punishingly high fees, there are too few spaces, and early childhood teachers are underpaid.
- Encourage employers in both the public and private sectors to pay living family wages, that is, wages that provide a basic level of economic security (calculated annually by our organizations).

No parent should be required to work so many hours that he or she is deprived of time for parenting, but that is what happens when wages are so low they must work multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

- Many important government subsidies and benefits have income thresholds that are much too low, and are clawed back so quickly that modest-income families face some of the highest marginal tax rates in the province. For example, many modest-income families (despite struggling with a bare-bones budget) do not qualify for the low-income carbon tax credit, the sales tax credit, the rental assistance program, MSP premium assistance, or provincial child care subsidies. This can be rectified with smart fiscal policy.

Rather than wasting precious public resources on expensive tax cuts (that benefit the rich as well as the poor), focus your efforts on those families struggling to make ends meet. You have begun to recognize this reality when you rightly stated, "Government needs to start thinking more holistically about all of these costs."

- Reform British Columbia's income assistance policies to better support parents and their children's healthy development. It is time to raise inadequate shelter and support rates, index them to inflation, and restore earnings and child support exemptions. Revise the rates for parents/ grandparents with children with disabilities to better reflect their extra needs.
- Increase government's efforts to end homelessness, and increase the availability of safe and affordable housing for low-income families. As a province, we need to return to the historic practice of bringing onstream 2,000 new units of social housing a year. If we do, we can end homelessness in our wealthy province.
- Work with the federal government to achieve enhanced parental leave through the Employment Insurance system.
- Ensure B.C.'s public schools have sufficient funding to deliver on their promise of equitable opportunity for all children, regardless of ability or income level. Necessary supports for children with special needs should not be so scarce.
- Ensure the Ministry of Children and Family Development has sufficient funding to carry out its child protection mandate with integrity, based on high standards of practice. Improve supports for youth in care as they transition to adulthood.
- After B.C.'s work-start age was lowered to 12 years old, work-related injury claims for 12-to 14-year-old children increased tenfold. Raise the work-start age back up to 15 and strengthen protections.

You have also emphasized the importance of job creation. This too is vital.

The latest Statistics Canada numbers report a B.C. unemployment rate of 8.8 per cent (distressingly high, and above any province west of the Maritimes). This should tell us that an economic strategy premised on tax cuts doesn't work. We need to be more creative.

We appreciate your commitment to applying a family impact lens to all cabinet decisions. We wish you good luck and great speed.

Sincerely,

Adrienne Montani, Provincial Coordinator, First Call: B.C. Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

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