

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition Election Questions

BC Green Party response, April 15 2017

Will you implement a poverty reduction plan for BC with legislated targets and timelines?

The B.C. Green Party is committed to reducing our persistently high rates of poverty and will implement a poverty reduction plan. Reducing poverty is one of our central priorities and we will act on this issue immediately upon forming Government. We will determine the most appropriate benchmarks for progress in consultation with expert groups. We will work collaboratively with anti-poverty groups to support their work and determine best practices. A B.C. Green Government will take action on multiple fronts to reduce poverty and enable people to escape the poverty trap, detailed in the following answers.

Providing adequate and accessible income support for the non-employed:

A B.C. Green government will take immediate steps to begin the transition to liveable incomes with an increase in all income assistance rates, including in the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) and Expected to Work categories. Rates will increase by 10% effective October 1, 2017, and rise to 50% above the current level on April 1, 2020. This increase will be supplemented by other programming to support those on assistance programs.

Under this increase, a single person on income assistance will receive \$671/month as of this October, up from the current rate of \$610/month. By April 2020, they will receive \$915/month. An individual with a PWD designation will receive \$1,136/month as of this October, up from the current rate of \$1,033/month. By April 2020, they will receive \$1,549/month.

We will also provide youth ages 18-24 transitioning out of foster care with a basic income support between \$15,000-\$20,000 per year.

We will review existing assistance programs to ensure that they are efficient, effective and fair; and, that financial disincentives to work are avoided.

In addition to raising social assistance rates, we will also design a basic income pilot project that will test its ability to reduce poverty, and improve health, housing and employment outcomes. We believe that basic income has the potential help us alleviate poverty and foster healthier families and more resilient communities. It could reduce the stigma and complexity of our current social assistance system, and provide people enough income security that they are able to escape the poverty trap and take care of their families. Basic income could enable a fundamental rethink of how we approach social assistance in BC and help us prepare for a future that holds significant economic change.

Improving earnings and working conditions for low-wage workers:

We recognize that an important part of income security is ensuring that those on minimum wage are earning enough. Growing levels of working poverty reflect the fact that the current minimum wage is inadequate to cover the rising cost of living.

In response, a B.C. Green government will establish an arm's-length fair wages commission, that will be tasked with establishing a new minimum wage and overseeing regular rate reviews. The commission will bring forward recommendations regarding strategies to address the discrepancy between minimum wages and liveable wages. Members of the commission will come from a cross section of society including business leaders, small business representatives, unions and the non-profit sector. The commission will make its first report by November 30, 2017.

We recognize that there is a significant gap between minimum wage and liveable income. This approach is designed to protect marginal jobs that would otherwise be at risk of being lost through immediately implementing a \$15/hour or higher minimum wage. The long-term intent of our plan to reduce working poverty and ensure liveable incomes is to implement a basic income program to fill the gap between minimum wage and a liveable wage. Basic income could enable people to respond proactively to the changes in the labour market, retrain for new professions, attend University or College, and take entrepreneurial risks. It could allow British Columbians dignity and autonomy while they navigate a changing world of work. That's why this is so important.

Addressing the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty:

In a society as rich as ours, it is shameful that our government allows persistently high levels of poverty to exist, particularly for multiple marginalized sectors of society.

In addition to significantly raising social assistance rates as detailed above, we will implement a basic income pilot project that will test its ability to reduce poverty, and improve health, housing and employment outcomes, particularly among marginalized groups. We support transitioning to liveable incomes for all British Columbians, and believe that basic income could be a key piece of this plan. By addressing income security through basic income we would restore dignity to the most vulnerable in society and give them a chance to rebuild their lives, rather than just be in survival mode.

A B.C. Green Government will also introduce a basic income support for youth aged 18 to 24, who are transitioning out of foster care. This will help these youth avoid the range of adverse outcomes they currently experience, including intergenerational poverty, criminal activity, substance abuse, lost educational opportunities, and homelessness. Research shows that establishing a basic support fund for these youth would actually save the Provincial Government \$165-\$201 million per year.

Implementing initiatives to end homelessness and the lack of affordable housing:

A B.C. Green government will introduce a comprehensive housing strategy that recognizes that the primary purpose of housing must be to provide homes first, and a means of investment second. We believe that every person has a right to reasonable accommodation and will enact policies to make this a reality.

We also recognize that anyone can become homeless in the current economic conditions. Homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter

circumstances and options may shift quite dramatically and with frequency. Experiences of homelessness are unique and each individual or family will have a story about their pathways into and out of homelessness.

We will invest heavily in affordable housing and rental housing and give breaks to those who are struggling to afford reasonable accommodation. A B.C. Green government will invest up to \$750 million per year in to support the construction of approximately 4,000 new units of affordable housing per year.

We will work with federal and local governments to make land available for the construction of affordable housing, and we will work with social housing agencies and federal and local governments to develop and implement a provincial housing plan to address deficiencies in the supply of affordable rental accommodation based on priority needs.

A B.C. Green government will lead a comprehensive rethink of zoning to ensure that it is consistent with government objectives such as the provision of affordable housing. Issues for consideration include densification, especially along transit corridors; revitalizing neighbourhoods surrounding schools; cultural and social amenities; and complete communities.

A B.C. Green government will also protect existing social housing and reduce operating costs by investing \$100 million per year in retrofits and renovations of older units. We will partner with First Nations, non-profit developers, cooperatives and the private sector to support planning and construction of low-income rental units, and we will introduce incentives for the construction of, and/or conversion of existing buildings for rental property.

Ensuring adequate protection for renters in the context of the tight rental market is also essential. A B.C. Green government will enhance the provisions of the Residential Tenancy Act to control rent increases, and to protect tenants from tenure termination that will result in the loss of affordable accommodation.

Providing universal publicly-funded child care:

The B.C. Greens Lifelong learning strategy recognizes that the cost of living has increased exponentially, while incomes have not. Parents and families are feeling the squeeze and need bolder solutions so they can raise their children without the stress of paying for costly childcare.

The BC Greens will re-establish Government responsibility to adequately educate children, combat child poverty and help children overcome educational disadvantages, through historic investments into early childhood education and childcare.

Our comprehensive program for early childhood education and childcare will provide:

- Up to 25 hours free early childhood education per week for three and four year olds;

- Free daycare for working parents with children under three;
- Up to \$500 per month for families with children under three and a stay at home parent.

Early childhood education funding will rise from \$495 million in 2017/18 to \$1.38 billion in 2020/21. The initial focus will be on publicly operated spaces for early childhood education/preschool for three to four year olds.

These investments will bring economic and social benefits for parents, and in particular women, from being able to more easily re-enter the workforce. They also invest in our future generations, giving our children the right start that they need in their lives.

Providing support for training and education:

We have an affordability crisis and an education gap in B.C. Due to chronic underfunding of our public education system. We need a bold plan so that British Columbians can feel secure about their futures.

Our public education system is chronically underfunded. This isn't just tough on kids and families, it also ignores that education is the best investment society can make.

A B.C. Green government will make historic investments into education at all stages of life to ensure all British Columbians receive the educational support they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

A B.C. Green government will significantly increase funding for public schools, beginning in 2017/18 at \$220 million and rising to \$1.46 billion in 2020/21, to allow schools and school districts to invest in every child and prepare students for the emerging economy, and to invest in innovation and technology. This is in addition to the \$330 million committed by the B.C. Liberal government to address the recent Supreme Court ruling on class size and composition.

We will also re-instate free adult basic education, reversing the BC Liberals' funding cut in 2014. Adults wanting to upgrade their high school courses in order to pursue post-secondary studies should not be burdened with tuition. This prevents adults who desire to train for jobs in the emerging economy and sectors that are experiencing job growth, like health care, from getting the qualifications they need to fill those jobs. These investments pay off in the long-run as more British Columbians are able to qualify for good-paying jobs.

A B.C. Green government will invest \$35 million in nutrition and physical activity programs to promote learning readiness and improve student health. This investment will enable all B.C. children to have the healthiest start possible so that they are best positioned to learn the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the emerging economy.

A B.C. Green government will review the funding model for the K-12 public education system with a view to ensuring equitable access for students. This will address targeting funding to public schools with the greatest need and increasing local autonomy regarding

funding priorities and distribution.

A B.C. Green government will implement needs-based grants for post-secondary students so that they can afford their tuition and cost of living.

A B.C. Green government will offer tax forgiveness of up to \$2,000 a year for up to five years to assist qualifying graduates to repay outstanding debt incurred for tuition fees.

- Reduced the burden of tuition fees for B.C. graduates.
- Greater access to education for economically disadvantaged students.
- A more positive start in life for graduates as full contributors to the economy.
- To enable students with existing loans to become debt free more quickly.

Promoting the health of all British Columbians:

The BC Greens believe the highest priority of government should be to promote the health and wellbeing of British Columbians. We recognize the interconnected nature of health and wellness, including the importance of socioeconomic factors. We will therefore take an integrative approach to ensure the health and wellbeing of British Columbians, through making primary care more accessible, improving access to other essential health services,

A B.C. Green Government will roll Medical Service Plan (MSP) premiums into the payroll tax and personal income tax to ensure that they are administered in a more equitable and progressive manner. Further initiatives for improving the health of British Columbians will be released as part of our healthcare platform shortly.

Do you have anything else you would like to add about your approach to poverty reduction in BC?

The B.C. Green Party is committed to creating a secure environment for people that ensures their health and essential needs are met without being stigmatized. This means addressing income security, food security, and affordable housing.

We must address the unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality in our province. We must ensure that no one - ever - falls so far behind that they cannot get back up again. Moreover, the social supports that were built for the 20th century need to be modernized for the 21st century. The safety net that was built for the old economy needs to be reinvented for the emerging economy.

If British Columbians are to be able to live happy and healthy lives in the 21st Century, we must eliminate the fear of uncertainty that is brought by income insecurity. As we design all of our income security programs, we will do so in a way that incentivizes the choice to work, while providing a solid floor to stand on that will enable people to escape the poverty trap and adapt to the 21st century economy.