


What We Heard --- About Poverty in B.C.



BRITISH
COLUMBIA



This report was produced on
the territory of the Lekwungen-
speaking peoples, the Songhees
and Esquimalt Nations.

**COPYRIGHT © 2018, PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.**

This material is owned by the Government of British Columbia and
protected by copyright law. It may not be reproduced or redistributed
without the prior written permission of the Province of British Columbia.

Contents

MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER	4
MESSAGE FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY	6
INTRODUCTION	8
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	10
CONSULTATION PROCESS OVERVIEW: ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE, WITH RESPECT	13
Engaging with Indigenous Communities	14
<i>First Nations Leadership Council</i>	14
<i>Remote First Nations and Indigenous Villages</i>	15
<i>First Nations Health Council</i>	15
<i>British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres</i>	15
<i>Métis Nation BC</i>	15
Community Meetings	15
Consultation Website	16
Meetings and Roundtables	16
Who We Heard From	18
KEY THEMES	19
Understanding the Key Themes	19
Housing and Homelessness	21
<i>Housing discrimination</i>	22
<i>Housing for people in need</i>	22
<i>Housing operating costs</i>	22
<i>Homelessness</i>	23

Supports for Children and Families	24
<i>Child Care</i>	24
<i>Child Protection</i>	24
<i>Lifting up children and youth in care</i>	25
Financial Security and Income Supports	26
<i>Fair treatment of people in need</i>	26
<i>Improving Income and Disability Assistance</i>	26
<i>Higher wages to match the growing cost of living</i>	27
Compassionate Care for Mental Health and Addictions	28
<i>Better access to mental health care</i>	28
Food Security	30
<i>Healthy food, healthy communities</i>	30
Access to Health Care	32
<i>Medical Expenses – a barrier to good health</i>	32
<i>Health services for people in poverty</i>	33
<i>Accessibility for rural and remote communities</i>	34
<i>Culturally appropriate care</i>	34
Education and Training	35
<i>Lower tuition and more experiential training</i>	35
Creating Good Jobs for People throughout B.C.	37
<i>Opening the door to good jobs for people in need</i>	37
<i>Employment Standards</i>	38
<i>Putting WorkBC to work for people</i>	39
Connecting the most vulnerable with the services they need	40
<i>Compassionate, personalized support</i>	41
Safe, Affordable Transportation	42
<i>Getting around isolation</i>	42

Ending Discrimination and Stigma _____	44
<i>Fostering social inclusion</i> _____	44
<i>Treating people with dignity and respect</i> _____	45
<i>Stopping discrimination</i> _____	46
Access to Justice _____	47
<i>Legal Aid</i> _____	48
CONCLUSION _____	49
APPENDIX 1: MINISTER’S ADVISORY FORUM MEMBERSHIP _____	50
APPENDIX 2: SCHEDULE OF COMMUNITY MEETINGS _____	51
APPENDIX 3: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AT COMMUNITY MEETINGS AND ROUNDTABLES _____	52
SUPPLEMENTAL REPORTS:	
First Nations Leadership Council Report – <i>Meetings with First Nations Leadership Council and First Nations Health Council</i>	
Métis Nation BC Report – <i>Métis Nation British Columbia Poverty Reduction Conversation: Regional Consultation – Winter 2018</i>	
BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres Report – <i>Indigenous Poverty Reduction Consultations: A Summary Report</i>	
Social Planning and Research Council Report – <i>Summary Report: Community Meetings on Poverty Reduction</i>	
Social Planning and Research Council Report – <i>Summary Report: Small Group Discussions</i>	
Letter from the Parliamentary Secretary for Gender Equity	
List of Policy Submissions	
List of Ideas Shared During the Consultation	



Message from the Minister

In July 2017 when our government took office, Premier John Horgan changed the name of the Ministry of Social Development to include Poverty Reduction. This was more than rhetorical it was a firm statement about our government's intention to effect real and positive change for the most marginalized people in our province.

For far too long, poverty was ignored, leaving too many people behind. That's a direction that doesn't reflect the values of the vast majority of British Columbians. Ours is a province that works best when all of us can share in its prosperity – when inequality is reduced, barriers are removed, and people are put first. This is our vision for B.C., and it's a commitment we took immediate action on.

We began by moving forward on B.C.'s first-ever poverty reduction strategy to address both the breadth and depth of poverty and to provide supports to those who need them most. Reducing poverty is about social justice. It's about creating a society that provides access to opportunity for everyone. Poverty reduction is also about creating shared prosperity in a rich and diverse province.

To make sure we heard from a broad range of British Columbians before starting on the strategy, we held extensive public consultations from October 30, 2017, until March 31, 2018. We spoke with people all over the province about their experiences with poverty, how it affects us as individuals and communities, what we can do to reduce it, and how we can put opportunities in front of people instead of barriers.

The response was overwhelming. Thousands of people shared their thoughts and ideas through in-person meetings or written submissions. We heard from people who live in poverty, who shared their personal experiences, their struggles, and the difficult choices they make each day. We heard clearly about the need to improve affordability throughout B.C., not just in urban centres. We heard the need to create opportunities to break the cycle of poverty. We heard about the need to promote social inclusion and to foster a culture of dignity and respect for marginalized people and groups. We heard about racism, colonialism and the need to take real action on reconciliation.

Out of respect for the distinct relationship and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, we held a robust consultation among First Nations and Métis communities. A long history of disregarding the rights of Indigenous peoples and their nations has resulted in disproportionately high rates of poverty in these communities. We are committed to making sure Indigenous voices, experiences, and solutions are a significant part of our strategy.

I want to thank everyone who participated in the consultation, particularly the people who are living in poverty now. I want to thank the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC), the First Nations Leadership Council, the First Nations Health Council, Métis Nation BC and the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres for helping to facilitate the consultation process.

In the report that follows, we share what we heard from British Columbians about their experiences with poverty and their ideas to make things better. This feedback will guide us as we introduce poverty reduction legislation this fall and develop our province's first-ever poverty reduction strategy.

The Honourable Shane Simpson
Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction



Message from the Parliamentary Secretary

Dear Minister Simpson,

I am pleased to provide you with an update on my work as the Parliamentary Secretary for Poverty Reduction. As part of my mandate, I attended meetings around the province to hear how people experience poverty in different communities and what ideas British Columbians have to address it.

Between October 2017 and March 2018, I participated in community consultations, roundtables and one-on-one meetings with local government officials; First Nations leaders; Indigenous, Métis and First Nations organizations; business groups; union members; service providers; community groups and advocates.

Many individuals and organizations discussed poverty and social conditions as a human rights issue and the need to recognize poverty reduction as a critical step toward building a better society for everyone.

I heard about both the social and economic value of reducing poverty. People recognized that by increasing opportunities to contribute to our communities, fostering social inclusion, and reducing inequality, everyone benefits. They spoke about the need to increase investment in public services, make life more affordable, and provide greater opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.

Affordable housing was the top concern in every community. I was told about the challenges people face finding a home and the high costs that are forcing people to make difficult choices each month – whether to pay the rent, buy food or pay for electricity or transportation.

People felt that, after 16 years of neglect, it was time to repair the social safety net. Problems once found only in large urban centres have reached into every community, leaving many people and local organizations struggling.

Many British Columbians are looking for help to address a wide range of issues, including mental health and addictions, child care, legal aid, affordable housing, skills training and advanced education in rural communities, and the need to make government services more accessible.

For too long, poverty didn't get the attention it needed. I am pleased to be part of a government committed to delivering British Columbia's first-ever poverty reduction strategy and look forward to continuing this important work with you.

Sincerely,

Mable Elmore
Parliamentary Secretary for Poverty Reduction



Introduction

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY ERODE SOCIETY. When our friends and neighbours can't afford to participate in the community, it is a loss for all of us. When people are struggling to afford the basics, it leaves us all poorer.

Equal societies are richer societies, with a greater sense of happiness and well-being. We all do better when everyone is included in our communities and our economy.

British Columbia is the only province in Canada without a poverty reduction strategy. We also have some of the highest rates of poverty in the country, especially for children and their families.

And for B.C. to say we have a truly inclusive and prosperous economy, that economy must, in turn, work better for more people in more parts of our province.

Reducing poverty is key to delivering on that prosperity for B.C. Our province is at its best when more people get the opportunity to reach their potential; when we lift people up instead of pushing them down; when we work together to make things better for everyone, rather than leaving people to fend for themselves.

Beyond making life better for all British Columbians, this approach is an investment in our province's future – helping build a healthier and more vibrant society where more people have the chance to contribute.

This is why, starting in fall of 2017, we reached out to people in every part of B.C. to learn more about how we could bring barriers down – reducing poverty and unlocking opportunity for everyone.

We started by appointing a 27-member Minister's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction to guide our efforts to gather and reflect stories about poverty, and ideas about how to address it, as well to advise government as we bring in our province's first ever poverty reduction strategy.

With the advisory forum's help, we engaged in a deep, province-wide consultation process aimed at asking British Columbians to share their experiences with poverty, their solutions, and their visions for a better, more inclusive province.

Between October 30, 2017, and March 31, 2018, government connected with people living in poverty and their friends, families and advocates, as well as community organizations, service providers, local governments, Indigenous communities, businesses, industry associations and unions.

Inclusion of people with lived experience is fundamental to any poverty reduction strategy. It was with this in mind that government made special efforts to ensure venues were accessible, people could afford to get to them, and that they could access child care and food on-site.

It's a sad reflection of the depth of poverty in B.C. that the cost of a bus ticket – or the cost of time not spent in a food-line – can make the difference between someone being made invisible or having their voice heard. That was why it was important to us to make sure our consultation process was low barrier and welcoming for people from all backgrounds and with all needs.

Tackling poverty is part of building a better British Columbia – a province where people have the chance to get the skills they need to succeed, access to good jobs and services they can count on, and a province committed to reconciliation.

Even as we began consultations, we recognized that people can't afford to wait for help when they are struggling today. That is why we took immediate action to raise social assistance rates, restore funding for transportation and improve earnings exemptions, while building housing and making child care more affordable.

We also cut Medical Services Plan in half, eliminated all bridge tolls, charted a path to a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, increased rental supplements for seniors and families, reduced the cost of prescription drugs for people on fixed incomes, and improved education and health services for everyone.

These are the first of many steps to a better province – a province where everyone has the opportunity to get ahead. There is still much further to go.

Our province is only as strong as the people who live and work here, and the communities we call home. We can only reach our full potential by including and valuing everyone.

Tackling poverty isn't just the right thing to do for people – it's good government.



Executive Summary

THIS REPORT REFLECTS THE THOUSANDS OF VOICES OF PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER B.C. WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE POVERTY REDUCTION CONSULTATION.

They brought forward a wide range of experiences, ideas, opinions, comments and suggestions about how we can reduce poverty, reduce barriers, and build a better B.C.

The consultation was designed to give people multiple opportunities to participate. People were encouraged to share their experiences with honesty and openness, and to share their ideas for improvement, without restraint. The intention of holding a broad public engagement process was to ensure that we heard a wide range of ideas, but most importantly, the process was designed to facilitate the participation of people living in poverty whose voices too often go unheard.

Throughout the consultation, it became clear that while every community and every individual has unique circumstances, there are also shared experiences of poverty. The dominant themes that emerged from the discussions underscore those shared experiences.

People shared their difficulties, but they also shared their hopes and dreams. They talked about what they could accomplish with the right services and supports. They spoke about how much they have to offer their communities, and their frustration at being left out and left behind.

Stigma and shame are leaving people isolated and without options. Racism, ableism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia and other forms of discrimination leave people of colour, Indigenous peoples, refugees and newcomers, people with health needs, people with disabilities, and others who experience systemic barriers, to face even more difficulties.

Affordability challenges, like housing, child care and the cost of food, energy and transportation are hurting B.C. families at every income level, but people living in poverty are suffering the greatest burden from these rising costs.

People with low incomes and complex needs struggle to get help because services are often unavailable, difficult to access, or hard to navigate. Those in rural, northern and remote communities often don't have access to the services they need quickly or close to home.

For those with disabilities, not having timely access to equipment like mobility, visual or hearing aids and other assistive devices, or access to accessible transportation leaves them isolated and unable to access services or explore opportunities.

Racism faced by people of colour, particularly Indigenous and Black people, creates an additional barrier in the experience of poverty. Finding affordable housing, accessing justice, and receiving timely and appropriate health care are just some of the challenges that systemic racism makes more difficult for racialized people.


People want increased income supports from government – but they also want the chance to build a different life. More than anything, people want opportunity and they want to be included. They want to be appreciated and celebrated. They want their children to grow up proud and empowered.

Finally, people spoke passionately about the basic rights associated with addressing poverty in B.C. – that for us to be the province we strive to be, all British Columbians should have the right to a decent, healthy and livable quality of life, consistent with global declarations on human rights.

The pages that follow express the passion, frustration and anger, as well as the ideas and suggestions for improvement that we heard throughout the process. The report summarizes the feedback we received from thousands of participants throughout B.C. Including; who participated, how the consultation was conducted, and the key themes that emerged.

There are several supplemental reports appended to the main report. Because of the far-reaching nature of the consultation process, there were multiple discussions that took place around the province. There was a full and robust consultation to ensure meaningful participation from Indigenous communities and leaders. The resulting reports from the First Nations Leadership Council, Métis Nation BC, and BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres are attached.

There were also 28 community meetings. A separate report sharing the feedback from those meetings is appended. There were 100 small-group discussions, also with a summary report. The appendices also include the complete list of written submissions received from stakeholders, as well as schedules of the meetings that took place around the province.



The opinions, ideas and solutions captured in this report are diverse, and represent the sincere reflections of the people who took the time to share them with us. They are the words of the thousands of British Columbians who have lived in poverty or who live and work with people who do. They are the words of the people and organizations who attended a community meeting, wrote a policy submission, phoned or emailed to join the conversation and shared their ideas about reducing poverty in B.C.

The many voices represented in this report will help guide government as the first poverty reduction strategy is developed in hopes of breaking the cycle of poverty affecting so many British Columbians.

Consultation Process Overview: Engaging with People, with Respect

BETWEEN OCTOBER 30, 2017, AND MARCH 31, 2018, the B.C. government conducted a comprehensive public engagement process to ask British Columbians how, as a province, we can tackle poverty and inequality.

As a first step, the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction appointed a 27-member Minister's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction, to provide insight and guidance throughout the consultation, and as the strategy is developed.

The goal was to ensure that we consulted widely, captured many voices and discovered the unique needs in different communities. It was important to engage people in rural and remote communities, as well as larger urban centres. We wanted to hear from local governments and community leaders, from service providers and advocates, from business and labour organizations, and from people experiencing systemic barriers to participation in their communities. We wanted to hear from people of colour, Indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ2S+ people, non-binary and transgender people, refugee and immigrant communities, and especially from those who are living in poverty today.

There was a dedicated engagement process with First Nations and Métis communities. We worked with the First Nations Leadership Council to engage directly with their leaders, as well as to ensure funds were provided to facilitate engagement in rural and remote Indigenous communities. Métis Nation BC held seven meetings. The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres held 27 meetings around the province, and the First Nations Health Council hosted a roundtable with the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. Reports from these sessions are available in the supplemental reports.

We held 28 public meetings throughout the province, hosted a website where people could contribute their thoughts, sponsored 100 small-group discussions for community organizations, and put out a call for submissions. You can read the full reports of the community meetings and the small group discussions, as well as find links to all the written submissions in the supplemental reports.

In addition, we met with local governments, businesses, labour groups, and community agencies, to discuss how poverty affects people and communities, and to give them an opportunity to present solutions. A schedule of these meetings is available in appendix 2.

We recognize the courage it took for many participants to reach out to government, especially while continuing to face discrimination and hardship. We appreciate everyone who took the time to share their experiences with us, especially those who are living in poverty.

ENGAGING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The Province is focused on building a true and lasting vision of reconciliation through a cross-government commitment to adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

The poverty reduction consultation was consistent with these principles, as the Province takes steps toward long-term transformation of B.C.'s relationship with Indigenous peoples.

In appointing the members to the Minister's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction, the B.C. government recognized the need for strong First Nations and Indigenous representation. The forum includes:

- Neil Belanger, Executive Director, BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society
- Natika Bock, Aboriginal Youth Housing Manager, Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Family and Community Services
- Cheryl Casimer, Political Executive, First Nations Summit and representative of the First Nations Leadership Council
- Rosanna McGregor, Executive Director, Cariboo Friendship Society
- Lissa Dawn Smith, Provincial Vice President, Métis Nation BC
- Leslie Varley, Executive Director, BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres

In consultation with the Minister's Forum on Poverty Reduction, the poverty reduction consultation included First Nations and Indigenous-specific engagement.

First Nations Leadership Council

Minister Shane Simpson held a roundtable discussion with the First Nations Leadership Council on February 16, 2018, to inform the poverty reduction strategy.

Remote First Nations and Indigenous Villages

During the First Nations Leadership Council meeting, it was recommended that the ministry provide financial resources to support remote villages to have community meetings. On behalf of the ministry, the Naut'sa mawt Tribal Council administered funding to support remote First Nations villages to hold community meetings.

First Nations Health Council

Minister Shane Simpson held a roundtable discussion with the First Nations Health Council on March 20, 2018, to inform the poverty reduction strategy.

British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres

With ministry support, the British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC) held 27 dedicated consultation sessions with Indigenous peoples around B.C. in 25 communities served by Aboriginal Friendship Centres.

Métis Nation BC

With ministry support, Métis Nation BC (MNBC) hosted seven dedicated consultation sessions with Métis people in B.C.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Facilitated by the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC), we held 28 public meetings throughout the province. To maximize participation of people living in poverty, each meeting began with a warm meal. Stipends and transportation supports were provided for anyone who self-identified as living in poverty, and child care was available so parents could freely join the conversation.

The community meetings were all structured around two questions:

1. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?
2. What would address these issues and help you and people out of poverty?

Each table had a facilitator and a scribe to record the discussion. Participants had ample time to discuss each question, and detailed notes were taken to capture all the ideas that were expressed.

CONSULTATION WEBSITE

The website – www.engage.gov.bc.ca/bcpovertyreduction – provided all the information about the engagement process. It included the schedule of community meetings, as well as a portal for submitting written policy papers and individual comments. This website hosts the complete record of policy submissions received during the consultation process.

MEETINGS AND ROUNDTABLES

A number of other meetings and roundtables were held throughout the consultation period, providing the opportunity to hear from specific community or stakeholder groups.

We sponsored 100 self-convening discussion groups to ensure that organizations and community groups with a unique constituency or perspective had an opportunity to share their feedback.

In addition, Minister Shane Simpson and Parliamentary Secretary Mable Elmore travelled to more than 30 communities, to meet with local government representatives, First Nations leaders, community leaders, service organizations, labour groups and chambers of commerce, to ensure diverse perspectives contributed to the discussion.

A full list of these meetings is available in appendix 2.

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

Engaging British Columbians

✔ IN COMMUNITIES



» **28 COMMUNITY MEETINGS**
*Community Meeting attendance: over **2500***

» **100 SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS LED BY COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**
*Number of Participants: **2786***



✔ WITH BC FIRST NATIONS

» **7 MÉTIS NATION BC CONSULTATIONS**
*Number of Participants: **166***

» **FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**

» **FIRST NATIONS HEALTH COUNCIL**

» **27 BC ASSOCIATION OF ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRES INDIGENOUS CONSULTATIONS**
*Number of Participants: **1439***

✔ BY SUBMISSION AND ONLINE



68
Stakeholder submissions
(Policy Briefs)



16,387
Website visits



1603
Online feedback



24 Telephone, mail and voicemail submissions

WHO WE HEARD FROM

➤ Community Meetings (28)

- ▶ Abbotsford
- ▶ Burnaby
- ▶ Campbell River
- ▶ Chilliwack
- ▶ Coquitlam
- ▶ Cranbrook
- ▶ Duncan
- ▶ Fort Nelson
- ▶ Fort St John
- ▶ Kamloops
- ▶ Kelowna
- ▶ Langley
- ▶ Maple Ridge
- ▶ Nanaimo
- ▶ Nelson
- ▶ North Vancouver
- ▶ Port Alberni
- ▶ Prince George
- ▶ Prince Rupert
- ▶ Richmond
- ▶ Quesnel
- ▶ Smithers
- ▶ Surrey
- ▶ Terrace
- ▶ Williams Lake
- ▶ Vancouver
- ▶ Victoria

- Minister's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction
- Stakeholder Organizations
- Minister's and Parliamentary Secretary Roundtables
 - ▶ Academics
 - ▶ Business
 - ▶ Community
- Broad range of Community Organizations
- Disability Community
- Feedback from Individuals
- Remote First Nations communities
- First Nations and Indigenous Organizations
 - ▶ First Nations Leadership Council
 - ▶ First Nations Health Council
 - ▶ Métis Nation BC
 - ▶ BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres
- Labour Unions
 - ▶ Canadian Labour Congress Winter School
 - ▶ Labour Councils
 - ▶ Union Locals
- Local Governments
 - ▶ First Nation Governments and Leaders
 - ▶ Municipal Governments
 - ▶ Regional Districts
 - ▶ Union of BC Municipalities

Key Themes

UNDERSTANDING THE KEY THEMES

These key themes were raised in every part of the province, representing the broad topics raised by stakeholders, as well as the community meetings, roundtables and discussions mentioned previously in this report.

B.C. is a prosperous province, but for too long too many people have been left out of sharing in that prosperity. Despite having the strongest economy in Canada, wages haven't kept up with costs, and many people are struggling to meet their basic needs.

While those who are living in poverty are as diverse as the province itself, there are a number of common themes regarding who falls into poverty and what keeps them there. Throughout the consultation, it became clear that poverty and discrimination are linked.

Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty as other people. Refugees and immigrants also experience high rates of poverty, as do people of colour, single parents, women, queer, non-binary, and transgender people.

People in these groups are also more likely to experience difficulties finding employment, housing and accessing the services they need.

This discrimination makes it more difficult to escape poverty.

What we heard is that poverty can't be separated from the context in which people experience it.

For many Indigenous peoples, the enduring impacts of colonialism, racism, the dispossession of traditional territories and, in particular, the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, are overlaid with the current experiences of poverty, homelessness, and mental health and addictions challenges.

For many people living with disabilities, ignorance and stigma about their capacities and capabilities compound with very real barriers – physical and social – to make it difficult for them to access opportunities.

Refugees and immigrants often experience racism, in addition to struggling to get credentials recognized, or overcoming language barriers. Combined, these factors leave them more vulnerable to poverty.

Women, regardless of their background, face a significant wage gap – one that is even larger for Indigenous women, trans women, and women of colour. This gap makes it harder for women to get ahead and stay ahead.

Women are also over-represented among single parents. The wage gap, higher housing and food costs, and child care costs leave many of these vulnerable families struggling to get by.

For these reasons, improving affordability can't be the only solution to poverty. We also need to create opportunity, promote social inclusion and take real action on reconciliation.

People of all backgrounds consistently identified the same challenges and the same solutions for breaking the cycle of poverty. These included the need for more affordable rental housing, increased supports for children and families, and greater income supports.

People talked about the need for better access to treatment for mental illness and addictions, more affordable access to healthy food, and improved supplemental health supports. They spoke about wanting the opportunity to access affordable education and training and better jobs, and the need for transportation to help them get there. Above all, they talked about wanting to be treated with dignity and respect.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

“Everyone needs shelter for stability. Dignified housing that is clean, secure and affordable. Co-ops, supportive housing, social housing and affordable housing are necessary in combination. In all markets, not just Vancouver.”

Affordable housing was overwhelmingly the top issue that came up during the consultation. It was named the most pressing issue for people living in poverty by people and organizations throughout British Columbia. Businesses, local governments, Indigenous leaders, and people living in cities big and small all spoke up about how the housing crisis has contributed to poverty.

High rents and low vacancy rates have widened and deepened poverty. Increasingly, people are spending more and more of their income to put a roof over their heads. This has pushed more people into poverty and left a growing number of people feeling vulnerable.

People noted that annual rent increases and the abuse of loopholes, such as fixed-term leases, created a real gap between incomes and rent costs in every part of the province. The low shelter rates for people on income assistance and disability assistance leave people with few housing choices and make them vulnerable to predatory behavior.

In every part of the province, people spoke up about how high housing costs limit people’s opportunities and forces people to cut back on food, turn down the heat, and live smaller, more isolated lives.

There was widespread support from participants for rent control linked to units, so landlords cannot dramatically increase rent when tenants change, or when income and disability assistance rates increase. Stronger tenancy protections and enforcement of the Residential Tenancy Act were also called for, especially for affordable homes.

Housing discrimination

It is difficult for people facing multiple barriers to find a safe, secure and affordable home. People told us that the stigma against people living in poverty makes finding a good home doubly hard for many families. We heard that discrimination is leaving many people afraid to assert their rights as tenants, forcing them to accept violations of their rights and substandard shelter conditions for fear of becoming homeless.

As the competition for safe, secure and affordable rental homes has increased, so has the scrutiny on people looking for housing. Fierce competition for rental homes only amplifies the challenges facing people in poverty, people of colour, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2S+, families with children, people with disabilities, and others at high risk of housing discrimination.

We also heard that addressing rental disputes is time consuming, complicated, and often expensive for everyone involved. This leaves vulnerable people at an even greater disadvantage in an extremely challenging rental market.

Housing for people in need

In every part of the province, people called for more affordable homes, including more supported rentals for people in need. People asked for housing specific to youth, youth transitioning out of care, LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous and Métis peoples, large families, seniors, young families, people with disabilities, women fleeing domestic violence, single people and those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

There was also widespread support for enhanced and expanded rental supplements. Some people also asked for basic-income measures that would ease the price of housing for ordinary people and families.

Housing operating costs

Being able to afford heat and electricity is a key part of housing affordability. We heard that as the cost of housing has risen, so have utility bills. People expressed how this squeezes families who are falling behind even more.

People from every part of the province expressed concerns about rising utility bills, but people in northern, rural and remote communities expressed especially deep concerns about how winter was increasingly becoming a time of hardship for many people. Families in these areas were especially vocal about how scary it was to face the prospect of having electricity cut off in the winter.

Homelessness

“It’s almost like homelessness is a crime.”

We heard that the risk of homelessness weighs heavily on people living in poverty in every region of the province. Years of inaction on the housing crisis caused homelessness to rise across the province, leaving many without a place to call home.

Families, seniors, youth, singles, people with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples living on and off reserve all spoke to feeling they are in bad situations, and many had inadequate housing. They felt powerless against landlords who increased rent improperly or did not maintain the property. Many had been threatened by landlords for asking them to follow the law and complete basic repairs.

In many communities we heard that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people living on the street. People spoke to the lack of shelter space overall, and limits on how long those who need shelter can stay. They noted that cold weather shelters often fill up quickly, leaving many people to the elements.

People told us they had been homeless for years. They spoke about the incredible prejudice they faced every day and the barriers between them and a better life. They spoke about how once they became homeless, it was harder to find a home and harder to find and keep work, so they could get out of homelessness. They talked about what it was like to have to fight for a bit of floor to sleep on, and about hoping for a home.

People called on the government to expand low-barrier, high-quality housing alternatives, and to increase long-term help for people struggling to find a place to call home. They asked for the government to make supportive housing a priority and to continue to increase the number of low-barrier homes, such as modular homes for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

“Many single mothers and mothers cannot work full-time jobs due to lack of proper child care and costs. Having daycares that run in all schools for after-care is desperately needed.”

People in every part of the province asked for better supports for families with children. Many low-income parents said they need to work long hours or multiple jobs to make ends meet, and this leaves little time for family. They told us how this financial stress directly affects their children.

Several organizations that provide support to children and families recommended a redesign of the BC Early Childhood Tax Benefit into a B.C. child benefit that covers children under the age of 18.

Child Care

Families throughout the province told us they are struggling to find safe, affordable child care.

People with children who rely on shift work and part-time work said they were especially affected by the lack of quality child care outside of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work hours. They spoke about how this gap in child care is a significant barrier to employment and educational opportunities for many families.

Child Protection

“We need an increase in foster care support to raise our grandchildren. Why do grandparents not receive the same amount from [the Ministry of Children and Family Development] as the foster-parent does?”

Participants highlighted challenges with child protection policies, and shared their fears of children being removed from their homes because parents are living in poverty. Parents feel they need to keep their children at home from school because they can't afford to adequately feed or clothe them and don't want their children apprehended.

Participants also noted that government provides more funding to foster parents than to parents or grandparents raising their own children or grandchildren. Families would like to see financial support for kinship placements be comparable to what foster families receive.

Lifting up children and youth in care

We heard that youth in government care are especially vulnerable. Youth aging out of care told us that they face many barriers when they turn 19. Existing programs often require them to “jump through hoops” and leave them feeling unsupported at a very vulnerable time in their lives. They expressed the need for more help navigating complex programs, and finding homes in a difficult housing market.

Among the ideas to help youth transitioning out of care was a dedicated support person to help them adjust to adulthood when they leave care, transitioning to independent living at 16 years old to practice living on their own before turning 19, and continuing full support to age 24. Participants also emphasized that these resources need to be low-barrier and offer sustained support.

People who have experienced the care system would also like to see the removal of both the age cap for the Tuition Waiver Program and the two-year eligibility requirement for income assistance.

People told us former youth in care are more likely to face homelessness than other British Columbians, and they often lack the family and social supports needed to get out of and stay out of homelessness. Many people expressed that addressing youth homelessness needs to be a key priority for any approach to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Participants called for better housing for all, while emphasizing the needs of young people, especially those subjected to discrimination. People asked for more compassion for young people looking for housing, especially those with health needs and disabilities, Indigenous youth, non-binary, transgender, LGBTQ2S+, and young families with children.

FINANCIAL SECURITY AND INCOME SUPPORTS

“We need to make sure people on welfare and disability receive enough to live with dignity—to make ends meet.”

Fair treatment of people in need

People spoke about the unfairness and the indignities of our assistance systems, and the ways they were treated as “less-than” by people who had power over their lives.

People all around B.C. said the current federal and provincial income support assistance rates do not meet their basic needs.

Many people also told us that payday loans and predatory lending practices keep pushing people further and further behind. Many people told us about how they paid unfairly high fees and interest rates to payday loan companies because they were unable to access other banking services.

Many individuals and organizations suggested revisions to specific government programs, such as increasing the Seniors Supplement, the SAFER, HAFI and RAP assistance programs, an increase to the annual earnings exemptions, and expanding the Single Parent Employment Initiative.

We frequently heard interest in exploring the idea of a universal basic income. Many participants believed it would help lift up people in the greatest need, while others were strongly opposed to the idea, expressing concern that it would result in critical services and supports being eliminated.

Improving Income and Disability Assistance

We heard from individuals and organizations in every part of the province that current income assistance rates do not address the needs of people in poverty. People said assistance rates have not kept up with housing, transportation and energy costs, leaving people in deeper and deeper poverty over time.

Many expressed the importance of indexing assistance rates to the cost of living, and tailoring assistance to better meet the needs of people in different regions.

People on income and disability assistance spoke up about how they felt that forcing people to apply early for Canada Pension Plan benefits was discriminatory and contributing to the number of seniors living in poverty. They also asked government to stop deducting Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits from provincial assistance programs.

Many people also spoke out about how unfair assistance policies were for couples. They felt two people should be able to live together without reducing their assistance payments. Many noted that policies that reduce or eliminate assistance for people who live together make people more vulnerable to abuse.

Participants also said that even the government's new, higher earnings exemptions for people receiving assistance were not high enough to help people to break the cycle of poverty.

Higher wages to match the growing cost of living

Many people working full-time in B.C. told us they are living in poverty. We heard that working full-time at the current minimum wage still leaves people struggling to support themselves and their families. People spoke about how they often need two or more jobs to make ends meet. Across the province people told us the cost of living has risen exponentially, while wages have remained almost the same.

Halfway through the consultation, the government announced the path to a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. While many supported government's actions, some people felt the time frame to get to higher minimum wages should be shorter. Others said there was a need for the province to move toward a regionally determined living wage, with income determined by the cost of living in each community.

We also heard about the need to close wage gaps for women, people of colour, and other people facing barriers. Many believed government should play a greater part in encouraging gender equity in pay, and in improving benefits and leave for all workers.

COMPASSIONATE CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

“If someone is struggling with addiction and wants help, they seem to have so many overwhelming hoops to jump through before they can get assistance.”

Throughout the province, participants found mental health and addictions services limited, difficult to access, and insufficient to meet their needs. People spoke about long waitlists, a particular issue for people experiencing mental health and addictions challenges, as the window of opportunity for people who want to enter treatment is sometimes very small. People told us about how hard it is to leave their support systems and communities to access treatment.

They also spoke about having to navigate mental illness and poverty at the same time, and the lack of adequate supports for either. They talked about how poverty and uncertainty worsened their mental health and made it harder for them to live full lives. There was broad consensus about the need to provide for people’s basic needs, to reduce the stigma for people with mental illness and people living in poverty, and to provide better opportunities for social inclusion.

They asked for more low-barrier services and better mental-health and addictions supports in communities throughout the province.

Better access to mental health care

Communities big and small expressed the need for better mental health and addictions services. People want government to do a better job co-ordinating mental health services, making them easier to access and more available for all.

Many talked about the problems that are caused when people don’t receive appropriate supports in a timely way. People spoke of those they lost to suicide and those they lost to overdose and those still living but struggling, including themselves. Some also raised the difficulties caused by increasing pressures on emergency responders, police, and health-care workers.

Indigenous peoples spoke about the lack of culturally appropriate supports and services, as well as a lack of accessible and affordable mental-health and addictions services in rural and remote communities.

People noted that a lack of stable housing makes it hard for people to manage. On one hand, these issues make it difficult for people to secure housing. On the other, the lack of stable housing makes it difficult to address health issues. Many people believed a housing-first policy that integrated services and supports into where people live would help more people stabilize their lives.

“Poverty negatively affects everyone, especially the mentally ill.”

The lack of appropriate and accessible facilities was particularly noted in northern communities, where people told us that the nearest treatment centres could be a seven-hour bus ride away. These communities discussed the need for detox services close to home, so people can more easily access treatment when they are ready.

They asked for government to provide better mental health services and supports for people in rural communities in a way that works for them. People also spoke out about how online and telehealth services could help fill in the gaps in existing services for some people living in northern and remote communities, but may not work for everyone.

Many people spoke about the importance of early identification and intervention services for youth who experience trauma and mental health issues. They suggested that there be more mental health and addictions counsellors and services available in schools to assist children early in life.

People also asked for integrated community mental health services to make them more accessible and available to everyone. Others suggested legalizing illicit substances to remove substance users from the correctional system, and to encourage safer use practices, such as supervised consumption sites.

FOOD SECURITY

“I have been forced to buy and eat unhealthy food because I cannot afford both food and rent. I am depressed and disconnected from my friends because I cannot afford the luxury of a small coffee.”

People told us about how the lack of access to quality, affordable and healthy food had a deeply negative effect on their lives. They spoke out about how not being able to afford good food made their lives harder and left them more isolated. It also left them fearful for the health of their children, and worried that they would be judged for relying on food banks and other forms of food charity.

Healthy food, healthy communities

People spoke out about how, as other bills rise, they have less and less money available to pay for food. Faced with the prospect of being evicted or having their electricity cut off, people told us that they were often forced to cut back on food to make ends meet.

In communities in every region of the province, people spoke up about how hard it is for them to afford healthy, nutritious and satisfying food. They spoke up about how important good food is for children, and expressed their worries about children who are trying to learn with empty bellies.

People in some communities spoke about issues with food banks including the limited availability of fresh nutritious food, limited hours, long lines, and difficulty with transportation to and from the food bank. People spoke about the struggles of transporting groceries home, as some food banks only allow you to access food one to two times per month.

Many people expressed that they felt ashamed to ask for help. They also admitted to being fearful of having their children taken away, because they are struggling to afford healthy food.

People expressed support for the expansion of school meal programs. Many advocated for them to be available to all students, so that children living in poverty wouldn't feel singled out and stigmatized for using them.

Installation of community gardens, as well as communal cooking and food purchasing programs were recommendations that addressed both food security issues, as well as promoted community inclusion. Participants recommended shared cooking options for seniors, as well as more meal programs at community-based seniors' centres, which could help deal with food insecurity, as well as social isolation.

Métis and First Nations communities spoke about the lack of access and prohibitive cost of food in their communities. This was a concern shared by many other people living in rural and remote communities.

Traditional food sources were highlighted by Métis and First Nations people as integral to supporting their culture. They spoke about how traditional food could often make the difference between an empty fridge and full bellies, and called for government to do more to remove barriers to hunting, fishing and cultivating traditional foods.

People had many ideas about how communities could come together to improve food security for families living in poverty. Suggestions included providing incentives for donations of fresh foods to food banks, more community gardens to grow fresh produce, as well as communal cooking and food purchasing programs.

Diverting food waste from grocery stores to community kitchens or food programs was another solution frequently brought forward to address food security. While this is happening in some communities already, all identified the need to scale up these programs, to divert food waste and feed their communities.

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

“Income assistance doesn’t cover enough, when some people need special diets and medication. People often go without these important medications and dietary needs, just to pay for travel, utilities and/or rent.”

Living with health problems can be hard for anyone, but for those living in poverty, it is even more of a struggle. We heard about how people live in pain and discomfort because they can’t afford the medication, medical treatment, or the special diets they need to live healthy lives.

Medical Expenses – a barrier to good health

“Though we have public medical services, many people are not able to get the adequate care that they need. Prescription medications are often unaffordable, especially to people with low or no income.”

People experiencing poverty told us that they struggle to pay for medical services and supplies that are not covered by the Medical Services Plan or Fair PharmaCare.

We heard from people who live and work with chronic tooth pain because they can’t afford to go to the dentist.

People told us they are cutting back on life-saving medication because they can’t afford it. Many people, particularly seniors, spoke about being unable to fill prescription medications due to the cost. People often did not know about the PharmaCare coverage that was available to them or how to access it, nor did they know that government recently moved to eliminate deductibles for those most in need. Many suggested that people should be automatically enrolled in provincial programs, like PharmaCare, when they file their annual income taxes.

We heard from people who struggled to get around because they couldn't afford to buy or repair their wheelchairs, walkers and other mobility aid devices. People with disabilities talked about how hard it makes their lives to be forced to wait for life-changing adaptive equipment.

Even people receiving income or disability assistance with supplemental health coverage were being forced to go without because of gaps in their coverage. They highlighted dental services, in particular, as not meeting their needs.

People from all backgrounds suggested that the lack of access to preventative health services, and the inability to pay for the care they need to manage their health problems, costs government more in the long run. They spoke out about how allowing chronic problems to worsen, and forcing people to emergency rooms to access health services, is costly and hurtful.

Seniors who are unable to afford hearing aids, visual aids and mobility devices talked about how they felt lonely, isolated and depressed. They asked for a more compassionate approach to their health needs that better promotes social inclusion.

Women talked about how the difficulty of getting access to birth control made their lives harder, and asked for it to be made free and accessible for all. People also highlighted the need for menstrual products to be more available for people living in poverty.

Health services for people in poverty

People shared their hopes for a robust home-care program, including housekeeping and meals for seniors, people with disabilities, and those who have been discharged from the hospital to recover at home.

Many people also shared their belief that our health-care system needs to be more comprehensive. They called for access to a full spectrum of health services, such as dental, optical, physiotherapy, and PharmaCare coverage.

People were supportive of government's plan to eliminate MSP premiums – but they also wanted to see an increase in health supplement rates for those on income and disability assistance, and more access to free PharmaCare, especially for seniors and children.

“Meaningful poverty reduction needs to be grounded in cultural shifts that value how Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing can benefit diverse communities.”

Accessibility for rural and remote communities

In northern and rural and remote communities, people shared their concerns about the cost of medical travel, which is a major barrier to accessing essential care.

In Fort Nelson, for example, community members told us that pregnant women must leave their community one month prior to their due date, as there are no maternity services in their community. While coverage is provided for some of these costs, the disruption to families’ lives and loss of women’s support network can be stressful for women and their families.

Culturally appropriate care

Indigenous participants felt that the health-care system is not sensitive to, or inclusive of, traditional ways of healing. As a result, Métis and First Nations peoples expressed that they often receive inappropriate care, including sometimes having to leave traditional and cultural supports for a western style of care.

It was suggested that the Province integrate Indigenous ways of healing into the health-care system, with the hope that government would work to increase the cultural sensitivity of people working in health services.

Black, Indigenous, and other People of colour spoke about the racism, systemic barriers and fear they experience in accessing affordable, quality and timely health care. Immigrants with chronic health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, talked about experiencing social isolation, due to a lack of support within their new communities. They also talked about the difficulty they experience in accessing supports and appropriate services, like counselling. Migrant workers identified the lack of extended health benefits and supplemental health care provided by employers, and the additional strain that paying for health services adds to their high cost of living.

Newcomers to Canada spoke out about how the lack of culturally relevant and multilingual health care made it harder for families to access the health services they needed. Language barriers and lack of interpretive services inhibit good communication and can limit timely and appropriate treatment. People asked for more training for health-care workers to support diversity and cultural sensitivity, and better resources to support those with language barriers.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

“Many people do not have the opportunity for training and education that would aid them to improve their situation and potentially get out of poverty. Training programs and education should be free for people that are not able to afford it.”

In every part of the province, people expressed the belief that education was key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Many people told us about how access to education and skills training would give hope and opportunity to their families.

People also expressed support for the expansion of programs, such as the tuition waiver for former youth in care.

Lower tuition and more experiential training

“[There is a] lack of education and skills training opportunities. [The] nearest college [is] usually only offering courses in Salmon Arm, and not enough that could make a difference to what rural people need to be successful.”

People told us that better investments in education and training could help people find good jobs that would let them support their families. We heard that access and affordability were the biggest barriers for people looking to upgrade their skills.

Even for those who are able to work and go to school at the same time, we heard that tuition and textbooks are too expensive and wages are too low, leaving people to struggle with debt once they leave school.

Many spoke up about how the pressure of working and studying at the same time was making it more difficult for them to be successful. They also talked about how long it took to finish programs and degrees part-time, and the difficulty of attending school full-time without better supports.

In rural and remote areas, people spoke up about how they have to leave home to further their education. People told us that the added cost of moving made education unattainable – while others spoke about how hard it was to lose their support networks because of moving, making it more difficult to be successful in school.

To remove these barriers, participants suggested reducing tuition fees, offering free tuition for qualifying low-income students, and more experiential training opportunities. They also asked government to create more training programs in northern, rural, and remote communities that are specific to the job opportunities in those regions.

Some spoke out about the need for more life-skills training for teenagers and young adults. People noted that this would help make sure students are prepared for adulthood. They suggested these programs could include content on financial literacy, jobs, relationships and emotional skills, cooking and cleaning, gardening, proper and realistic sexual health and biological education to give them the tools they needed to ease into adulthood.

There were also recommendations to expand opportunities for marginalized populations, to help them access education and training that recognizes their particular barriers.

CREATING GOOD JOBS FOR PEOPLE THROUGHOUT B.C.

“We need a better system for finding jobs, regulating jobs, and protecting people.”

People in every part of the province spoke about their hope to find steady employment with an employer who respects them.

Many talked about how poverty made it harder to find a good job, leaving them stuck without opportunities to make their lives better. Others spoke out about how discrimination and stigma made finding and keeping a job more difficult.

Opening the door to good jobs for people in need

Some people living in poverty told us that they want to work, but often face barriers when looking for employment.

We heard that People are struggling to find steady, stable employment opportunities. People in rural and remote communities spoke about the difficulty of breaking into the natural resource sector, while people in communities that rely on seasonal tourism spoke about the difficulty of managing in the off season.

Many people living in poverty told us that they are trapped in precarious employment, with low wages or unpredictable hours that can change week to week.

The cost of finding and keeping a job was noted by many. Child care was a major barrier for families with children, while others spoke out about the cost of transportation to and from work, especially with many jobs requiring a vehicle.

The difficulty of paying for quality clothing, haircuts and other requirements for professional work environments was something that many felt made it harder for them to find better employment.

Similarly, lack of access to work clothing, like hard hats and steel-toed boots, was something that people said kept them from getting work as labourers.

Many living in poverty felt trapped because these costs were stopping them from pursuing opportunities that could make life better for their families.

Many people believed that with a few additional supports, and funding for transportation, clothing and equipment, people would have a better chance to find good work and climb out of poverty.

People told us that they need access to better, more effective employment programs. Those who had not worked for a long time expressed the need for help in bridging the gaps on their resumes and for work experience opportunities that would demonstrate they are employment ready.

Youth asked for help transitioning from school to the workforce and expressed support for more co-op style programs that would give them diverse work experience opportunities before graduating.

Participants told us that they believed earnings exemptions need to be higher, to provide stronger incentives for employment. They also emphasized that the current policies don't take into account how precarious employment can be.

We heard that it can take several months to return to assistance, if people's hours are cut and they can no longer live without supports. Some people told us that they gave up on employment as they experienced more financial stability by remaining on assistance because of these policies.

Employment Standards

People repeatedly spoke out about the lack of benefits at many jobs. They also told us that they wanted to see better enforcement of employment standards. They also talked about how hard it was to see employers not following the rules but being afraid to speak up about it because of their financial needs.

We heard many people asking for better protections for workers, including improvements to minimum call-out hours, improved sick-leave policies and help unionizing workplaces.

People from immigrant and refugee communities spoke about the lack of employment opportunities, due to their foreign credentials not being recognized, and work permits taking too long to be approved. A peer-support system was suggested that would match immigrants who had lived in the community for several years with newcomers to share information and provide support.

Putting WorkBC to work for people

A number of participants told us they were dissatisfied with the services provided by WorkBC, B.C.'s employment program. People told us they are not getting enough supports to help them transition to work.

There was hope that WorkBC could be improved to better help people find jobs better tailored to their skills and needs.

Other people told us that the incentive structure for WorkBC contract agencies leaves the most vulnerable without help. People believed that agencies focused too much on people who were the easiest to employ, rather than those most in need.

We heard that government should do more to help people with disabilities access employment opportunities. Among the ideas we heard were employer education and business incentives to hire people with disabilities. One participant suggested that there should be sections of WorkBC dedicated to supporting people with disabilities, with staff that are focused on helping people with disabilities find work.

CONNECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE WITH THE SERVICES THEY NEED

“... [Putting] more services exclusively online or accessible only by phone makes accessing services difficult or impossible for the many who do not have access to the internet or telephone, or who lack computer literacy.”

We heard how important it is for people, particularly the most vulnerable, to be able to connect with the services they need.

Many people and organizations told us how difficult it is to find and access government supports. People said that information about government programs is often confusing, contradictory and difficult to understand. People with low literacy and language barriers told us they found it especially hard to find the information they needed. Organizations spoke about the barriers people in poverty face if they don't file their taxes, as they are not able to access benefits for which they are eligible.

Overall, people expressed that services often aren't well integrated. They also expressed frustration about not being sure which ministry or agency delivered different programs and supports.

People told us that these issues make it more difficult for people to know what services are available to them. They said this particularly hurts those who are vulnerable, people who face multiple barriers and people who are in crisis.

Participants asked government to do more to make services more accessible, co-ordinated and comprehensive. They called for action to break down silos and for greater transparency across government.

We also heard that people want government to present information in a way that is clear and easy for people to understand, and in more languages.

Many people spoke of the need for a navigator in their community, who could help them find and access services from government and community agencies.

There were also many comments about the challenges accessing income and disability assistance.

People told us that the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction phone-line waits were typically 15 to 20 minutes or longer. People who rely on public phones told us that this often forced them to hang up and call back multiple times, while people who pay for minutes on their cell phones expressed unhappiness that their limited resources were being wasted by long hold times.

Both people and organizations told us that many found online applications burdensome, difficult to understand and hard to access and navigate.

A few participants shared that they would sometimes receive conflicting information, forcing them to return to the office or call the phone line more than once for the same issue.

Compassionate, personalized support

People told us about times they felt hurt and ashamed by the way they were treated by some people who were supposed to help them.

Some participants shared that they felt stigmatized by the lack of understanding of the challenges of poverty among people with whom they interacted.

Indigenous peoples shared that they often felt there were cultural barriers that made it more difficult to access the supports and services they needed. They called for better training for frontline staff, to increase cultural competence and safety.

Some people spoke out about their desire to see a return to personalized supports for people on assistance. They told us that local caseworkers assigned to local clients would be able to offer better services than the current one-size-fits-all approach.

One participant suggested people with lived experience work alongside frontline staff to act as mentors, advocates and navigators. Others recommended the ministry should hire more frontline staff with lived experience.

Organizations that support people in poverty called for an accessibility review within the ministry, so government can remove barriers that discourage, delay, or deny people from accessing supports.

These organizations emphasized the need to substantially simplify access and provide a clear guide to navigating available supports, benefits and systems within the ministry.

SAFE, AFFORDABLE TRANSPORTATION

“Transportation is expensive and if you are choosing between going to school, and using your money for other things that are more important to living, you will choose the other things.”

Being able to get around any community is a key part to feeling included. People said it is difficult to find and keep employment without reliable, accessible and safe transportation.

What we heard from people throughout the province was that transportation is often one the first costs cut in households living in poverty. Faced with higher rent, increasing heating bills, and already struggling to pay for food, people told us that they felt they had no other choice but to cut back on their ability to get around.

Getting around isolation

“We live in a town that does not have handyDART services. I have been trying since the end of August to get a bus that passes through our town, stopping at two places, the closest of which is about a kilometre away, to be diverted on a Request for Service basis, but that has not yet happened. Even then, we would only have access pretty well twice a day, four days a week.”

People told us that transportation was central to their ability to participate in their community, but they face barriers with affordability and access when it comes to their transportation options.

We heard that in some communities there is no public transportation network or handyDart service. Others told us that a lack of bus service during certain hours, such as in the early morning or evening, makes it difficult for people to find and keep work.

We also heard that the inability to move between communities reliably, frequently and affordably because of limited bus and ferry schedules, made it harder for people in more rural, northern and remote communities to access the services they needed.

Many people shared that they can't afford to take public transit. They told us that lack of bus fare is holding them back from accessing education, employment opportunities and community services. People who can't afford to get around also spoke about the harmful effects of social isolation, and how it had an impact on their mental health.

There were many ideas shared by participants about how to improve transportation services.

Some suggested making public transportation free or subsidized for children and people who have low incomes. They also expressed support for extending the BC Bus Pass program to individuals on income assistance.

ENDING DISCRIMINATION AND STIGMA

“People in poverty don’t deserve to be looked at differently.”

Fostering social inclusion

Living in poverty is hard enough without being judged for it. Many people told us how hard it is to not only have to deal with the effects of poverty on a daily basis, but to also have to deal with the stigma of being impoverished.

People living with other barriers, including people of colour, gender minorities and people living with disabilities, told us the stigma of living in poverty added to the difficulties of their everyday lives. Many said that finding housing and employment was even harder because they were in poverty. Others said that the stigma from being in poverty made them ashamed to seek out help.

Throughout the consultation, in the written submissions and at the community meetings, we heard about the isolation that people living in poverty experience: It affects seniors, people with language barriers, people of colour and Indigenous peoples, and families – the single parent who can’t pay for child care, the senior who can’t get out of the apartment, the newcomer who is still struggling to learn a new language, and the person who can’t afford a cup of coffee with their friends.

Above all, social isolation results from the stigma associated with poverty. We heard that poverty reduction isn’t just about increasing affordability and opportunity; it’s about fostering social inclusion, so that everyone feels welcome to participate as active members of their communities.

Treating people with dignity and respect

“Everyone needs to take part in this and do what they can, whether it’s small or large measures. We all have the capacity to make an impact somehow. This is not a Mission [B.C.] problem, or a rich vs. poor problem, or a well vs. healthy problem, or an addict vs. not problem, as people like to separate themselves from ‘those people’ who are the ‘problem’. This is a humanity problem and we all played a part in creating it. We should all be participating in resolving it.”

People told us that they longed to be treated with dignity. They spoke about the need for people living in poverty to be respected and empowered, not ignored and shamed.

We heard that people living in poverty feel there is a general lack of empathy and understanding toward people living on low incomes and people without homes. Many people shared that they are often judged based solely on their socio-economic status. Some expressed that this stigma is something they deal with every day.

We heard that the stigma of being poor starts at childhood, with kids being identified as poor by their clothes, or because they can’t participate in extracurricular activities. Single mothers spoke of discrimination in their search for housing, with landlords and building managers not open to renting to anyone with children. Others spoke out about how employers were unwilling to give them a chance because of gaps on their resumes.

Without the resources to connect with supportive people and organizations in their communities, people told us they were left even more socially isolated by the stigma around poverty that they faced daily.

Stopping discrimination

“By showing how poorly Indigenous people have been treated, it will reduce the stigma, and if we learn about traditions, and languages, it not only keeps those alive, it also makes more people feel connected to Indigenous culture, which is part of our history.”

We heard from many people about the role that discrimination plays in deepening poverty.

Métis and First Nations peoples spoke out about how racism and ignorance further drive people into poverty. They called for a more respectful and inclusive approach to poverty reduction that meets the unique needs of Indigenous communities.

Many people spoke to facing discrimination as a tenant, based on gender, race, or being recipients of income or disability assistance. Indigenous peoples living off reserve often cited racism as the key reason why they were denied housing by landlords. Overall, many people expressed that discrimination was making it more difficult for them to pursue opportunities that would help them escape from poverty.

While people believed the roots of discrimination and stigma run deep in society, they also felt hopeful that government could promote positive change.

Some suggested a public education campaign, in school and in society at large, would help remove the stigma against people living in poverty, and help people have more empathy for the problems they face.

People also believed that mandating cultural awareness training for provincial frontline staff would help reduce stigma. There was a call from many participants for more education for service providers about cultural safety, empathy and non-discrimination.

People also spoke about ways to link communities back together. One suggestion was to connect youth and elders through community-based programs, for the benefit of both groups.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

“A lack of access to justice can disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society and can significantly impact the severity of the effects of poverty. Addressing significant access to justice concerns must thus be part of an effective poverty reduction strategy.”

We heard that improved access to the justice system was needed to make sure that people living in poverty were being treated fairly and having their safety and rights protected.

Legal advocates told us that unresolved legal problems can cause serious challenges for individuals and families, including impacts on physical and emotional health, strain on relationships, or the loss of housing or employment. These problems can result in increased costs to governments in areas such as social assistance, employment insurance, and health-care expenses.

We also heard that, increasingly, people living in poverty need an advocate or legal representative to assist them in navigating government bureaucracies. We heard from advocacy organizations that people applying for income and disability assistance shouldn't need their services. Yet for people with language barriers, without access to a phone or computer, or with low literacy, working through the system can be too complex without their support.

Organizations that provide legal services for people living in poverty also called for a regular review of administrative tribunals, including the Employment and Assistance Appeals Tribunal, and the Residential Tenancy Branch. They said it is critical that these tribunals remain accessible, procedurally fair, and responsive to clients.

Legal Aid

“I applied for legal aid for the divorce, but did not qualify. To boot, I had to sign an agreement with legal aid that I wouldn’t reapply for the next three months. The humiliation was devastating.”

Access to low-cost or free legal services is a key part of reducing poverty. We heard from organizations that provide such services that, by definition, legal aid is for the poor and most vulnerable people in society.

Legal aid organizations shared their data, showing that over 50 per cent of legal aid clients were women, and three out of four of those women were single parents with children at home. A high percentage of legal aid clients self-identify as Indigenous, particularly in child-protection cases.

For those vulnerable clients, access to legal aid can reduce poverty directly by resolving problems, such as spousal support, increasing family financial security, or through early interventions that improve health outcomes.

Yet people told us that legal aid services are not meeting people’s needs, leaving people struggling to get help and resolve difficulties. For example, women leaving abusive relationships are often forced to turn to non-profit organizations when their legal aid hours run out. This can result in women representing themselves, being unprepared and ill-equipped to navigate the legal system, and in some cases, being cross-examined by their abusive partner and/or the person who assaulted them.

Legal groups, anti-poverty advocates, anti-violence groups, non-profit service providers and many individuals joined a call for substantive increases to legal aid to ensure the service is accessible to all who need it through their entire legal proceedings.

Conclusion

Many of the people who participated in this consultation process shared deeply personal stories about their experiences living in poverty. They spoke about the sometimes overwhelming challenges they face and the hardship of their daily lives.

Despite these challenges, participants brought creativity and optimism to the discussion, sharing their ideas to make life more affordable, to improve services, and to create opportunities to break the cycle of poverty.

As we heard from many participants, there is a tremendous amount of stigma around poverty in B.C. This stigma stops people from finding good homes, good jobs and getting the help and services they need. What we heard paints a troubling picture of the depth and breadth of poverty in our province. What we heard shows the need for an effective response to poverty in B.C.

We are grateful to everyone who took the time to share their hopes, dreams and challenges with us. The feedback received will guide government in moving forward with B.C.'s first-ever poverty reduction strategy.

Appendix 1: Minister’s Advisory Forum Membership

In October 2017, Shane Simpson, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, appointed an Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction. The 27 members bring a broad range of expertise to their roles, and are providing their insights and guidance to the minister as the Poverty Reduction Strategy is developed.

The forum members represent multiple sectors, including poverty advocates, people with lived experience, Indigenous peoples, academics and experts, along with representatives of the labour and business communities.

Full bios of the Advisory Forum members are available at:
gov.bc.ca/poverty-reduction-strategy/advisoryforum

Co-Chairs:

- Mable Elmore, Parliamentary Secretary for Poverty Reduction and MLA for Vancouver-Kensington
- Dawn Hemingway, Associate Professor and Chair of the School of Social Work, University of Northern British Columbia

Forum Members:

- | | | |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|
| ➤ Neil Belanger | ➤ Viveca Ellis | ➤ Debra McNaught |
| ➤ Natika Bock | ➤ Trish Garner | ➤ John Millar |
| ➤ Cheryl Casimer
(?aq#smaknik piçak pa#kiy) | ➤ Wes Hewitt | ➤ Jan Morton |
| ➤ Queenie Choo | ➤ Zahra Jimale | ➤ Tabitha Naismith |
| ➤ Shelley Decoste | ➤ Murry Krause | ➤ Anne Peterson |
| ➤ Stephen D’Souza | ➤ Catherine Ludgate | ➤ Lissa Dawn Smith |
| ➤ Jane Dyson | ➤ Hilary Marks | ➤ Stephanie Smith |
| | ➤ Jen Matthews | ➤ Stacey Tyers |
| | ➤ Rosanna McGregor | ➤ Leslie Varley |

Appendix 2: Schedule of community meetings

Between November 27, 2017 and March 29, 2018 public community meetings were held in 28 communities throughout the province. More than 2,500 people participated in these sessions.

DATE	CITY
November 27, 2017	Victoria
January 11, 2018	Prince Rupert
January 12, 2018	Terrace / Kitimat
January 13, 2018	Smithers
January 18, 2018	Kamloops
January 19, 2018	Kelowna
January 22, 2018	Nanaimo
January 23, 2018	Port Alberni
January 24, 2018	Campbell River
January 25, 2018	Richmond
January 29, 2018	New Westminster/Burnaby
January 30, 2018	Duncan
February 1, 2018	Surrey
February 2, 2018	Williams Lake
February 3, 2018	Quesnel
February 8, 2018	Cranbrook
February 9, 2018	Nelson
February 17, 2018	Prince George
March 3, 2018	North Vancouver
March 10, 2018	Vancouver
March 17, 2018	Coquitlam
March 20, 2018	Vancouver
March 22, 2018	Fort Nelson
March 23, 2018	Fort St. John
March 26, 2018	Maple Ridge
March 27, 2018	Langley
March 28, 2018	Abbotsford
March 29, 2018	Chilliwack

Appendix 3: List of Participants at Community Meetings and Roundtables

Throughout the consultation, Minister Shane Simpson and Parliamentary Secretary Mable Elmore met with many Indigenous organizations, community groups, business and labour groups and local governments. The following is a non-exhaustive list of participants at those meetings:

ORGANIZATION	CITY
Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce	Abbotsford
Abbotsford Community Services	Abbotsford
Abbotsford Downtown Business Association	Abbotsford
Algra Brothers	Abbotsford
City of Abbotsford	Abbotsford
Fraser Valley Labour Council	Abbotsford
University of the Fraser Valley	Abbotsford
Burnaby Family Life	Burnaby
Burnaby Neighbourhood House	Burnaby
City of Burnaby	Burnaby
MOSAIC	Burnaby
posAbilities	Burnaby
Better at Home – Campbell River	Campbell River
Campbell River and North Island Transition Society	Campbell River
Campbell River Family Network	Campbell River
City of Campbell River	Campbell River
Grassroots Kind Hearts Society	Campbell River
Habitat for Humanity – Vancouver Island North	Campbell River
Immigrant Welcome Centre	Campbell River
North Island Employment	Campbell River
North Vancouver Island – Success By 6	Campbell River
Strathcona Community Health Network	Campbell River
Ally Engineering	Chilliwack
Baker Newby Law Firm	Chilliwack
Chilliwack Chamber of Commerce	Chilliwack

ORGANIZATION	CITY
Chilliwack Community Services	Chilliwack
Chilliwack Economic Development Partners	Chilliwack
City of Chilliwack	Chilliwack
Downtown Chilliwack Business Improvement Association	Chilliwack
Odlum Brown Financial	Chilliwack
Dawn to Dawn Society for Action on Homelessness	Comox
Town of Comox	Comox
AIDS Vancouver Island	Comox Valley
Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness	Comox Valley
Comox Valley Social Planning Society	Comox Valley
City of Courtenay	Courtenay
Comox Valley Chamber of Commerce	Courtenay
Comox Valley Transition Society	Courtenay
K'ómoks Nation	Courtenay
L'Arche Comox Valley	Courtenay
Wachiay Friendship Centre Society	Courtenay
Canadian Mental Health Association – Kootenays Branch	Cranbrook
City of Cranbrook	Cranbrook
Cranbrook & District Community Foundation	Cranbrook
Salvation Army – Kootenay Valley Community Church	Cranbrook
Fort Nelson and District Chamber of Commerce	Fort Nelson
Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society	Fort Nelson
Fort Nelson Employment Centre	Fort Nelson
Fort Nelson Family Development Society	Fort Nelson
Fort Nelson Hospice Society	Fort Nelson
Fort Nelson Hospital and Healthcare Foundation	Fort Nelson
Hillcrest United Church	Fort Nelson
North Peace Savings and Credit Union	Fort Nelson
Northern Rockies Regional Municipality	Fort Nelson
Northern Rockies Seniors Society	Fort Nelson
Pentecostal Hi-Way Tabernacle	Fort Nelson
Women's Shelter	Fort Nelson
Town of Gibsons	Gibsons
Canadian Mental Health Association – Kamloops Branch	Kamloops
Kamloops & District Labour Council	Kamloops

ORGANIZATION	CITY
Kamloops Aboriginal Friendship Society	Kamloops
Kamloops Chamber of Commerce	Kamloops
Two Rivers Métis Society	Kamloops
United Way Thompson Nicola Cariboo	Kamloops
City of Kelowna	Kelowna
Kelowna Chamber of Commerce	Kelowna
Kelowna Métis Association	Kelowna
City of Langley	Langley
Langley Chamber of Commerce	Langley
Township of Langley	Langley
City of Maple Ridge	Maple Ridge
Katzie First Nation	Maple Ridge
Ridge Meadows Chamber of Commerce	Maple Ridge
City of Nelson	Nelson
Alberni Community & Women's Services Society	Port Alberni
Alberni Valley Assisted Living Society	Port Alberni
Alberni Valley Chamber of Commerce	Port Alberni
Alberni Valley Employment Centre	Port Alberni
Canadian Mental Health Association – Port Alberni Branch	Port Alberni
City of Port Alberni	Port Alberni
INEO Employment Services	Port Alberni
Port Alberni Association of Community Living	Port Alberni
Port Alberni Friendship Centre	Port Alberni
Port Alberni Shelter Society	Port Alberni
Port Alberni Social Planning Council	Port Alberni
Westcoast Home Hardware	Port Alberni
City of Powell River	Powell River
Community Resource Center Powell River	Powell River
Powell River & District United Way	Powell River
Powell River Brain Injury Society	Powell River
Powell River Chamber of Commerce	Powell River
Powell River Employment Programs (PREP) Society	Powell River
Powell River Food Bank	Powell River
RCMP – Powell River Detachment	Powell River
Tla'Amin Nation	Powell River

ORGANIZATION	CITY
City of Prince Rupert	Prince Rupert
Nisga'a Lisims Government	Prince Rupert
North Coast Transition Society	Prince Rupert
B.C. Chamber of Commerce	Provincial Organization
B.C. Construction Association	Provincial Organization
B.C. Innovation Council (Crown Corporation)	Provincial Organization
B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association	Provincial Organization
B.C. Restaurant & Food Services Association	Provincial Organization
B.C. Tech Association	Provincial Organization
Business Council of B.C.	Provincial Organization
Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives B.C.	Provincial Organization
Canadian Home Builders Association of B.C.	Provincial Organization
Destination B.C.	Provincial Organization
First Nations Health Council	Provincial Organization
First Nations Leadership Council	Provincial Organization
Motion Picture Production Industry Association of B.C.	Provincial Organization
Retail Council of Canada – Western Office	Provincial Organization
Simon Fraser University	Provincial Organization
Small Business Roundtable B.C.	Provincial Organization
University of British Columbia	Provincial Organization
University of Northern British Columbia	Provincial Organization
University of Victoria	Provincial Organization
Vancity	Provincial Organization
Vancouver Airport Authority	Provincial Organization
Vancouver Board of Trade	Provincial Organization
City of Quesnel	Quesnel
District of Sechelt	Sechelt
Habitat for Humanity – Sunshine Coast	Sechelt
Open Door Group – Sechelt & Gibsons	Sechelt
Sechelt & District Chamber of Commerce	Sechelt
shíshálh Nation	Sechelt
Sunshine Coast Community Services Society	Sechelt
D'zel Kant Friendship Centre	Smithers
Town of Smithers	Smithers
Fraser River Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association	Surrey

ORGANIZATION	CITY
Grace Point Community Church	Surrey
Lookout Society	Surrey
Options Community Services	Surrey
Phoenix Society	Surrey
Realistic Success Recovery Society	Surrey
Sources Community Resources	Surrey
Surrey Board of Trade	Surrey
Surrey Foodbank	Surrey
Surrey Homelessness and Housing Society	Surrey
Surrey Housing & Homelessness Task Force	Surrey
City of Terrace	Terrace
Kermode Friendship centre	Terrace
Kitsumkalum First Nations	Terrace
Vancouver & District Labour Council	Vancouver
Cariboo Chilcotin Métis Association	Williams Lake
Cariboo Chilcotin Partners for Literacy	Williams Lake
Cariboo Friendship Society	Williams Lake
ChangeMaker Consulting	Williams Lake
City of Williams Lake	Williams Lake
Community Bridge to Housing First	Williams Lake
Community Futures Cariboo-Chilcotin	Williams Lake
RCMP – Williams Lake Detachment	Williams Lake
Social Planning Council Williams Lake Area	Williams Lake
Stop the Violence Williams Lake	Williams Lake
Thrive Williams Lake	Williams Lake
Williams Lake & District Chamber of Commerce	Williams Lake
Women’s Contact Society Advocacy Program	Williams Lake



BRITISH
COLUMBIA