

A Living for All: Ideas to End Poverty

A Tyee Solutions Society Series by Katie Hyslop

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by Katie Hyslop for Tyee Solutions Society

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From 2002 to 2009, British Columbia had the highest child poverty rates in the country. It was an unenviable achievement, only taken away from us when Manitoba's rates surpassed ours in 2010. Yet children are never poor: their parents are. The number of kids living in poverty is a direct result of the number of adults living in poverty. It is perhaps no surprise then that according to Statistics Canada poverty rates for all age groups in British Columbia remained the highest for the country in 2010, for the 12th year in a row.

That poverty in a so-called "have" province like B.C. could surpass poverty in much poorer, "have not" provinces, for so long is upsetting. It begins to make sense, however, when you consider B.C.'s other distinction: one of only two remaining provinces or territories in Canada without a province-wide poverty reduction strategy or a plan to create one.

Beyond the moral cost of poverty, realized in the suffering of those making too little money to support themselves or their families, poverty costs the people of British Columbia money. Whether it is increasing costs for healthcare, child welfare services, or the criminal justice system, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) put the annual cost of poverty to B.C. as high as \$9.2 billion in 2011.

Over 2012, Tyee Solutions Society education and youth reporter Katie

Hyslop investigated how the B.C. government has addressed poverty issue, and explored suggested alternative strategies to reduce poverty in the province. Her stories included: reporting on the B.C. government's local poverty plans intended to address poverty on a community basis; the benefits and drawbacks of three different wage policies aimed at reducing poverty; and the provincial government's attempts to clean up child welfare services as they related to children in care, the majority of whom are Aboriginal, typically come from impoverished backgrounds.

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BC Launches Hyper-local Poverty Strategies

Minister says plan avoids cookie cutter approach, advocates say it avoids making real change.



Vancouver-inner city dwellers. Not all poverty is alike. Photo by popeyelogic via Your BC: The Tyee's Photo Pool.

Close to a decade of demanding a provincial poverty reduction strategy seems to have finally paid off for British Columbia's poverty reduction activists. The province recently announced the launch of a community-based poverty reduction strategy beginning as a pilot project in seven communities this summer, expanding to all 47 communities by 2014/15.

Unlike every other province and territory with the exception of

Saskatchewan, British Columbia has yet to commit to provincial strategies for poverty reduction. But B.C.'s Liberal government says their local strategies will improve on the provincial model by looking at the unique needs of communities and avoiding a cookie-cutter, one-size fits all method.

But poverty reduction activists say this new plan, which comes with no new money or policies, misses the point. They argue the main steps needed for poverty reduction are sweeping, province- and Canada-wide changes and they fear government's new plan won't bring poor British Columbians any further ahead.

Local is better: McNeil

In partnership with the Union of BC Municipalities' (UBCM) Healthy Communities Committee, the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) will work with the seven municipalities to develop unique poverty reduction plans by September. Selected by the UBCM, the communities involved are Surrey, New Westminster, Port Hardy, Cranbrook, Prince George, Kamloops, and Stewart.

Unlike a provincial poverty reduction strategy, MCFD Minister Mary McNeil says this plan will focus on each community's particular experience of poverty. Each community will have a committee comprised of MCFD staff, municipal staff, poverty reduction

organizations, and low-income residents to determine their particular strategy.

McNeil told The Tyee the plan came from the realization that government was providing poverty-reduction programs without consulting with communities first about their needs.

"Last June we were talking with a really small community of 500 people. The province had four to five programs for kids zero to six within that community. They loved each of the programs, but no one had the conversation with them of what do your (age) zero to six kids need in this community?" she says.

McNeil says the government has studied other provincial strategies and B.C. is already ahead of the game: by May 1 they will have raised the minimum wage from \$8 per hour to \$10.25 in one year, and they have built 21,000 new affordable housing units since 2001.

Instead, this strategy is about ensuring duplicate services aren't being provided between MCFD and the other ministries. It's about making sure communities, and families, receive services tailored to their individual needs, while keeping the budget low.

"The beauty of what we're doing is we're going in with open minds. Let's take a look, see what it is that we're all doing, see what the community needs, does it mesh," says McNeil.

"It is a real tough fiscal climate right now, and first off that means there isn't a lot of money that we can throw into anything. But also there isn't a

lot of money we can waste."

Once the seven strategies are completed, McNeil plans to have 20 community plans in place by the end of 2013. The ultimate goal is a plan for each of the province's 47 municipalities, based on the success of the first seven.

Government not doing their job: Garner

The B.C. Poverty Reduction Coalition is glad the province has recognized poverty is an issue, and that they are seeking community input, working across ministries and have set clear timelines and goals to complete each strategy. But that those are the only positives of this poverty reduction method.

"Fundamentally it's pretty lacking. It doesn't have any new policies, any new priorities, and any new money, so it's not really getting at any of the systemic causes of poverty," says Trish Garner, organizer of the B.C. Poverty Reduction Coalition.

"The truth is that there are one-size-fits-all measures that do need to be in place that would make a huge difference, like raising the minimum wage even more than it has been, raising welfare rates, building more social housing -- something that we were good at in the past -- (and a) universal child care system.

"These are things that can't happen at the community level, they need the provincial government to take the responsibility for that."

Garner says what government has achieved so far is paltry, particularly regarding housing. She says a partnership between the provincial and federal governments saw 1,500 new units of social housing built per year from the 1970s to the 1990s. But from 2005 to 2010 the B.C. Liberal government has built just 280 new units.

The Coalition did meet with MCFD in March to express their concerns. But Garner says few of their suggestions were utilized in the end, including advocating to the federal government for national housing and childcare strategies.

"It doesn't do what the provincial government is supposed to do, which is actually introduce bold new policies that would make a huge difference to people," she told The Tyee.

Local plans could lead to provincial strategy

There are currently services for the homeless and unemployed in Cranbrook, but Mayor Wayne Stetski is optimistic a community poverty plan could help break the cycle of poverty. He's glad the province is starting out small, however, and sees these first seven plans as a test-run of an eventual provincial strategy.

"The risk with a province-wide initiative is you're not really sure what kind of success rate you're going to have. I think that starting small and learning from that can actually, in the end, be very cost-effective and effective in terms of implementation on a province-wide basis. Personally I think it's a good way to go," he says.

"What is learned in Cranbrook potentially may help other communities and other parts of the province. I'm excited about that."

The city of Surrey was already developing a poverty reduction strategy when this announcement was made. A city where approximately one-third of the population is children, city council estimates 16 per cent of Surrey's residents live under the poverty line.

Surrey's strategy should be complete by July, a full two months before the provincial government's. But Councillor Judy Villeneuve is eager to see government help make a difference, hopefully by adopting some of Surrey's strategies.

"We certainly can't accept the downloading for all the responsibility because we only get eight cents out of every tax dollar. So our financial resources are limited, and our mandate as city council is not to be providing social services, but developing infrastructure and services for a healthy community," she says.

"We want to take peak care of people on our streets, and so we play a strong advocacy role, but we're also willing to work hand in hand if there's resources from other levels of government."

Villeneuve wants a provincial strategy, too, however. Her argument is poverty is costing the province too much money, particularly to our health and judicial services, and needs to be a top priority for the province.

McNeil hasn't ruled out introducing new policies or funds for reducing poverty once the community plans are done. She says she expects common themes and issues to show up between communities in terms of their poverty reduction needs.

Garner says she believes McNeil sees the value in a provincial plan, but her government doesn't.

"They're still pushing their jobs plan as an approach to reducing poverty, and we know that that's really not getting at the key problems. We know that two-thirds of people living in poverty have a job already," she says.

At least seven community plans should be completed by the May 2013 provincial election. But that doesn't give government much time to prove local plans are the way to go before British Columbians make the ultimate decision at the ballot box.

Is the 'Living Wage' Enough?

Fair wages bring equality to workers. But what is fair? And what about people who can't work?



New Westminster mother and software shipper Alex Moya: A 'living wage' raise of \$4 per hour let her feel like 'I have a more normal life.' Photo: K. Hyslop.

British Columbia's lowest-paid workers finally got a raise last spring, when Premier Christy Clark announced the first increase to the province's minimum wage in 11 years. The wage increased by \$1.50 to \$10.25 an hour, in one year bringing it up from the lowest in the country to tie for second highest with Ontario, just behind Nunavut's \$11 per hour.

But even with an increase, full-time minimum wage workers in B.C. aren't earning enough to meet Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off line (commonly cited as Canada's poverty line) for families. Raising the minimum wage also does little for people who can't work full-time, can't work at all, or who can't find work. That means the recent rise in the minimum wage, welcome as it is, won't do much to rescue the **12 per cent** of British Columbians now living below the poverty line in this province.*

But if a higher minimum wage isn't enough, then what income policy is the best choice for eradicating poverty in British Columbia? Economists and social policy groups have no shortage of solutions to suggest. Ideas include a so-called "living wage," higher welfare rates, a universal guaranteed minimum income, even something called a "Demogrant." (For a more complete list, see the sidebar to this article, "A Glossary of Anti-Poverty Policies.")

For the Tyee Solutions Society, I've been exploring the pros and cons of three of the most widely advocated of these proposals to put an end to poverty: the living wage, a guaranteed annual income, and government wage subsidies. I spoke to anti-poverty activists, social policy theorists, academics, and economists. Some have devoted careers to advocating for a specific method; others take a more flexible approach to reducing poverty.

Reports in the days to come will detail the merits and drawbacks of a guaranteed annual income and of government wage subsidies. We start here with a look at the pioneers who are turning the idea of a living wage from generality into a meaningful number.

The difference a living wage made for one mother

When Alex Moya started as a shipper/receiver at software maker SAP in Vancouver last September, she was earning \$15 an hour. Almost \$6 above minimum wage at the time, it was enough for her to get by. But still, she admits it was sometimes "stressful."

When SAP became a "living wage" employer earlier this year however, Moya's salary jumped to almost \$19 an hour. It was a big help for a young mother who, along with her husband, has a young daughter in daycare and commutes from their home in New Westminister to work in Vancouver.

"Just to have extra cash, it helps for those things that you're not prepared [for], like if your car breaks down or something happened to your computer. I don't feel so stressed out. I feel I can have a little bit of extra cash for the 'just-in-case' things," she says.

"I feel like I can have a more normal life, like if I want to just go out and have a dinner or go to the theatre, I have that extra money."

Unlike a *minimum* wage, a *living* wage is calculated using the cost of living in a specific municipality. The idea is that the salary you make should be enough to cover the cost not only of food and shelter, but

A Glossary of Anti-Poverty Policies

Economic jargon is hard enough to penetrate without encountering multiple names for the same ideas. Here is a glossary of terms to help cut through the economese.

Living Wage: An hourly wage that covers the essential costs of food, clothing, housing, healthcare, transportation, education, childcare and incidentals in the region where it applies.

Minimum Wage: The lowest hourly wage you are legally allowed to pay a worker in a jurisdiction like British Columbia. An exception in B.C. is the \$9 "liquor server" wage for employees who serve alcohol.

Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI): A base income guaranteed to all residents of a country, regardless of employment status, and provided by the state to those who do not earn it in the labour market.

Other ways we do, have, or might support low-income Canadians:

Past:

Family Allowance: Beginning in 1945, the federal government sent a monthly cheque to the parents of every Canadian child to help with the cost of their care. Canada's first universal social program, it lasted until 1973. A Liberal federal government replaced it with a selective tax credit in 1978.

also of transportation, basic medical care, household goods, school supplies and clothing needs. Differences in rent and food prices mean living wage rates vary across the province.

Anti-poverty advocates like the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and half a dozen public sector unions support the idea through **A Living Wage for Families Campaign**. The non-partisan organization pushes municipalities, private businesses, and the provincial government to adopt living wage salaries for their own and their contractors' employees.

Each year the campaign releases an updated calculation of living-wage rates for full-time work in several B.C. municipalities. They range from an hourly wage of \$14.16 in Cranbrook to \$19.14 in Metro Vancouver. Those rates may be lowered, however, if they're matched with benefits like health and dental coverage, day care subsidies, or bus passes.

For Michael McCarthy-Flynn, director of the campaign, it's the best method for eliminating poverty for workers who don't meet the low-income cut-off lines: "It's a wage that will lift people out of poverty and it's based on the sophisticated methodology that looks at the basket of goods that the average family needs."

The basket is quite limited: the "needs" it recognizes include food, clothing, rent, healthcare, transportation and education costs. *Not* considered needs are debt payments, retirement or education savings, home ownership, caring for a disabled or elderly relative or covering emergency costs like car trouble, vet bills or any of those other "just-in-case" moments Alex Moya used to worry about.

MINCOME: A pilot project in Dauphin and Winnipeg, Manitoba, that provided a guaranteed annual income to people there from 1974-1978. Funded jointly by the federal and Manitoba governments. Only a select few Winnipeg workers received the benefit, but it was open to both working and non-working individuals in Dauphin.

Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP): A federal pilot project for a never-instituted national wage subsidy to keep single parents working and off welfare. Ran in British Columbia and New Brunswick for a decade starting in the early 1990s.

Present:

Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement: A federally issued income supplement that tops up the annual income of retired Canadian seniors. Calculated based on their accumulated lifetime earnings.

Universal Child Care Benefit: Federal payments of \$100 per month per child paid to Canadian families with children under the age of six. Intended to supplement childcare costs. Descendent of the Family Allowance program, Canada's first universal social welfare program, which gave all Canadian mothers a monthly, tax-free benefit from 1945 to 1973. Except in Quebec, where the cheque was issued to fathers.

And the idea has its detractors. They say a living wage does nothing for people who for a variety of reasons aren't working. When B.C.'s unemployment rate sits at just about six per cent, tying a poverty reduction strategy to work, they argue, won't solve income inequality.

Living wage catches on in BC

Although living wage campaigns sprang up across the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, they've only come to the forefront of B.C. anti-poverty discussions in the last decade.

It's a theory at least two municipalities have already **bought into**. New Westminster made history in 2010 when it became the first municipality in Canada to adopt a living wage for its workers and contractors. The Capital Regional District of Esquimalt followed suit in January 2011.

This April the Qualicum School District became the first district in the province to adopt a living wage strategy. Over 130 municipalities in the U.S. and more than 100 U.K. employers have also adopted living wage policies.

Several B.C. employers have also embraced the living wage. The most high profile is VanCity Credit Union, which officially joined the ranks of living wage employers last summer. Others include non-profit organizations like the BC Teachers' Federation, United Way of the Lower Mainland and The Canadian Cancer Society -- B.C. and Yukon Division, as well as for-profit companies like SAP's Vancouver presence and Now Communications.

Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB): A national federal government wage subsidy program for Canada's low-income workers. Workers typically apply via income tax returns, but there is a separate "advanced payment" form if tax returns are too far in the future. Cheques are issued four times per year.

Earned Income Tax Credit: A federal government wage subsidy program for American low-income working families. Unlike the WITB, which is open to individuals, recipients of the Earned Income Tax Credit must have children under 18.

Canada Child Tax Benefit: A monthly tax benefit paid to families with children under 18, regardless of parents' working status. Benefits are usually issued around the 20th of each month, from July to June. Benefits can be paid in one lump sum if under \$240 annually. The benefit is clawed back based on the amount of income a family makes.

Envisioned:

Negative Income Tax: A way to guarantee annual income by paying a "negative" tax to people earning below a minimum amount. Payments decline the closer a recipient comes to the guaranteed income through their own means. Anyone who earns more than the base amount does not receive money, and pays taxes instead.

Universal Demogrant: Another way to pay a guaranteed annual

A public for-profit software company, SAP's involvement with the Living Wage for Families Campaign started with its pro-bono development of an online **living wage calculator**. It grew into a living wage commitment from the Vancouver office when managers there realized how the campaign fit into their social and economic sustainability goals.

"SAP is a global multinational company, and we're very much interested in doing good in the world," says Kirsten Sutton, managing director for SAP Labs Canada. "But what's most important is for each location to make sure they're doing good in their community, and for us here [instituting a living wage] was one way to do that."

Most of SAP's own Vancouver employees were already making above the living wage, so the firm's effort focused on the 50-plus contractors who provide its office custodians, security staff and facility managers. (Shipper/receiver Moya is actually employed by Compass Group Canada, an SAP contractor.)

Sutton says it means paying more money for these contracts. But for their office it's important not to pass the poverty on: "A good business these days is not just a bottom line," she insists. "It's worrying about many other things."

During the run-up to last November's municipal elections in B.C., the Living Wage for Families Campaign joined 54 other organizations in a push to convince candidates in Metro Vancouver to support a living wage for workers. Although the effort failed to persuade additional cities to adopt living wages, most of the candidates contacted **expressed interest** in the idea, even if they did not immediately endorse it.

income where everyone, regardless of income or employment status, receives the same payment (the Family Allowance was a type of demogrant since all parents, rich or poor, received it).

Wage Subsidies: Government payments to subsidize work-related income. Can be delivered as tax benefits like the existing Working Income Tax Benefit, or be added onto paycheques at an hourly rate.

And the campaigning seems to be paying off in other ways. While the election season was on, the Columbia Institute **commissioned a poll** asking a representative sample of voters whether they would support their town or city adopting a bylaw to ensure all municipal employees and contractors adopt a living wage. Over 67 per cent said they would.

A partial answer at best

While that kind of support may be promising for the future of municipal employees and contract workers, critics point out that a living wage benefits only people who are able to work, and can never be more than one part of a broader poverty-reduction plan.

"A successful, comprehensive, poverty reduction strategy would include some policy to deal with adequate wages," says Margot Young, a University of British Columbia law professor. "But [must also] ensure those who aren't in the paid labour sector have an ability for flourishing,

both economically and in terms of participating in the community, that is just and fair."

Young co-authored a **report** on the more inclusive idea of a guaranteed annual income for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (one of the groups with a seat on the Living Wage for Families Campaign advisory committee). It's a subject we'll look at in the second part of this series.

Living Wage campaigner McCarthy-Flynn accepts Young's criticism. "The [guaranteed] income is looking at people who are on welfare, ensuring that they have a dignified existence and [getting] rid of the bureaucracy, whereas the living wage looks at the working poor," he reasons. "So they're sort of complementary rather than in competition."

Simon Fraser University economist Krishna Pendakur endorses paying workers enough money to live on, but he's uncomfortable with policies that favour select groups. Because only a handful of municipalities and businesses yet endorse a living wage policy, that's exactly what it does.

"One obvious mechanism the state has is to pay its own workers a lot," he says. "But not everyone gets to be a public sector worker."

It's an investment: McCarthy-Flynn

Then there's the cost of implementing a living wage. Although it's difficult to determine what the total cost would be because of the range of living wages across the province, the average hourly wage for workers over 25 in B.C. is significantly above the living wage for a four-person

household. Many people's wages wouldn't change at all under a living wage.

Find the Living Wage Where You Live

The way a living wage is calculated depends on local economics. Find out the living wage in your part of B.C. by clicking on **[this link](#)**.

But according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, in 2008 almost eight per cent of the population **earned less** than \$12 an hour.

McCarthy-Flynn says cost is a poor excuse for inaction. He believes governments and employers should see a living wage as an investment in the future, rather than an expense for today.

"We seem to be very good at spending money on poverty after it exists," McCarthy-Flynn says, "rather than investing in programs that will prevent poverty from happening in the first place." Those, he says, "are, one, cheaper, and two, a lot better socially in the long run."

McCarthy-Flynn cites a CCPA **report** which estimates an annual poverty cost of \$8.1 to \$9.2 billion in B.C. alone. A large chunk of that money goes to pay for the healthcare and policing costs associated with poverty.

By comparison, the same report put the cost of a comprehensive poverty reduction plan at \$3 to \$4 billion per year.

Another CCPA report *Working for a Living Wage: 2011 Update* cites

a finding that employers who paid a living wage in the U.K. saw a decrease in employee absenteeism. Unchecked absenteeism in Canada, it **estimated**, costs employers up to \$6 billion per year. Other changes that came with a U.K. living wage include a reduction in staff turnover, improved performance and production and greater customer satisfaction.

The centre's research doesn't directly link a reduction in health costs with a living wage. But it does cite evidence that higher stress levels among low-income households relative to those in the mid-to-higher income bracket lead to poorer overall health and a greater use of health services in the long-term.

To McCarthy-Flynn, a living wage would allow those who have been taking the most from our social safety net to start paying back into it. That, he argues, benefits more than just the people at the lower end of the economic scale.

"If people get a living wage and are lifted out of poverty, they have a higher opportunity to become fully engaged, productive, contributing members of society in terms of the economic return they give and the social return," he says.

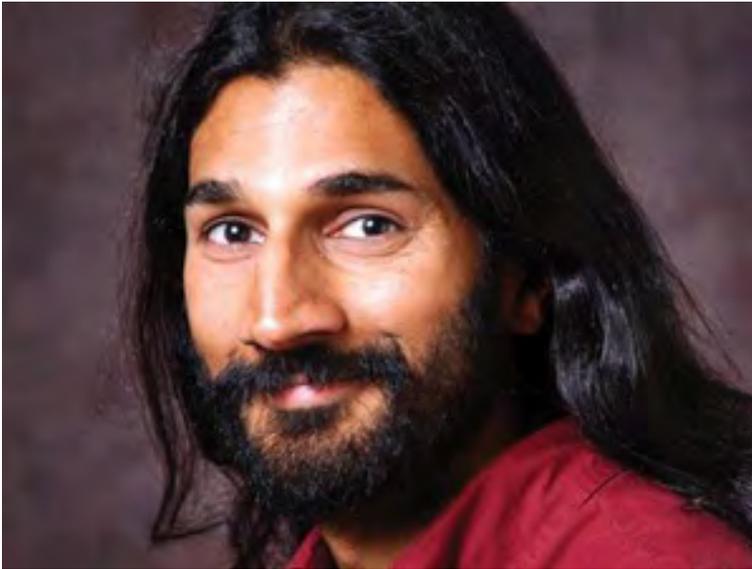
Growing support in the business community and the wider population for instituting a living wage hasn't been enough to sell B.C.'s Liberal government on raising the provincial minimum wage again any time soon. Its NDP rivals have come out in support of indexing the minimum wage to inflation; it's unclear whether those changes would become reality should the party come to power in next year's provincial election.

And plainly, when 12 percent of British Columbian households struggle below the low-income cut-off line, getting everyone to a living wage is going to take more commitment -- from government, the business community and most of all, voters.*

But the living wage isn't the only policy device to help get us there. We'll look at others in reports to come tomorrow and Wednesday.

What About Just Guaranteeing Everyone a Basic Income?

Doing so for all Canadians could almost erase poverty, or dry up labour sources, depending on whom you ask.



People like working' even when guaranteed a base income for no work, but will they work enough? asks Krishna Pendakur, an SFU economist who focuses on anti-poverty measures.

British Columbia's lowest-paid workers finally got a raise last spring, with the first increase to the province's minimum wage in 11 years. But even with that hike, full-time workers earning B.C.'s minimum wage of \$10.25 an hour don't take home enough to meet Statistics Canada's equivalent of a poverty line for families.

When it comes to countering poverty, economists and social policy groups have no shortage of ideas (See "A Glossary of Anti-Poverty Policies" that runs as a sidebar.)

For the Tyee Solutions Society, I've been checking out three of the most widely advocated. **Part one** of this series looked at the **living wage**; a future installment examines **government wage subsidies**.

Today, the contrarian case that a **guaranteed annual income** -- what some might call that economic phantom, the "free lunch" -- might just be the most cost-effective way to end poverty.

Shackled by 'deserving poor' notion?

Your parents probably told you, "Money doesn't grow on trees." Unfortunately they were right. But what if we made it easier for low-income people to cover basic needs by giving them money?

It's not such a far out idea: Alberta **did something like it** in 2006, when every man, woman, and child in the province received \$400 from oil revenues. Alaska has been **doing the same** since 1982.

The purest form of giving away money this way is a guaranteed annual income (GAI): a payment from the government to its citizens simply for being citizens. It can be taxable or non-taxable, meted once or on a continual basis, monthly or annually.

Whatever the method, some anti-poverty advocates believe a GAI is essential to a comprehensive strategy for reducing poverty because it offers extra income, no strings attached. For a low-income person it can mean the difference between having to choose between rent and food -- or having enough money for both.

"We think that all Canadians deserve to have a basic standard of living just because they're Canadian. They don't have to be 'deserving' poor," says Donald Benham, director of public education at Winnipeg Harvest, a food bank distribution centre in Winnipeg, MB, which endorses a GAI. "We all believe in helping each other, and we think there should be a basic level [of income]."

Some economists disagree. They argue a guaranteed income could remove our incentive to work, increasing dependence on government-funded programs. The solution to our poverty problems, as they see it, could be the beginning of a labour crisis.

GAI creates healthier people: Forget

When you ask Canadian economists and social policy academics about this, they inevitably mention the MINCOME experiment. For a period in the 1970s, it paid every poor person living in Dauphin, MB, enough extra money for their incomes to reach at least 60 per cent of the low-income cut-off line (see sidebar).

Supported by the federal and Manitoba governments, MINCOME ran from 1974 until 1978, but only two years worth of labour data was collected from the test project. By the time it finished, public and

DAUPHIN: ONE TOWN'S ANTI-POVERTY EXPERIMENT

According to a **report** by Evelyn Forget at the University of Manitoba, the idea behind a GAI was born out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. But its roots go back much further.

Over 200 years ago, American revolutionary Thomas Paine is said to have proposed a one-time payment to all American citizens simply for being American. French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's statement that, "man is entitled by birthright to a share of the Earth's produce sufficient to fill the needs of his existence," is often interpreted as endorsing a guaranteed income, though he did not introduce one.

In 1962, American economist Milton Friedman, popular among free-market followers, **proposed** a negative income tax and a flat tax to create a guaranteed annual income. Everyone would be required to file an income tax return, but those who fell below a specific income line would receive money to raise them to that line. Every dollar of earned income would reduce the benefit.

During the early 1970s several Canadian provincial and federal committees, including the Special Senate Committee on Poverty and Quebec's Castonguay Nepveu Commission, recommended a GAI to reduce poverty.

political support for a GAI had waned. The data gathered dust until Evelyn Forget, a community health sciences researcher at the University of Manitoba, gained access to it in 2009.

"I've always been interested [in MINCOME] and knew little work had been done. I wondered whether the database I had access to might give us some answers," Forget explained in an email to The Solutions Society.

"We know that poverty is one of the biggest health risks. If we can address poverty, can we improve health outcomes and reduce costs?"

What Forget found was a significant decrease in the number of hospital visits during those years, especially for accidents, injuries, and mental health issues. Among two groups, access to a guaranteed income did reduce employment. Teenagers stayed in school longer instead of leaving to get work. And young mothers stopped working while receiving MINCOME benefits to care for small children.

They were the only two groups that stopped earning an income; and in both cases that decision may have paid social benefits later. Furthering teenagers' education may have qualified them for higher paying jobs after graduation. Mothers staying home cut down on childcare costs.

The findings are enough for Forget to endorse a GAI for Canada today: "I think that social programs have changed a great deal since the 1970s, so the GAI program would need to be re-designed, but the principles are still valid."

But neither U.S. nor Canadian governments were prepared to adopt such risky programs without testing them first.

"There was widespread interest across North America in 'rationalizing' income support programs, but also concern that good programs would lead people to reduce their work effort," Forget told The Solutions Society.

"[In the early 1970s] four experiments in the U.S. were providing data, but Canada wanted its own data. GAI was an interest of the Liberals in Ottawa and the [NDP] government in Manitoba."

With a cost projection of \$17 million, Manitoba secured Ottawa's commitment to foot that majority of the bill for simultaneous projects in Winnipeg and Dauphin, dubbed MINCOME.

The Dauphin study is of particular interest to Forget because it was the only one where non-workers -- the elderly, unemployed, and disabled -- were also included.

An agriculture community with a population of about 12,500 including the surrounding rural area, everyone in Dauphin was eligible to receive 60 per cent of the low-income cut-off line for a family their size. Families with no source of income received the full

Forget says a living wage, an idea described in my first report in this series, puts unfair financial pressure on small businesses, or increases

what they demand from low-skilled employers. But a GAI can work in conjunction with a minimum wage to increase people's income without penalizing small employers.

"A GAI supplements low wages without interfering in the market," Forget argues. "Small firms can hire unproductive people and pay low wages because that's all their labour is worth. But the GAI would ensure that [an] individual receives enough to live on. Minimum wage legislation still needs to be in place so people aren't exploited, but there is no need to ensure that the legislated minimum wage is enough to live and support children on."

Raising the base

For Benham and Winnipeg Harvest, a GAI is needed to ensure that every Canadian experiences a basic standard of living that meets their basic needs.

But unlike the MINCOME project, which in today's numbers would see a family of three in Winnipeg receive top-up payments to reach an annual income level of at least \$17,058, Winnipeg Harvest has devised its own needs-based measure. After interviewing low-income people in Winnipeg who use food banks, Harvest released a **report** finding that an equivalent family of three today would really need a base income of at least \$38,000 per year to make ends meet.

"That's about twice as much as what you get on welfare," says Benham.

"Welfare is completely and utterly inadequate for feeding and sheltering

and clothing a family of three in Winnipeg right now. That's what this report shows beyond a shadow of a doubt."

That might seem like a tall order for a province that has **nudged up** welfare rates by only a miserly \$84 in 20 years. But Benham says it has the support of the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce, which would like to see low-income people become customers.

"Their members know exactly who [low-income people] are: 'these people never buy anything from me because they're on welfare.' If you just increase the shelter benefit enough so they can pay their rent and have money for food, then maybe they'd have enough extra money to spend on a bicycle for their kid," he explains.

GAI has other supporters in high places, too. Senators Art Eggleton (Liberal) and Hugh Segal (Conservative) led the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology's research into poverty, housing and homelessness in 2009. The committee's **report** urged the federal government to "publish a Green Paper by 31 December, 2010, to include the costs and benefits of current practices with respect to income supports and of options to reduce and eliminate poverty, *including a basic annual income based on a negative income tax* [emphasis added]."

The government has since produced a green paper on retirement incomes, including the Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement given

to retirees based on their lifetime earnings. But no green paper has appeared on reducing or eliminating poverty.

Creating economic, environmental sustainability

There's more to a GAI than boosting the economy by creating more shoppers or making life easier for the poor. Pursued far enough, it might also save the environment.

As Jim Mulvale sees it, the GAI's supposed Achilles' heel (it kills the urge to work) is really a silver lining: the more money we earn through a GAI the less we work, true. But the less we work, the slower our economic development and the more sustainable our society becomes.

"Historically, liberal democratic societies with advanced welfare states have relied on economic growth [and] rising tax revenues to meet rising social-service expenses for growing populations," observes Mulvale, an associate dean of social work at the University of Regina. "From an ecological point of view, we just can't go on supporting open-ended economic growth.

"We have to be thinking about moving towards true, genuine economic sustainability, which probably means a no-growth society, which probably means redistribution as opposed to a growing pie of which we've all got a larger slice."

Mulvale wants a negative income tax, which would provide basic income to any household that fell below a certain income threshold, the same model used for MINCOME (in contrast to the universal "demo-grant"

model, where everyone, regardless of income level, receives the same amount of money).

Social policy triumvirate

Canada already has some GAI programs, like the Guaranteed Annual Income Supplement for seniors, the Universal Child Care Benefit, and the Canada Child Tax Benefit. Colin Busby, a senior policy analyst with the C.D. Howe Institute, says we have research into GAIs like MINCOME to thank for these policies.

But there is a delicate balance to achieving successful GAI programs, he warns. And governments have been struggling to create sizable benefits for low-income individuals, with low claw-back rates that government can afford.

"It's very difficult to have a large transfer to low-income individuals with low claw-back rates," says Busby. "The claw-back rates are important because they influence the behaviour of individuals in labour markets.

"You're talking about a very large government expense. Whatever it is you decide to do, you come across some difficult questions."

Krishna Pendakur, an economist and professor at Simon Fraser University, agrees with Busby's view on claw-backs. He also says a negative income tax could have a negative effect on the amount of work people do.

"You don't want to measure the number of people who drop out of work. You want to measure the hours [worked] response. People like working; it makes them feel like they're doing something right. You would not expect people to just drop out completely," he says.

The MINCOME data doesn't provide the information to dispute Pendakur. "No research was done on work effort in Dauphin. Some was done on the Winnipeg sample. People who worked full time made few changes to their work effort," says Forget.

Similar studies in America, however, found an overall 13 per cent reduction in work effort from families as a whole, with less effort coming from secondary and tertiary earners. This allowed many women the chance to take longer maternity leave than would have been previously possible.

Changing public policy is 'slow': Benham

Winnipeg Harvest has been meeting with Manitoba politicians since their first report on appropriate incomes came out in 1997. Politicians frequently agree that a GAI is a good idea. But, they say, it's out of their hands.

"We've had cabinet ministers say to us, 'Well, this might be the right thing to do, but it's not politically popular. What Winnipeg Harvest needs to do is mobilize the masses. Get everyone convinced that we need to do this, so that it becomes politically easier,'" says Benham.

Winnipeg Harvest has been trying. Along with the Winnipeg Social Planning Council they've started a Raise the Rates campaign to increase welfare rates; they organized a march on the legislature; they've run op-eds in local papers and made speeches pleading their case in public.

"It didn't work," Benham laughs. "It's a slow business changing public policy."

Mulvale, who calls himself a "social policy pragmatist," believes a GAI won't happen in the short-term. He says most people will be relying on a labour market income for the majority of their working lives. He also notes the federal budget 2012 decision to delay payment of the Old Age Security / Guaranteed Income Supplement program until workers are 67 means government is moving away from a guaranteed income, not closer to one.

The only federal party that's shown enough interest in a GAI to include it in their platform is the Green Party. But Mulvale sees benefits in a GAI that all parties would endorse.

"[In] societies where there's a relatively small gap between the wealthy and the poor, health outcomes improve, there's lower infant mortality, crime tends to be less, people complete school more often. And living in a society where the quality of life is protected through those good social outcomes, that benefits the wealthy as well as the middle class and the poor," he says.

With one central program to produce GAI cheques, there wouldn't be any need for provincial programs like welfare or child benefits. Money from those programs could be funneled into a GAI program for all Canadians. It would incur less overhead cost than delivering separate programs that vary in adequacy from province to province, town to town.

As Mulvale and Benham see it, much of the federal government's money shuffling -- cutting programs in favour of decreasing the deficit--would not be necessary with a GAI. But thinking for the long-term is a difficult sell for politicians hoping to be reelected in three years.

Should We Subsidize Work?

Government wage top-ups could spell the end of the working poor. Last in a series on anti-poverty policy ideas.

As of this month, Sue Collard makes one dollar above minimum wage. Even after six years at the same retail job in north Surrey, she isn't surprised her salary remains low.

The bottom line is, retail jobs do not pay. The justification is we need to be competitive -- isn't that always the justification?" she asks.

On paper Collard is above the poverty line for her three-person family. She works four days a week for more than minimum wage. Her partner has a full-time job in sales at an insurance company. She has one child to take care of, a 19-year-old son from a previous relationship.

But the family is only squeaking by on about \$46,000 per year. When Collard isn't working, she's trying to home-school her son to complete his Grade 12. Various psychological and developmental problems keep him at home, out of school and unemployed.

But she says there are no government supports available for his



Sue Collard makes barely above minimum wage after six years in retail. Should society top up her pay? Photo: K. Hyslop

education and care. And they make too much money to qualify for tax benefits. The family is perpetually strapped for cash, unable to afford emergency expenses.

"We use our credit cards probably too much, mostly for emergency situations which unfortunately crop up with greater frequency than one would like. I'll give you an example: in the past four months there's been a car breakdown, dental, and two emergency vets," she told said. Collard estimated she's spent between \$5,000 and \$6,000 on emergencies so far this year.

Insurance only covers 50 per cent of the family's dental costs up to a ceiling. Collard's job carries no health benefits. She's already used up her three days of annual sick leave.

Put simply, Collard needs to make more money.

Raise the Rates, a coalition of anti-poverty activists in Vancouver wants the minimum wage bumped to at least \$12 an hour and BC NDP leadership hopeful Nicholas Simons campaigned last year in part on a promise to meet that demand if he led an NDP government. The party chose Adrian Dix -- who supports the present rate -- as its leader.

In any case, merely forcing employers to pay more incurs its own undesirable consequences. It puts financial pressure on small businesses. In turn businesses put pressure on government, typically

arguing that raising minimum rates will lead to fewer people working -- at any wage.

If raising the wage is too expensive for small business, and politically risky for politicians, where does that leave people like Collard?

Economists like Krishna Pendakur from Simon Fraser University say that one answer is for other taxpayers, through the government, to top-up their poorest neighbours' paychecks to a more livable level.

The idea, Pendakur says, is for the public to subsidize minimum wages with "more (money) than the market would have delivered to typically low-skilled people."

We actually do this now in Canada, to a modest degree. We have the **Working Income Tax Benefit** (WITB), which provides a small tax benefit to low-income workers issued four times a year. Several provinces also offer their own supplements for low-income workers, often as part of their provincial poverty plans.

We've even experimented with larger subsidies. The Self-Sufficiency Project (see sidebar) of the early 1990s supplemented wages for thousands of single parents in B.C. and New Brunswick as an incentive to stay off welfare. The United States offers the Earned Income Tax Credit, a similar program for low-income families with children.

Those who favour wage subsidies argue we need to increase and broaden our subsidies if they're going to help low-income workers like Collard.

But the counter argument is the economic pressure it puts on

The Self-Sufficiency Project

In the late 1980s, Barry Carin saw a problem: a majority of people on welfare could have held a job, but they didn't work because, simply put, work didn't pay.

Many were single mothers who couldn't afford to lose the benefits that came with social assistance and pay for the transportation, new clothes and childcare that were required for work. Especially when jobs for low-skilled workers paid only marginally more than welfare.

Carin, assistant deputy minister for the federal Department of Employment and Immigration at the time, believed the patchwork of social assistance programs available to would-be workers was inadequate, and actually prevented people like single parents from getting off welfare.

Inspired by social experiments conducted in the U.S. to test solutions to this "welfare wall," Carin's department convinced the Department of Finance to devote \$100 million to wage experiments. In exchange, Carin's department introduced cuts to unemployment insurance, including stricter eligibility rules and limited the duration of coverage.

Experiments included the Self-Sufficiency Project, a decade-long project involving 9,000 single parents on welfare in B.C. and New Brunswick. Participants who found a job within one year of signing

government. Number crunchers like Michael Mendelson of the Caledon Institute believe tax dollars should instead go to increasing benefits like the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the WITB, and that subsidizing a low-wage economy will make poverty worse on all of us.

Raising the return to work

Previous articles on the 'living wage' and a guaranteed annual income foreshadowed Pendakur's criticisms of those policies' ability to reduce poverty. An economist who researches the social costs of poverty and homelessness, he believes the way to bring the working poor out of poverty is a government wage subsidy.

As Pendakur would have it, British Columbia's minimum wage would remain in place, but the federal or provincial governments would pay a small subsidy to workers making that rate. As their 'market' pay rate increased above the legal minimum wage, the public subsidy would decrease.

For example, if someone earns \$10.25 an hour -- British Columbia's new minimum wage -- the government could add \$5 per hour to that cheque. If they get a raise to \$11.25, the subsidy goes down to \$4 per hour, and so on.

"I like low-wage subsidies because they raise the return to working. And working is good," Pendakur said. "Not just because I'm a Protestant who loves work -- but because working now makes it easier to work later.

onto the project **received** a wage supplement for three years that brought them up to an earnings benchmark. In 1994 that benchmark was \$37,500 (the equivalent of \$53,440.00 in 2012 dollars).

Carin left the project in 1992 to join the Department of Foreign Affairs. He regrets not staying around to ensure the supplement would increase, not decrease, if the participant got a raise.

"You can end up in a situation where somebody gets a raise from \$22,000 to \$24,000, they could end up with less money because they end up in a higher tax bracket and no longer qualify for certain tax benefit programs. You don't want anyone to face a situation where they say 'Don't give me that raise!'"

But despite the claw-back of 50 cents in support for every dollar of increased market earnings, the project was a success. Participants who received subsidies returned to work faster than the control group. Full-time employment increased while welfare recipients

"Long spells of unemployment are correlated with yet-longer spells of unemployment: there's a 'stickiness' to your labour market attachment. So if we want to live in a society where people, throughout their lives, work, then it can be advantageous to subsidize that work so that they do it."

He says subsidies could start with small wage subsidies, a dollar or two per hour, to take into account the possibility of fraud. If government

finds fraud is rare, the subsidies could increase.

It's not such a far-fetched idea. Pendakur compares it to America's Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides low-income families with children a tax benefit to assist with social security costs and keep them in the workforce. It's an **expensive program** that cost the U.S. government \$36 billion in 2004. The money that the program's beneficiaries pay for goods and services, however, cycles through the economy and tax systems, offsetting at least part of that cost.

The Self-Sufficiency Project

Canada already has a small government wage subsidy program in the WITB for low-income workers. In order to qualify for the supplement in B.C., a family must make less than \$27,513, while single parents must earn below \$19,153. For Vancouver, the income thresholds are **less than** every low-income cut-off except that for individuals.

WITB isn't Canada's only foray into subsidizing wages. Several provinces **also offer** modest working income supplements for low-income or unemployed workers, some as a part of an overall provincial poverty reduction strategy. B.C. has a Confirmed Job Supplement for welfare recipients who can't afford the transportation or work-related items required to start a job. There are also a few supplements for **people with disabilities** going through job training and temporary or part-time work.

But the first experiment with a national program was the Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP) (see sidebar). Beginning in the early 1990s it subsidized

the income of thousands of single parents. Tested in British Columbia and New Brunswick, it was designed to get people who could work off welfare.

In a 2003 report, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation concluded the program had paid for itself. Increases in tax revenues and a reduction in welfare enrolment covered most of its cost. The report added that if something like the Self-Sufficiency Program were fully implemented, welfare costs would likely continue to decrease over time.

"There were gains for parents in terms of income," says Reuben Ford, research director for the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. At the same time, researchers "were also testing for how children would fare. And the mid-range age children -- ages four, five and six -- were seeing gains in their vocabulary tests and skills, because they were probably spending more time at daycare," Ford said.

Ford told the Tyee Solutions Society he would have recommended the SSP go nation-wide at the end of its test run almost 10 years ago. But he fears there are fewer people on welfare today capable of finding high-paying jobs.

Welfare numbers have **decreased significantly** in B.C. since the Self-Sufficiency Project began. In 1995, for example, the number of people on social assistance across the province classified as "expected to work" was 293,710, equal to almost half of Vancouver's population today.

In comparison, the number of those "expected to work" this past

February was just 48,716, a significant decrease in the number of people who would benefit from a program like SSP today.

Carin believes the program would still work, an SSP-type benefit would still be a difficult sell. In order to avoid what he calls the "poverty trap," where benefits are clawed back when people make higher wages, some middle-class workers who don't need help will have to get subsidies, too.

"It means people earning \$40,000-\$60,000 who are not your targets are still going to be getting benefits. It's going to be expensive because some of the money has to go to people you don't intend it to go to," he told the Solutions Society.

Even if a national wage subsidy program could in theory pay for itself, that doesn't mean any government is going to soon give it the green light.

"The problem the department of finance has in any government," Carin says, "is they have a bunch of people coming to them that say 'I have a project idea with a great rate of return.' But they can't finance everything with a positive rate of return.

"The burden on somebody promoting an idea like this is you have to argue not only can it pay for itself, you have to argue that the rate of return is even higher than (competing policy ideas) that pay for themselves."

Subsidizing a low-wage economy

The Caledon Institute envisions wage subsidies as part of its "New

Architecture for Adult Benefits," a **re-imagining of the social safety net** for working-age Canadians. In its model, subsidies exist in addition to a higher minimum wage, government tax benefits and strict employment standards for low-wage workers.

But Michael Mendelson, a senior scholar at the Institute, argues that Pendakur's idea for subsidizing low-income jobs could be dangerous for the economy.

"You're going to be distorting the economy so that you've got an over-investment in low-wage jobs," he says, comparing the idea to **subsidizing the price of oil**.

"Not only will it be a low-wage economy, but the price of the products that people pay for goods and services produced by low wages will be (reduced by) an implicit subsidy paid by taxpayers rather than the purchaser. You can't have low levels of poverty in an impoverished economy with low wages."

Mendelson would rather improve tax benefits, like the Canada Child Tax Benefit, which goes to all Canadians with children whether they're employed or not, or the WITB, in addition to enacting other elements of the institute's imagined safety net. He estimates the total cost of the institute's plan could have been covered by the two percentage point cut in the GST rate introduced by the Conservative government over 2006-2008.

Pendakur is not against expanding tax benefit programs in addition to

a wage subsidy. In fact he says that would be one of the cheaper ways of introducing more money into poor people's pockets, because it does not require a large government overhead.

"We could totally expand those things, it would be trivial. It's like a few lines of code. You don't have to pay an administrator, the entire system is already there," he says.

But he isn't holding his breath for an increase under the current government, saying much of what holds back poverty reduction isn't an absence of means, but a lack of political will: "If you just want to raise the payments or raise the threshold it's trivial, all you have to do is pay for it. But are federal Tories going to do that? No, they don't care. It's not their thing," he says.

"My belief is that politicians do not think it's politically salable to make the lives of poor folks any better. It's totally feasible, no problem. The problem is politicians believe the voters don't want to do this stuff."

They may be right. If Canadians are indeed as concerned as Pendakur believes about the effects of poverty, it's clear government isn't getting the message. A wealthy country like Canada could afford a more equal society. But Canadians would need to decide that they'd rather pay to prevent poverty today, than face a larger tab later on.

BC Drops in Child Poverty, Up in Overall Poverty

British Columbia's children were a little less likely to be living in poverty in 2010 than they were in 2009. According to a study **released today** by Statistics Canada, B.C.'s child poverty rate was second to Manitoba's, effectively ending the province's eight-year streak as the province with the highest child poverty.

B.C.'s child poverty rate dropped 1.5 per cent from 11.8 per cent in 2009 to 10.5 per cent in 2010. In a press release issued by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, the Coalition indicated the largest drop came from families with two parents, which saw poverty rates fall a whole three per cent to 7.7 per cent in 2010.

Single mothers, however, saw their poverty rates increase to 16.4 per cent from 15.9 per cent the year before.

Poverty rates for all age groups were higher, too. B.C.'s rate was 11.5 per cent, cementing its position as the province with the highest overall poverty rate for the 12th year in a row.

"The latest statistics show -- once again -- the need for a comprehensive anti-poverty program in British Columbia, supported by every political party," read a statement from Adrienne Montani, provincial coordinator for First Call, in the release.

"Poverty is costing children their health and limiting their ability to reach their full potential."

First Call's release noted the provincial New Democratic Party's bill sitting before the provincial legislature right now that requires the province to adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy with clear goals and timelines. But even if the NDP were to form government after next spring's election, First Call says there's no predicting how long it could take for those plans to be put into action. B.C. is one of only two provinces not working towards or operating under a provincial anti-poverty strategy.

The Liberal government's response to the call for a provincial poverty reduction strategy has been to implement community-based poverty reduction plans, with the first seven set for completion by May 2013. They're also depending on the BC Jobs Plan to lift families out of poverty through employment.

"No government wants to see any child or family living in poverty. That's why government is focussed on a job creation plan that will strengthen the economy, create and protect jobs for families in every region of B.C., and make sure B.C. residents are able to get the skills training and education needed to fill job openings," said Mary McNeil, minister of child and family development, in an email to The Tyee.

"Putting a label on this is not what will bring about real change. Helping families through crises while, at the same time, creating opportunities for jobs and developing strategies together to give families the keys

to capability at the community level is what will give families the springboards they need."

McNeil also noted child poverty rates have dropped 45 per cent since 2003, from 19.2 per cent in 2002 to 10.5 per cent, a much larger drop in child poverty than any other province. However that doesn't include a **spike** in the child poverty rate in 2004 when it was 23.5 per cent, and it only fell back down below 19.2 per cent again in 2007.

First Call critiques 'alleged' BC poverty strategy

A child and youth advocacy organization is calling out the provincial government for creating a poverty strategy without money for new programs and policies.

The provincial government's community-based poverty reduction strategy, announced this past spring, will begin this fall in seven B.C. communities: Surrey, New West Minster, Kamloops, Cranbrook, Prince George, Stewart, and Port Hardy. If successful they plan to spread to 20 communities by the end of 2012, and 47 by 2015.

Organized around the idea there is no "one size fits all" strategy for reducing poverty -- as distinct from the **11 province and territory-wide strategies** that exist or are in development -- government officials will begin to work with 10 to 15 impoverished families in these communities in September.

That's not enough to make a substantial dent in poverty in B.C., let alone eradicate it, according to First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. In *BC's "Alleged" Poverty Reduction Strategies report* released by First Call today, the organization says the strategy is pointless without money and province-wide policies.

"If the BC government wants to be taken seriously on poverty reduction, it has to give top priority to raising welfare rates, raising

wages in low-wage jobs and removing barriers to earning income, such as the lack of affordable child care," reads a statement from Adrienne Montani, provincial coordinator of First Call, in a press release sent out today.

"Regional strategies and community involvement are important, but only if they complement action to boost the incomes of poor families."

The report notes some of the federal programs already successful in lifting families out of poverty, like the Canadian Child Tax Benefit or Employment Insurance, are one-size fits all programs.

In addition, assuming the 400 families the government hopes to help by the end of the year have two kids each, the report says the 800 children assisted by the localized program represent just 0.1 per cent of the 87,000 children believed to be living in poverty in B.C. today.

In an emailed statement to The Tyee, Minister of Child and Family Development Mary McNeil says B.C. is already ahead of the many governments with province and territory-wide plans by increasing minimum wage to \$10.25 an hour this year and building affordable housing.

"We've focused on early child development through StrongStarts,

Neighbourhood Learning Centres and full-day kindergarten expansion; we've introduced health and family supports such as the nurse home visitation program and eliminated or reduced MSP premiums for low-income families," reads McNeil's statement.

"Working directly with families will help us to understand the unique issues and challenges that most need to be addressed in metro, urban, rural and remote settings. The lessons we learn from these first seven communities will provide valuable insight as we expand to additional communities and more families."

First Call's criticisms of the plan are not new -- The Tyee **reported** on similar criticisms in April. But they do offer 15 solutions including raising the minimum wage to \$12 an hour by May 2013 and indexing it to annual cost of living by 2014; adopting living wage for all levels of governments' regular and contract employees; raising B.C. welfare rates above the after-tax Low-Income Cut-Off line; and rescinding all cuts made to Employment Insurance.

McNeil says the best strategy for reducing poverty in B.C. is making sure parents have jobs. But First Call points out in its **2011 Child Poverty Report Card** that 48 per cent of families living in dire circumstances have at least one parent that works full-time.

B.C. had the highest child poverty rate in the country for seven years until 2010. Numbers for 2011 will be released in First Call's *2012 Child Poverty Report Card* released in November.

Finishing the Fight on Poverty

A record decline in single-parent poverty may be stalled. How to rescue the remaining poor?



'I thought "how can I stop this cycle?": Minna and Martin Kim in Vancouver.

Minna Kim started life over at 27, when she took her infant son and fled Ontario for Vancouver, leaving behind her abusive partner.

But back in her hometown life got off to a rocky start. She was forced to move back into her parents' house and, with no childcare, meager and irregular child-support payments, and no job, she had to apply for income assistance.

"Obviously I didn't want to live on welfare. I don't want that for my son, and how horrible would it be if he [was on welfare] in the second

generation?" says Kim, who spent six months on income assistance before returning to school on student loans.

"I thought, 'How can I stop this cycle?' I've always had in me the desire to help people, and I decided to go into social work because having lived that experience of being in an abusive relationship and having to go on welfare, I thought I want to help someone who's going through the same thing."

Even though she spent less than a year on social assistance, employment didn't provide enough money to keep her family out of poverty. It was through a combination of government childcare subsidies and student loans, a diploma in social work, a job, and subsidized housing from a non-profit, that Kim was finally able to push her family above the poverty line.

Now, almost 12 years after they left Ontario, she and her now 13-year-old son Martin enjoy a few of the finer things in life: "Actually having a bathtub instead of just a standup shower; ventilation in the kitchen; [and] a big enough bedroom to sleep in. My son is so good-natured: there were some places we stayed at that the bedroom for him was as small as a closet."

Living on just over \$25,000 a year after taxes, the Kims aren't rich. But they are part of a promising trend: the percentage of single parent

families living below Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) after taxes has plummeted in the last 15 years, falling by more than half.

Canada's welfare rolls have **dropped**, too, from 3 million people in 1995 to just over 1.6 million in 2005, the last year the now-defunct National Council of Welfare provided a national estimate. One of the biggest drops was in the single parents who were able to work category.

It hasn't been a steady decline, but the numbers have moved from almost one in two single-parent households living in poverty, to fewer than one in five. Where 15 years ago almost half of all single parent families were destined to live below the country's poverty line, now 80 per cent live above it. No matter how you slice it, it's a significant victory for poverty reduction in Canada.

What's behind the shift?

Several ideas are raised to explain the success, and not all researchers agree on what's to thank. One I spoke to said it's a combination of "tough love" welfare-to-work policies that forced single parents off income assistance, matched with other, "soft-love" measures such as the introduction of a National Child Benefit Supplement in 1998.

But others credit demographics. Single mothers head up the great majority of single parent families. And whereas single mothers of the '80s and early '90s were usually young, undereducated, and underemployed, single moms of the late '90s and beyond tend to be older, more educated and better established in their careers, making it easier to stay out of poverty.

In Search of the 'Poverty Line'

Statistics Canada **maintains** its Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) line isn't a poverty line but rather a measure of people deemed to be "low-income." The line represents what family would need to earn in order to spend no more than 20 percentage points of its income above what the the average family would spend on shelter, clothing, and food, based on family size and community. If you spend more than one-fifth of your income above what the average family in your demographic spends on the barest of these necessities, you may be below the LICO.

There are two LICO measures: before and after tax. Stats Can prefers the after-tax LICO, which accounts for public transfers redistributing income. Various benefits pull some families who fall below the LICO before tax, above it afterward.

Statistics Canada doesn't call the LICO a "poverty line," saying there is no consistent definition of what poverty is in Canada. Instead, it says the LICO "identifies those who are substantially worse off than the average." That could include students receiving loans, or families with substantial assets apart from their income.

Even so, many economists, social policy experts, politicians and, yes, journalists do use LICO to measure hardship in this country. It's the best we have.

Whatever the reason, everyone we spoke to agrees the success so far has been the easy part. The remaining 20 per cent of single parents aren't getting out of poverty on their own.

No one is saying single parent poverty can't go any lower. But we do need to make changes or do more to bring these remaining families out of poverty. However there is no consensus on exactly how we do that.

John Richards, the Roger Phillips chair in Social Policy at the C.D. Howe Institute and a professor in the Public Policy Program at Simon Fraser University, thinks the status quo is insufficient. But he doesn't think a major shakeup of the tax benefit system is the way to go.

"In many ways I think getting [poverty rates] down even lower is not just a question of short-term back-to-work policy or more generous income assistance or childcare subsidy," says Richards.

"There are always tweaks. Like better education for early childhood for families at risk like low-income, single parent families. We're hoping that the next generation will have a better position in the labour force."

Others say it's going to take more than a few tweaks here and there to bring down lone parent poverty: "Poverty reduction measures are often not about income, they're about supports and things that let people continue to get back to work," says Armine Yalnizyan, a senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

For Yalnizyan that means more than just early childhood education: it's access to good schools, safe housing, neighbourhoods with green spaces

But neither U.S. nor Canadian governments were prepared to adopt such risky programs without testing them first.

"There was widespread interest across North America in 'rationalizing' income support programs, but also concern that good programs would lead people to reduce their work effort," Forget told The Solutions Society.

"[In the early 1970s] four experiments in the U.S. were providing data, but Canada wanted its own data. GAI was an interest of the Liberals in Ottawa and the [NDP] government in Manitoba."

With a cost projection of \$17 million, Manitoba secured Ottawa's commitment to foot that majority of the bill for simultaneous projects in Winnipeg and Dauphin, dubbed MINCOME.

The Dauphin study is of particular interest to Forget because it was the only one where non-workers -- the elderly, unemployed, and disabled -- were also included.

An agriculture community with a population of about 12,500 including the surrounding rural area, everyone in Dauphin was eligible to receive 60 per cent of the low-income cut-off line for a family their size. Families with no source of income received the full amount. For those with an income source, every dollar of earned income reduced the GAI by 50 cents.

and public assets like libraries and community centres, and public transit without having to skip meals or miss bill payments.

To push single-parent poverty to single digits or lower, we first need to understand why some parents have managed to climb out of poverty while others can't seem to keep their heads above water.

Tough love, soft love

In 1996, the fraction of single-parent families living under the LICO after tax was 49.3 per cent, the highest it had been in almost two decades. In comparison, poverty among two-parent families was barely a quarter as severe, at just 10.7 per cent. (See Sidebar.)

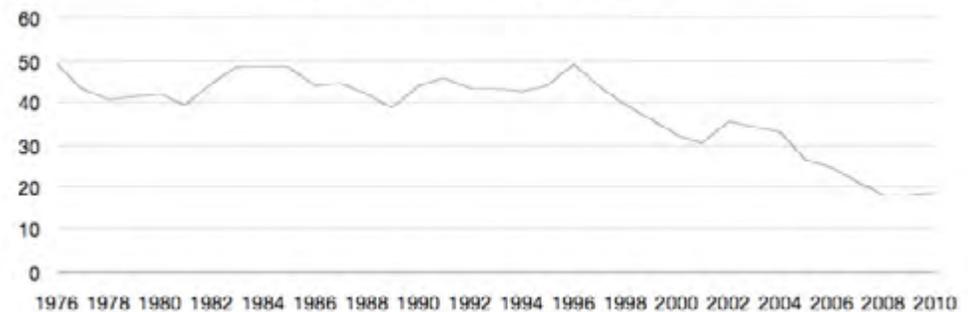
The country had just recovered from a late-1980s recession, followed by massive cuts in the government sector in an effort to **reduce a national deficit** that had reached \$42 billion, nine per cent of Canada's GDP.

With the increase in poverty came an expansion of welfare rolls. In 1994 when the **national welfare numbers peaked**, there were 200,000 single parents on welfare, not counting their children who lived with them on social assistance. The following year in British Columbia, single parent families accounted for 151,000 out of 341,000 social assistance clients.

But by 2008, the number of single parent families on welfare in B.C. fell to 28,000.

"By my own conclusion, two things happened that worked together," says Richards. "One was more generous benefits to low-income families with children, and the other is that most provincial welfare systems

Lone Parent Low-Income Levels in Canada, 1976-2010



Percentage of persons in lone parent families in low income, after tax 1992 base

Source: Statistics Canada CANSIM table 202-0804.

became more strict in allowing low-income parents to have social assistance if there was no other presenting problems [preventing them from working]."

Keeping parents with no barriers to working off the provincial welfare rolls is what Richards refers to as a "tough love" policy. The federal government toughened its "love" as well, making it harder for repeat applicants and seasonal workers to get what was then known as federal unemployment insurance.

But with those sticks also came carrots: "soft love" measures to help families off welfare rolls and keep them in the labour market, like the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS).

The NCBS is made up of two parts. Ottawa's contribution is an extra payment to low-income families added to their Canada Child Tax

Benefit (CCTB), received monthly by all middle and low-income families with children under 18.

British Columbia's contribution was more selective. Low-income working parents were allowed to keep Ottawa's NCBS money. Parents on public assistance however, had the supplement clawed back from welfare or child benefits. Victoria promised to re-invest the money it took in, services to benefit children of low-income families.

The point was to create more incentive to get off welfare. Previously, parents often saw little change in income when they moved from welfare to working. Some even saw their situation worsen when they lost welfare benefits like dental and drug coverage for their children.

In his paper Richards credits the NCBS with enabling families to leave welfare on lower earned incomes than previously, because the federal supplement topping up working parents' income was enough to make a job more profitable than being on welfare.

Single moms work it out

But it wasn't just a change in government policies that brought single parents off the welfare rolls. Unlike the recession of the early 1980s, single mothers -- by far the majority of single parents in Canada -- were different this time around.

An increase in the divorce rate and a decrease in teen pregnancy meant single moms were typically older and more educated than a decade

earlier. They had labour market experience already, so even if they lost their job it was easier to find another one.

It also didn't hurt that Canada experienced one of the biggest job booms in the post-'80s world.

"The mid-1990s, that's your high water mark of poverty," says Yalnizyan. "Then we create more jobs than any other nation in the [then] G-7 and we've got a fraction of the population, and you've got a sense of how poverty is likely to drop."

While most single mothers from the mid-to-late 1990s have raised all their kids by now, the cohort of single mothers from 2000s is having a similar experience.

"What we do see over the last decade is changes in the labour market experiences of lone mothers," says Sylvia Fuller, an associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. "More lone mothers are engaged in paid employment and in paid employment at higher rates, [and] are more likely to work full-time than before."

Post-recession employment is unstable: Yalnizyan

All these experts agree however that the good news on single parents is over for now -- the decline in their numbers has leveled off. Fuller, who has done extensive research in B.C. and Ontario, believes the number of single parents in poverty has been stalled since about 2009 because many would need help beyond the NCBS to get off welfare.

Almost half of lone mothers in this province on social assistance now are in some kind of medicalized category," says Fuller. "So they're either classified as disabled or they're classified as someone with persistent multiple barriers to employment.

"For the most part, lone mothers who do not have massive barriers to employment because of health problems or addictions problems, they're off the [welfare] caseload. Or if they're on the caseload, they're on for a very short period of time and then they're moving back into the labour force."

Yalnizyan has a different theory about why single parents' poverty rates stalled. She's been tracking Canada's job growth since the 2008 recession and says that while employment has increased, it's not the secure, well-paid jobs with benefits that single parents need.



'Poverty reduction measures are often not about income, they're about supports and things that let people continue to get back to work' says Armine Yalnizyan, CCPA senior economist.

"Compared to May, 2008, four out of five of the jobs created [since then] are temporary," she said.

"The first people that go in a downturn are term and contract. The employer has the least loyalty to [them]. And we saw it: the biggest loss of jobs came before Oct. 2008, and they were temporary workers. That category of workers lost jobs before the full time ones, but [temporary and part-timers] were the first workers that got jobs back."

Temporary or part-time jobs offer none of the advantages of full-time employment: supplemental health and dental insurance, time off to take a kid to the doctor or attend their school play, chance of advancement or a raise.

Economist Yalnizyan believes it is federal policy to see lower wages, for less secure jobs, dominate the Canadian employment landscape. She cites Ottawa's inaction when U.S.-based Caterpillar closed its London, Ont. plant after workers **refused** to take a 50 per cent pay cut, its support for hiring more temporary foreign workers, and measures to make it more difficult for Canadians to receive Employment Insurance.

"If the only answer is work, and the amount of money you get for work is dropping, costs are rising and your security at work is falling, that's bad for any household with children, because it makes that person more focused on maintaining their job," said Yalnizyan.

"Which certainly makes it more challenging to be devoted to your family when you have that kind of pressure for anybody to have time to raise their kids."

Softer approach to easing poverty

Among households with children, those with single parents are still twice as likely to live in poverty as kids with two. And living with parents in poverty puts children at **increased risk** of growing up to continue to live in poverty.

So if the status quo won't bring the numbers any lower, what *could* we do to bring single-parent poverty at least to par with other families in Canada, if not even lower?

C.D. Howe/SFU policy expert Richards thinks more "soft love" -- policies like raising welfare rates and reducing benefit claw-backs -- would help families make and sustain the transition to the other side of the poverty line.

Currently families with one earner and two children who make between \$20,000 and \$40,000 see as much as 40 per cent of their benefits "clawed back." These claw-backs, combined with income taxes, are known as the "marginal tax rate."

"One way to help the 'near poor', [people] earning over 20k, is to lower the claw back rate, which results in a lower marginal effective tax rate over the [\$20,000 to \$40,000] range," Richards wrote in an email.

But he cautions that reducing claw backs risks giving money to some people who don't need it, too.

Sociologist Fuller believes we need to re-examine how we treat single parents on income assistance who have very young children. Back in the 1990s, single parents in B.C. with children under the age of seven were not expected to look for work. Welfare reforms under the current Liberal government lowered that age to three.

The change accommodated changing social norms: not all parents *want* to stay at home with their children for years. But a shortage of childcare spaces have meant that many single parents who would like to get a job can't, because they have no one to look after their children.

"I wouldn't go so far as to argue it's a bad thing to be suggesting that lone mothers be engaged in paid employment where possible, but we have to also make that possible," Fuller told The Tyee Solutions Society.

For Fuller that means government invest in an adequate number of low-cost, good quality childcare spaces in British Columbia.

It's where you live

Think-tank economist Yalnizyan has a more out-of-the-box idea -- almost literally. She believes that helping families raise their children in a good neighbourhood can break the cycle of poverty.

"If you don't have a lot of income to spare, it's extremely difficult to live in a neighbourhood which is supportive of childhood development, that has plenty of opportunities in the mix: green space, good schools, easy transportation, lots of recreational things to do," she said.

"The opportunities that a child has, it's not just [that] their parents have got low income, it's [that] the communities in which they live are not very supportive."

A lone parent salary could stretch much further if governments provided affordable housing, childcare, transportation in low-income neighbourhoods, as well as tuition for lone parent families. Although it would be quite an expensive cost for taxpayers to cover, Yalnizyan says it would be repaid at least partially by an increase in lone parents' purchasing power.

It was proper housing that finally brought the Kim family out of poverty. Even basement apartments in Coquitlam were expensive for a single mom and her son, so Kim considers it "a miracle" that her application to live in a new YWCA apartment building for single moms was accepted earlier this year.

"Having affordable and safe subsidized housing, it's like an actual godsend for a single mom. We used to balance everything to the penny," says Kim, who has been living in her new apartment since April and pays just \$670 per month in rent.

That cost will be cut further, by more than half, if her son Martin later attends post-secondary school full-time and lives at home. This

extra incentive to reach for the academic stars also increases Martin's prospects of escaping poverty for good when he enters the working world.

"Housing is one of the biggest areas that can be a success for single parents to move forward and be able to do better for your child and yourself, by having that housing," says Kim. "Without that, it's just a cycle: poverty begetting poverty."

In a place where accommodation is as expensive as the Lower Mainland, families like the Kims work hard, but still can't make it without help from non-profits and government subsidies.

Society's payoff for that help may only come later, when the next generation achieves economic lift-off.

Effective public benefits have brought the number of single parents living in poverty in Canada down by half over 20 years. Winning the rest of the battle may take another generation -- and Canadians willing to invest in parents.

What Life Without a Living Wage Looks Like

Two Vancouver events examine the working poor's experience in the 'livable' city.



Featured in an upcoming exhibition (see bottom of story for details), this image depicts the daily commute for low-income families getting children to daycare and school while parents commute between multiple shifts at various low-wage jobs. Days for families like this often begin at 5 a.m. and end with an 8 p.m. supper time. Photo by Anne Marie Slater.

It's a paradox well known to residents of the Lower Mainland: Vancouver is repeatedly awarded the title of most livable city in the entire world, yet many of its residents are just scraping by. According to BC Stats, in 2005 more than one in five Vancouverites lived under the low-income cut-off line after tax, too poor to cover basic needs like food, clothing, transportation, and shelter in one of the most expensive cities in Canada.

But less than two per cent of the city's population is on income assistance, meaning most people living under the poverty line are

"working poor." Demographically speaking, working poor in Vancouver are typically immigrants and women with children, unaware of their labour rights or the advocacy work on their behalf.

Citing statistics about the working poor is easy. But the Living Wage Campaign for Families actually spoke to people living behind the label. Through the Listening Circles project, the wage equity organization recruited 15 men and women in the Mount Pleasant area to come to weekly meetings to discuss their experience working for a low wage while raising a family.

Supporting low-wage workers isn't just about raising wages; it's about making cities truly livable for all residents, no matter their incomes. The Living Wage Campaign for Families is taking that message public this week with two events, a photography exhibition featuring images inspired by the Listening Circle, and a forum on making cities livable for people regardless of their income levels.

For Michael McCarthy-Flynn, campaign organizer, these events are about familiarizing residents from the Lower Mainland with the substantial number of families who are struggling to get by: "Ironically this is the reality for some of the families who are providing the (low-wage) services that make our city livable."

Giving voice to hopelessness

The biggest coup for living wage advocates in B.C. is arguably the conversion of the City of New Westminster into Canada's first living wage municipality in 2011. It's closely followed by Vancity Credit Union's conversion later that same year, making it the largest company in the country to adopt a living wage.

A slow but steady stream of smaller businesses and government employers, like School District 69 (Parksville/Qualicum), continue to make the switch to equitable wages, but it's hard to keep the issue on the public's radar with tiny victories.

Instead the Living Wage Campaign tried a different tactic through the Listening Circles project. Funded by the Catherine Donnelly Foundation, McCarthy-Flynn and the Living Wage Campaign worked with the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House to recruit members of the community whom have either recently worked for low wages or still are to discuss the difficulties they face.

McCarthy-Flynn says it was difficult at first to get the participants, mostly immigrant women with children, to agree to open up about their private affairs in front of strangers.

"This is often the first time they really thought about this. They are in quite difficult situations, which are often quite hopeless, and to talk about them can be quite traumatic because our society views being able to look after yourself as a key moral good, whereas these people are in situations where they can't earn enough," he says.

But after eight weeks of meeting together to discuss their issues, their rights as workers, and how to get the story of their struggles out to the wider public, hope emerged. Together the participants decided to help the Living Wage Campaign put together a public art exhibition and forum on the struggles faced by living wage workers.

"A big thing that we're trying to achieve with this is (to convey) a sense of hopelessness and a sense of despair that people have in low-wage jobs: 'I'll never get out of this, this is my situation for the rest of my life,'" says McCarthy-Flynn. "(But) even just giving people (a) voice is giving them a sense of hope."

Pictures tell the story

McCarthy-Flynn hopes these events will show members of the public, as well as civic leaders, that you don't have to be a business owner in order to support a living wage.

"Living Cities: Reducing Child Poverty, Photography and Social Change," a photography exhibit running Sept. 12 to 17 at The Roundhouse in downtown Vancouver, will feature photography by artist Anne Marie Slater. Slater worked with participants of The Listening Circle to interpret struggles they face as low-income earners through the medium of photography.

"One image that came up for people was not having food in their house and how to deal with children who are hungry," says McCarthy-Flynn. "(It's) looking at having an empty fridge in your house, and how you can

be in a city that's supposedly one of the most livable cities in the world where some people don't earn enough to eat."

Although the show starts Sept. 12, an opening gala for the event will be held at The Roundhouse on Sept. 13 with guest moderator Kathryn Gretsinger, an award-winning CBC journalist. Gretsinger, who has reported extensively on poverty and families in the region, says the event is important to her because it gives voice to the powerless.

"It takes time and relationships to get those stories out, and sadly a lot of people don't spend time going out and talking to people who don't have a lot of power, and people who are poor don't often have a lot of power," Gretsinger told The Tyee.

"I hope (people) think about what these stories and what this art is trying to make us think about the way that the world works, and ask questions about what a living wage is. It's not just a poster on a campaign, it actually means something, and if we could do a tiny bit to get people thinking about that, that would be amazing."

Lower Mainland mainly unaffordable

Both events are open to members of the public (although you need to register ahead of time) and McCarthy-Flynn hopes The Children and Livable Cities Forum on Friday will attract city workers from across the Lower Mainland, community organizations that represent low-wage workers, and people interested in using art as a form of activism.

For city workers in particular, McCarthy-Flynn points out cost and livability issues aren't limited to Vancouver alone. The Greater Vancouver Regional District had a low-income population of 16.5 per cent in 2005, with only 1.6 per cent on the welfare rolls last year.

"For us to develop truly livable cities, we need to take into account families who live on low wages for whom our cities aren't really livable, and we need to move beyond the built environment, things that we look at in terms of having a livable city, whether its playgrounds, transit, etc.," he says.

"(We need) to look at the social reality for a large amount of our cities, which isn't livable no matter how much density we build."

McCarthy-Flynn hopes that everyone comes away from these events asking what they can do to make the Lower Mainland truly livable for all its residents. Large employers like the City of Vancouver won't change because the Living Wage for Families says they should, he says.

"They will change if a lot of people are asking for this, and we're trying to give people the tools and ammunition to get into a persuasive dialogue and generate community support for what we're asking, which is for large employers to take on living wage jobs for families in Vancouver."

What will Minister Cadieux Do for BC Kids in Care?

The fifth minister for children and family dev't in six years is taking on a ministry 'in crisis'.



New Minister for Children and Families and Development Stephanie Cadieux: Promises a 'steady hand.'

Just three years into her political career, BC Liberal Stephanie Cadieux took on her fourth cabinet portfolio earlier this month when Premier Clark appointed her to the controversial Children and Family Development portfolio.

Cadieux told The Tyee she is "excited" to work in a ministry that affects so many children and families in the province.

Replacing Mary McNeil, who announced her retirement from politics only a week before, Cadieux is the fifth politician to head the ministry in six years. With a provincial election just eight months away, there's no guarantee Cadieux will remain minister for long.

But while McNeil's retirement necessitated a replacement, social workers in the province are wary of more change, especially when they're struggling with the implementation of a new case management system. By appointing a less-experienced minister to the portfolio, social workers fear the worst is yet to come from Premier Clark's government.

"Any inexperienced minister would be a concern, because it is an extremely important ministry," says Carol Ross, chair of the BC Association of Social Workers' Child and Family Welfare Committee.

"It's about the welfare of children, and the impact on families across the province can be huge. So I'm hoping (Cadieux) has the wisdom to rely on her skillful staff and not attempt to make radical changes to the whole database problem."

Inheriting a messy ministry

Since its creation in 1996, MCFD has struggled. After a series of high profile deaths of children in government care in the early 2000s, an inquiry by Justice Ted Hughes produced what's commonly referred to as the Hughes Report in 2006 with 62 recommendations for improving care for vulnerable youth in B.C. These included the creation of the representative for children and youth, and stopping the "revolving door" of ministers -- 11 in 10 years.

The portfolio has changed hands five times since the report's release, but in 2010 then-minister Mary Polak **told The Tyee** she hoped the turnover stopped with her: "I know there's a reputation for ministers not wanting to be in this spot, but when (former premier Gordon Campbell) asked what I was interested in, I told him I wanted this ministry and I was very pleased when he decided to take me up on that," she said.

"(Former MCFD minister) Tom Christensen was a long serving minister; I hope I am."

But after high profile clashes with the Representative for Children and Youth Mary Ellen-Turpel LaFond, which **peaked** when Turpel LaFond successfully sued the government for access to cabinet files in 2010 to complete an audit on MCFD's Child in the Home of a Relative program, Pollak was replaced as minister of MCFD by McNeil in March 2011.

Compared to Pollak, McNeil brought stability to the ministry: "She went a long way to mending the relationship with the Representative's office, and when that's a positive working relationship it ripples down to be a benefit to social workers," says Ross.

But that stability was put to the test earlier this year when the ministry's transition to the new Integrated Case Management (ICM) system from its old Management Information System resulted in so many technical problems that social workers had to enter information into two different case management systems. If they worked for a Delegated Aboriginal Agency, which serve for aboriginal children and families in B.C., social workers had to use a third system, the Cowichan Tribes-designed Best Practices case management system, too.

One of McNeil's last acts as minister was to pledge another \$12 million and 150 new auxiliary workers so social workers could spend more time working with families and kids and less time trying to decipher the complicated ICM system. But the issue is far from resolved.

"I can't stress enough that the problems with the (ICM) system have tipped workers and the system over the edge," Ross says.

"There are huge privacy issues and huge concerns about workload issues and stress levels for workers, and therefore they're unable to spend the time they want to spend and need to spend providing families with services."

From controversy to controversy

Cadieux is no stranger to cleaning up the messes of her predecessors, however. Appointed to the Ministry of Social Development less than a year ago, Cadieux became the fall person for the Community Living

B.C. (CLBC) **scandal** despite the fact it happened under her predecessor, former minister Harry Bloy.

Although Bloy was demoted for his involvement, the revelation that CLBC managers would see hold back pay included in their normal salaries was widely interpreted by the media and public as a financial bonus for bad work. After just a few months as minister, Cadieux faced much criticism over a move that was apparently **in the works** long before she took the portfolio.

Cadieux's work with the ministry draws praise from some. Before she was elected in 2009, she worked with Spinal Cord Injury B.C. for eight years. A paraplegic herself, Cadieux was the main driver behind the creation of a successful peer support program for new spinal cord injury patients in the province.

It's the same compassion and practicality that former Spinal Cord Injury B.C. colleague Maureen Brownlee saw in Cadieux's work as minister of social development.

"Speaking personally, I think she did a tremendous job. Stephanie is really knowledgeable about the issues and she's a really competent manager," Brownlee told The Tyee. "She's really thoughtful and very strategic and decisive."

From her own perspective, Cadieux believes she left social development better off: "I was able to get out and talk to people and get a sense of what the depth of that problem was, along with the reviews that we had done, (and) I think we got a good go-forward plan," she says.

"We have been putting the steps in place over the year that we laid out and I believe that work is well underway and will continue."

In shifting jobs, Cadieux told The Tyee she is excited to be running a ministry now that can make a difference in the lives of children and families who live in circumstances that make them vulnerable. But as minister of social development her actions had an effect on vulnerable children, too.

When Opposition New Democratic Party member Jagrup Brar spent a month living on welfare in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood earlier this year, by the end of the month he had lost weight and was \$9 in debt. Yet Cadieux **denied** there were issues with the province's social assistance levels.

"It's a careful balance we always have to find between what we are able to provide from a financial perspective and what taxpayers feel comfortable with, as well," she told The Vancouver Courier at the time.

Six months later Cadieux was announcing "modest changes" in social assistance that will come into effect next month. Some of the changes included covering dental care for children on social assistance and raising back-to-school bonuses to \$100 from \$84 for five to 11 year olds, and to \$175 from \$116 for children over 12.

MCFD in crisis: Young

For Tracey Young, it doesn't matter who holds the minister's position

in MCFD. The social work advocate who quit MCFD in 2009 and now works as a psychiatric social worker says the Liberal government have been running the department like a business for over a decade, and the problems in the ministry will continue until they change their ways.

"The continuing problems of MCFD are very much related to the last decade of employee cuts, hiring freezes and ever-present re-organization and changed processes which have detracted from the core activities of MCFD, most importantly, a focus on protecting at-risk children and youth," she told the Tyee via email.

Young says MCFD is in an almost constant state of crisis, and that the current ICM issues are predictable because the ministry failed to consult its own employees before introducing the new system. She doesn't foresee appointing a new minister as bringing any change, positive or negative, to the situation.

"(Minister Cadieux) is neither responsible for the state of MCFD, nor will she likely have much to do with the crisis B.C.'s child welfare system will continue to experience until they make real improvements," she says.

"Making real change and improvements in the child welfare system of care is going to require the will of the B.C. government and a much more strategic action and investment plan for recruitment, health and safety and retention of frontline workers."

Ross says Premier Clark is running the risk of undoing a lot of good relationship building by appointing a relatively new minister to the

portfolio, although McNeil was elected for the first time in 2009 as well. In addition to the fragile relationship with Turpel-LaFond, Ross says the B.C. Association of Social Workers has a good working relationship with Deputy Minister Stephen Brown.

"Our hope certainly is that there won't be any changes at (the deputy minister) level because that's a key position, especially when you're so close to an election. Any changes are going to have an impact on social work staff," she says.

But Cadieux says she has no plans to make big waves at her new ministry. Acknowledging the uncertain future of her role as minister, she told The Tyee she would be staying the course McNeil set for the ministry, including keeping Brown as deputy minister.

"I can totally understand from the perspective of individuals who work in the ministry how unsettling it is to get a new minister on a regular basis. I am certainly going to do everything I can as minister to maintain a steady hand over the ministry, following through on the plans laid out by (McNeil)," she says.

"My goal is just to constantly find ways to improve the way that we serve children and families in the province, and I think the way that we do that is collaboratively with our stakeholders."

BC Child and Youth Watchdog Criticizes Unstable Child Services

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is not doing a good job of stabilizing the lives of children in the ministry's care, and it's leading kids to self-harm and even suicide. That's the emphasis of a report issued by the Representative For Children and Youth this morning that analyzed the suicides of 15 kids and instances of self-harm of another 74 from 2008 to 2010.

Trauma, Turmoil and Tragedy: Understanding the Needs of Children and Youth at Risk of Suicide and Self-Harm is the Representative For Children and Youth (RCY) Office's second aggregate review of ministry data on child deaths and injuries as required by The Hughes Report, the first being on deaths of children in care under two years of age.

Although each child's case was different, there were common themes: unstable foster home situations that led to 776 moves in total for 56 of the children; histories of abuse, neglect, and domestic violence in the family; lack of comprehensive treatment for mental health issues; problems at school; and romantic troubles within 24-hours of the self-harm or suicide.

"The planning for children in care was not adequate, and we're seeing, either because of the absence of more therapeutic caregivers (or) meaningful plans to meet their mental health issues, we're seeing some

very dramatic circumstances where kids are just not having their needs met," Turpel-Lafond told The Tyee.

Like the children in care system overall, Turpel Lafond found an overrepresentation of Aboriginal children among those who self-harmed: eight of 15 the children who committed suicide and 44 of the children who self-harmed identified as Aboriginal.

Delegated Aboriginal agencies, authorized through agreements between the government and First Nations provide child and family services to Aboriginal populations were only providing services to 38 per cent of the Aboriginal children in this review. Less than half of the Aboriginal children were living in Aboriginal placements, although the ministry is aiming to **increase** the number of placements in Aboriginal homes to 61.5 per cent by 2014/15.

But improving mental health services for children and youth was the only recommendation Turpel LaFond included in the report.

"The child's experience is one of re-traumatizing kids who are already challenged, and for whom we need to help," she says.

MCFD Minister Stephanie Cadieux addressed the media during a conference call this afternoon, saying she appreciates the work Turpel-Lafond has done on the report and accepts her recommendation. She

says much of the problems outlined in the report are already on the ministry's radar, but have nothing to do with **issues** with their Integrated Case Management system.

"We're currently developing a two-year action plan that will review and strengthen our child and youth mental health services, and that includes collaborating with stakeholders in Aboriginal communities to improve our Aboriginal child and youth mental health services," she says.

Stability for children in care was also a common theme that came up at MCFD's recent review of children in care. This involved consulting with 600 stakeholders, including MCFD and contracted organization staff, foster parents, Aboriginal Delegated Agencies, and youth in care.

"As a result of all of that work, we're putting extra focus on creating more stability and permanency, and as recommended by the representative, we're implementing a process to review and take action on any child that's in care that is moving more than three times in a 12 month period," says Minister Cadieux.

Training for dealing with victims of trauma is another ministry focus, specifically for foster parents to create a stronger connection and sense of understanding when they foster traumatized children.

The problem could be bigger than even the report reveals, however. Turpel-Lafond has criticized MCFD in the past for not reporting injuries and deaths of children in their care. She says reporting has since improved, but believes the list of suicides and injuries in this report is modest compared to the actual numbers.

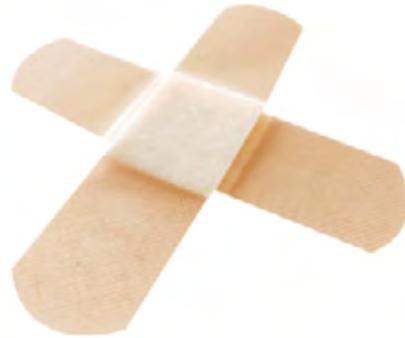
"It was hard to go back and find ones that they maybe didn't report to us," she told The Tyee.

"We really don't have very reliable data on that point, which is a problem. All I can say is that for the cohort we look at here, we could have made interventions in many of these cases."

Enough with Child Poverty 'Band-aids': BC Teachers' Union

While some teachers decry 'just incredible poverty,' the province says its policies are already reducing the rates.

The latest statistics for child poverty in 2010 show British Columbia held onto its second-highest child poverty ranking in the country for the second year in a row. But while Manitoba has again taken the undesirable top spot, B.C. still has more poor children than the national average. t



Annual report card finds B.C. still holds the second-highest child poverty ranking in the country for another year. Band-aid image via Shutterstock.

The **2012 Child Poverty Report Card** released this morning by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition shows B.C.'s child poverty rate fell in 2010 to 10.5 per cent after tax from 12 per cent the year before. Higher than the national average of 8.2 per cent, First Call estimates 87,000 children in the province live in poverty.

For the BC Teachers' Federation, this comes as little surprise. They contend teachers in B.C. deal with child poverty every day: kids coming to school without food, wearing the same clothes for days, or living in substandard, over-crowded housing.

There's little individual teachers can do to challenge poverty on their own. But as a union, the BCTF is focusing on the cause this month more than ever as part of their Year of Action leading up to May's provincial election.

"We know B.C. has led the country in high rates of child poverty for a long time now," said Susan Lambert, BCTF president. "We're also one of the very few provinces that don't have a child poverty reduction plan, and our contention is that unless you take on the work of developing a plan, setting goals, setting guidelines, you will never, ever address the issue."

B.C. is just one of two provinces and territories **without a poverty reduction plan**, but not every province with a plan -- like Manitoba, which has had one since 2009 -- is succeeding in the fight.

Instead of a provincial plan, the B.C. government opted for a series of community-based poverty reduction plans, which it says will suit communities' different needs.

"Our community poverty reduction strategies are meant to complement the targeted supports we are providing at the provincial level, with a focus on reducing poverty, mitigating its effects and supporting services for low-income families at a community level," reads an emailed

statement from the B.C. Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD).

The plans do not come with any new funding, however, which critics say is needed to move families out of poverty. With an election looming, the teachers' union is determined to make child poverty a hot button issue and convince the next government to follow the rest of the country in pledging to make a provincial plan to reduce it.

'Just incredible poverty'

The teachers' union has long been an anti-poverty advocate. In recent years, including this year, they have hosted First Call's Child Poverty Report Card press briefing in their Vancouver headquarters. They also conduct professional development workshops like "Teachers Can Make A Difference for Children Living in Poverty," designed to help teachers meet the needs of students living in poverty.

The Tyee was invited to attend the most recent "Teachers Can Make A Difference" workshop in Surrey on Nov. 9, where teachers from inner city and affluent schools in the Surrey School District detailed their struggles with educating children who live in poverty.

"In the classroom a few of my kids everyday don't have breakfast or food, and most of my class is on the lunch program. I'd say every kid but one," said one teacher. All but one of the teachers attending the workshop asked not to be named because of an obligation to the school board.

"Most of them don't have clean clothes, aren't getting picked up after school -- just incredible poverty."

Another teacher recalled how one student's year-long struggle with head lice made her wish she could do more: "You just want to take the kids home. I'm at a more affluent school now, and my husband likes that because I don't come home crying," she said.

"If I could, I would have adopted them all. But you can't do that realistically."

For their month-long anti-poverty campaign, the union is focusing on their platform from their [**Better Schools for BC**](#) document, which serves as the basis for the entire Year of Action, using a different platform from the document as a cause for every month.

One of their actions in November has been collecting signatures for petitions addressed to municipal governments in B.C., asking them to pressure the provincial government to create a province-wide poverty reduction plan.

"I'm hoping we can change government's mind," said Lambert. In addition to making it difficult to for children to learn, Lambert says poverty is often a catalyst for bullying.

"This is a premier, for heaven's sake, who talks about the family, who's on the bullying bandwagon all the time, but actually hasn't done anything

that would help alleviate conditions that led to stresses in families and that lead to bullying."

Child poverty dropping: MCFD

First Call makes 15 recommendations in the 2012 Child Poverty Report Card, including increasing the minimum wage and indexing it to the cost of living, raising social assistance rates, and introducing an affordable childcare plan.

But the organization also agrees with the BCTF's recommendation for solving child poverty in B.C.: create a comprehensive, accountable poverty reduction plan with set timelines and targets.

Regarding Manitoba's child poverty issues despite having a comprehensive poverty reduction plan, Lorraine Copas, executive director of the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC), which collaborated with First Call on the report card, says Manitoba's situation could be unique.

"You'd have to look at what's behind (Manitoba's numbers); they could have a certain economic situation that's resulted in a situation (with child poverty)," she said at the report card launch this morning.

"I haven't looked fully at Manitoba's (plan), but it's actually how you structure your programs, what types of clawbacks you put into place, what types of incentives you've actually put into place to help people move out of poverty, and what you can do to prevent others from falling into poverty."

But the government says its strategy for reducing poverty is already working. So far seven communities have poverty reduction plans in the works, with a goal of eventually creating plans for 47 B.C. communities. These plans will work in conjunction with province-wide changes such as the increase of minimum wage to \$10.25 and an increase of allowable earned income for people on social assistance and disability.

"Since 2003, B.C.'s child poverty rate has dropped by 45 per cent (19.2 per cent in 2003 to 10.5 per cent in 2010)," reads MCFD's statement, which uses the **after-tax child poverty statistics** that take into account the redistribution of income through income taxes, helping to bring some families above Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut-Off line.

"This is a higher rate of decline than the national average. In fact, B.C.'s poverty rate is at its second-lowest point in since 1980; it was only lower in 2008 -- before the recession."

Adrienne Montani, First Call's provincial coordinator, says government must also take credit for the **increase in child poverty** to 23.9 per cent in 2003 from 17 per cent before tax in 2001. First Call uses before tax numbers because it says they're more reliable in small sample sizes, like smaller communities, than after-tax numbers.

"When you start to get down to looking at single parents or looking at smaller communities, how many are working full-time, full-year, the sample size we get from Stats Canada starts to get very small and sometimes less reliable," she said.

In addition to expanding the local plans to include 47 different communities, the only hint MCFD offered for other future government poverty reduction strategies was to continue its focus on job creation in the province.

"We know that one of the best ways to help people out of poverty is to ensure they have a job. That's why we are focused on a job creation plan to strengthen the economy and create and protect jobs for families in every region of B.C. Since February 2011, B.C. has added 56,500 jobs to the economy," reads the statement.

The Child Poverty Report shows, however, that 43 per cent of children living in poverty before tax had at least one parent with a full-time job.

Charity versus policy

Other aspects of the BCTF's child poverty reduction plan this month include canvassing their members for the effects of child poverty in their classrooms, and encouraging them to put up posters and wear stickers with bandages on them symbolizing the need to end "band-aid" solutions like charity and fundraising and replace them with policy changes.

The Vancouver Sun Children's Fund **Adopt-A-School** program is arguably the most successful fundraiser for inner city schools in the Lower Mainland. Last year Adopt-A-School raised just under \$800,000 in donations from the public and matched funds from corporations for everything from clothing and food to field trips and new library books.

But Gillian Shaw, a reporter for the Vancouver Sun and member of the Children's Fund board, doesn't view Adopt-A-School as a charity.

"It's a role that everyone plays," Shaw told The Tyee. "You want to try and help the kids who are going hungry in your own neighbourhood, just as you help an older person who can't shovel their walk."

At the BCTF's child poverty workshop in Surrey, however, teachers expressed their frustration with charity involvement in schools. While they appreciate the money and supplies, they resent competing with other schools for scarce charitable dollars.

For Denise Moffat, an art teacher in Surrey, the presence of charities for public schools means funding decisions are left up to the wealthy who decide which public programs receive funding and which ones don't.

"I just see as our disparity grows that we're moving more to this idea like the United States has where we're a charity nation, where the rich just selectively give to the causes that speak to them. I won't be popular for saying this, but taxation is supposed to be the equitable redistribution of wealth," said Moffat, who is a member of the BCTF executive but doesn't speak for the union.

"To me, the solution is looking at how we fund our tax base and how we then choose to distribute that tax base to people to fully support them in their communities, rather than allowing those who can selectively pick and choose who they support."

What Would BC's Parties Do for Kids?

Advocates challenge May 2013's contenders on affordable childcare, school funds, poverty, and more.



Up with children? Photo by [Cassandra's Eye](#) from [Your BC: Tyee's Photo Pool](#).

The most important issues in British Columbia -- poverty, housing, education, environment, health care -- affect our most vulnerable residents: children and youth.

With a provincial election approaching in May, where do B.C.'s political parties land on matters related to the welfare of kids? That's what First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition has been trying to find out. Since December, they've been meeting with party leaders to express their concerns regarding issues as diverse as raising welfare rates

and creating a subsidized childcare system, to improving education and introducing a living wage. In return, leaders are listening and responding, outlining shared beliefs or concerns with First Call's ideas.

Green Party leader Jane Sterk met with First Call in December, and The Tyee was at NDP leader Adrian Dix's meeting with the organization on Jan. 9. An invitation extended to Premier Christy Clark has so far gone unanswered, and First Call says another invitation is on the way for BC Conservative leader John Cummins.

"This is offered to the leaders as a one-stop-shop kind of place to come and canvass or hear from advocates or agencies engaged with children and youth issues across a broad spectrum," said Adrienne Montani, provincial coordinator of First Call, which is best known for releasing the provincial **Child Poverty Report Card** every year.

"We'd like to influence their policies, their platforms, or, whoever forms government, what they could do while they're in government that we'd like."

First Call's policy recommendations centre around their **four keys to success for children and youth**: early childhood education, support for transitions to adulthood, increased economic equality, and safe and caring communities. But with platforms on the drawing board and the Throne Speech still a month away, parties are wary of promising broad

and quick changes in policies affecting children after a decade of Liberal rule.

How affordable is 'affordable childcare'?

First Call advocates for a **\$10-a-day public childcare** similar to the province of Quebec, which charges parents \$7 a day for licensed public childcare. Under the \$10 plan, government would subsidize childcare so parents only pay \$10 per day for full-time, \$7 a day for part-time, and no fees for families with annual incomes under \$40,000.

No party has expressed unequivocal support for the idea. Both Sterk and Dix expressed reservations about the cost, with Dix telling First Call members B.C. taxpayers are footing Quebec's childcare bill through billions in federal transfer payments Quebec receives. He also says B.C. needs Canadian government support and funding for childcare, which is unlikely under Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"Remember, the premier's former chief of staff [Ken Boessenkool], who was one of Mr. Harper's advisors, said the greatest achievement of his life was stopping a national childcare program in Canada," said Dix.

Sterk is also concerned the plan could exclude parents who want to stay home with their kids or leave their children with babysitters, but admits her party's **platform** is light on childcare policies.

The Tyee requested an interview with Premier Christy Clark, but was told she was out of town. Her government has indicated repeatedly, however, that B.C. can't afford this plan. The Ministry of Children and

Family Development (MCFD) has estimated the annual cost of a \$10 a day program as high as \$2 billion: "Unfortunately, implementing universal child care in B.C. is simply not feasible, given our current economic climate," they said in an emailed statement sent to The Tyee last month.

Cummins did not respond to an interview request, and the BC Conservatives platform also has yet to be released. But a **policy document** on their website says "parents are the child's first and most important teachers," and therefore government should fund whatever licensed educational institution a parent chooses.

Funds for schools?

Education is a controversial topic even without an election looming, but Dix told First Call "B.C. has one of the best education systems in the world." He does want to make it better, but other than eliminating the Foundation Skills Assessments (FSA), he will only say his party is deliberating about the issue.

"Some people would argue if you have money to invest in young people, then you invest it in the classroom. Other people say, in fact, the core issue is outside the classroom," he said.

He is not eager, however, to introduce changes to the child welfare sector, where he says quick and concurrent changes have caused problems for an already stressed system.

"I think the whole issues around devolution of First Nations children's services in the province is an example of this, where the devolution occurred and the new system was expected to absorb cuts from what the previous system provides," he said.

"The iron law of government reform is new systems -- at least in the short term -- tend to be more expensive than the previous system."

First Call's notes from Sterk's meeting indicate her party's desire to make B.C.'s education system the world's best: "We can learn from other places (ex. Finland) and look at the philosophy behind these success stories and determine how can we make it work for a made-in-B.C. solution. We need people with expertise at the table, as well as ordinary British Columbians to move forward towards excellence; this will help ensure British Columbians support the chosen path."

The BC Conservatives hope to use the FSA results to encourage school improvements, as well as setting up evaluation of teacher credentials, certification and suspension. They also promise transparency and proper funding will accompany any downloading of services from the province to school board, and where possible they will eliminate "mandated bureaucratic processes unrelated to student learning."

The Liberal government, which is in the middle of reforming provincial curriculum as part of its BC Education Plan, has repeatedly said education funding in the province is higher than it's ever been, an **increase** of \$1.4 billion since 2000/01. But school boards maintain funds have not kept pace with increasing costs, and government pressures to reduce school board spending are **causing backlash** from some trustees.

Greens, NDP pledge poverty reduction plans

First Call's most recent **child poverty report** released in November found B.C. had the second-highest child poverty rate in the country for the second year in a row, a slight improvement after seven straight years at the top.



BC NDP leader Adrian Dix at First Call meeting last week: Poverty reduction program promised. Photo: K. Hyslop.

Dix commended First Call for their work on the issue, and promised an NDP government would introduce a poverty reduction plan with a set of clear timelines, but keeping in mind government's limited funds mean solving poverty in one term is unlikely.

But while First Call pushes government to increase minimum wage and welfare rates, and become a living wage employer, Dix avoided committing to income reform other than to say the best way to bring people out of poverty was to raise incomes. He did promise, however, that eradicating Bill 29, legislation that eliminated collective agreements in healthcare and caused 6,000 healthcare workers to lose their jobs in 2002, would be one of an NDP government's first acts.

Sterk told First Call she not only wants a poverty reduction strategy for the province, but also believes in indexing the minimum wage and providing income supplements for low-income families.

"We believe there needs to be a greater commitment to the effective provision of social services, particularly for those people who are experiencing difficulties, who are at risk of living in poverty, who are underemployed and unemployed," Sterk told *The Tyee*.

"I think our policies are ones that would be more effective at approaching some of those entrenched issues in our culture."

The current B.C. government is in the process of implementing local poverty reduction strategies in seven communities, but with no new money attached. In an [interview with *The Tyee*](#) last spring, MCFD's then minister Mary McNeil said that unlike a provincial plan, a local strategy would find poverty solutions specifically suited to a community's needs.

"The beauty of what we're doing is we're going in with open minds. [We're saying] let's take a look, see what it is that we're all doing, see

what the community needs, does it mesh," she said. "It is a real tough fiscal climate right now, and first off that means there isn't a lot of money that we can throw into anything. But also, there isn't a lot of money we can waste."

The BC Conservatives policy document does not say anything about poverty or income inequality.

Guiding voters

B.C.'s party stances on issues affecting children and youth will become clearer as more leaders meet with First Call, release their platforms, or both. But in addition to informing policies for the 2013 election, First Call hopes these meetings will work to inform voters, too.

Minutes from Sterk's meeting are on the First Call website, with others to follow, and the coalition plans to send out questionnaires on child and youth issues to the parties in the coming weeks. The information First Call gathers will be included in their 2013 Election Guide, available on their website by the end of February.

Montani said it's an opportunity for people to gather information, including potential questions people may want to ask candidates at upcoming meetings and debates, about these particular issues.

"The idea is trying to explain in a pretty simple way to people what's at stake in this election," she said.