July 4, 2007

British Columbia Conversation on Health

Dear Sirs/Mesdames,

Re: Submission on Child Poverty

Health Officers' Council of British Columbia respectfully makes the following submission, on the subject of Child Poverty, to the Conversation on Health. This submission outlines a number of initiatives and recommendations to begin addressing this public health issue.

Health Officers' Council of BC is a registered society of British Columbia public health physicians who, among other activities, advise and advocate for public policies and programs directed to improving the health of populations. Members of Health Officers' Council of BC (HOC) are public health physicians practicing in British Columbia. Council members include, among others, medical health officers with regional health authorities, physicians with the BC Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, physicians in public health research and teaching, and physicians with the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. For more than fifty years, members of the Health Officers' Council have, individually and collectively, played key roles in every major public health achievement in British Columbia.

Health Officers' Council respectfully submits that child poverty is a population health concern of significant magnitude in British Columbia. Poverty in childhood not only leads to immediate and lifelong health concerns, but also impacts lifelong achievement. Children do not choose to live in poverty. Safeguarding the health of our children and population through strategic investment in child development is both a moral obligation and a critical tool for sustaining our health care system. Currently in BC, one in four children lives in poverty, and evidence indicates that the depth of poverty is also increasing. British Columbia has had the highest rate of child poverty of any province in Canada for 3 years in a row. The Premier has declared a goal for BC to be the healthiest jurisdiction ever to host the Olympic Games. We would like to see child poverty goals tied to this declaration. Our success depends on ensuring that programs emanating from this declaration do not increase existing disparities, and that no child is left behind because of our failure to act.

Health Officers' Council respectfully submits a number of recommendations, including:

- **Clear Poverty Reduction Strategies and Targets:** Develop a comprehensive provincial child poverty reduction strategy that is driven by an inter-governmental / inter-ministerial approach and includes specific and meaningful targets for child poverty reduction. An annual child poverty report card can be used for accountability to these targets.
• **Increased Surveillance**: an important measure of our progress in reducing child poverty is the state of children’s development at kindergarten. BC already supports the assessment of the state of children’s development through the Early Development Instrument (EDI). This is done currently every three years. HOC recommends the annual collection of this data. Annual collection allows the identification of trends in ECD and enhances accountability through monitoring/evaluation of programs. The EDI also provides a population measure of vulnerability of our most vulnerable neighbourhoods and communities (i.e., proportion of children scoring within the lowest 10% of the population) and an opportunity to compare this information by geographic areas (i.e., neighbourhoods, school districts). The Health Sector has enhanced its commitment to child development through the proposed inclusion of ‘ready to learn’ targets involving annualized collection of the EDI in Health Authority Performance Agreements.

• **Provincial Income Assistance Strategies**: Enhancements to provincial income assistance programs will ensure adequate support for families during times of need and transition periods.

• **Accessible Child Care**: Develop a provincial childcare plan that commits BC to building a quality, accessible and publicly funded childcare system.

Health Officers’ Council is submitting reports to the Conversation on Health on three different topics: child poverty, problematic psychoactive substance use, and chronic disease. While different, these three topics do share some common features:

• They are among the most pressing health issues facing British Columbians today.
• They all speak to the vital importance of appropriate government leadership and intervention in population and public health.

Further, many chronic health problems and causes of problematic psychoactive drug use have their roots in the early years. The solutions to the challenges posed by the three topics are complex but inter-related. British Columbians are among the healthiest people in the world, but this degree of health is not experienced equally among us. We submit that the health challenge to British Columbians in the 21st century is ensuring that “no British Columbian is left behind.”

Health Officers’ Council of BC hopes that our submissions will enrich and inform the conversations on health taking place in our province. We are committed to working with the government collaboratively on the issues articulated in our submissions. We look forward to a response to our recommendations in the final report.

Sincerely,

Dr. James Lu  
Chair, Health Officer’s Council of BC  

JL/wjb
Taking Action on Child Poverty

Discussion Paper
June 2007

Prepared for Health Officers Council of BC (HOC) by
the HOC Child Poverty Working Group:

Nelson Ames - Medical Health Officer, East Kootenay and Kootenay Boundary, Interior Health
Brian O’Connor - Medical Health Officer, North Shore, Vancouver Coastal Health
John Millar – Medical Health Officer, Provincial Health Services Authority
Veronic Oulette – Medical Health Officer, Fraser Health Authority
Cheryl Anderson – Medical Health Officer, Vancouver, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
Ted Bruce - Executive Director, VCH Population Health
Trevor Hancock - Public Health Consultant, Ministry of Health
Adrienne Montani - First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition
Lori Irwin - Human Early Learning Partnership - UBC
Helena Swinkels - Community Medicine Resident
Darryl Quantz - Policy Consultant, VCH Population Health
A. Background

Members of the Health Officers’ Council (HOC) are public health physicians practicing in British Columbia. Council members include, among others, medical health officers with provincial health authorities, physicians with the BC Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, physicians in public health research and teaching, and physicians with the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. For more than fifty years, members of HOC have, individually and collectively, played key roles in every major public health achievement in British Columbia.

HOC has identified child poverty as one of three critical health topics on which to develop policy positions and an advocacy strategy. The lead for this action has been designated to an HOC Child Health Working Group comprised of HOC representatives from 4 health authorities and representatives from the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of BC (UBC), First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition and the Ministry of Health. The goals of the working group are to:

1) Propose a spectrum of high-level policy approaches around child poverty. Recommendations and evidence for policy alternatives were canvassed from partners and current policy reports.
2) Present recommendations to HOC and engage HOC in the development of a clear and focused policy position on child poverty.
3) Develop and facilitate the implementation of an advocacy framework including the identification of HOC champions, the development of partnerships and the selection of and commitment to advocacy activities.

The following paper and supporting resources are intended to provide the HOC with the tools to develop and implement an advocacy framework to address child poverty issues. As part of its strategic plan, the government of British Columbia has declared its desire to make British Columbia the healthiest jurisdiction ever to host the Olympic games. Further, British Columbia has outlined within its strategic goals the desire to build the best system of support in Canada for children at risk (See: http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/archive/2001-2005/2005OTP0019-000122.htm). Stakeholders recognize that the solutions to child poverty are multi-faceted and require
intersectoral action. As a key group of public health representatives, HOC has an opportunity to contribute to the provincial mandate by providing leadership and advocacy around the issue of child poverty. HOC hopes that this submission will enrich and inform the conversations taking place in our province on health. HOC is committed to working with the government collaboratively on the issues articulated in this submission.

B. About the Issue: Child Poverty

Research has demonstrated the strong correlation between early childhood experiences and health status/social well-being in adulthood. Safeguarding the health of our children and population through strategic investment in child development is both a moral obligation and a critical tool for sustaining our health care system. Evidence continues to indicate that British Columbia has failed to adequately address poverty. Each year, First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition compiles and releases a report card of key child/family poverty statistics. The data from this report shows that British Columbia has had the highest rate of child poverty of any province in Canada for 3 years in a row. Approximately 1 in 4 of our province’s children live in poverty with evidence indicating that the depth of poverty is also increasing.

![Child Poverty Rates by Province (Before Tax, 2004)](chart)

How is Poverty Measured in Canada?
Canada does not have an official ‘poverty line’ but poverty is generally measured using the Low Income Cut-Offs (LICOs) from Statistics Canada. The LICOs represent levels of income where people spend disproportionate amounts of money for food, shelter, and clothing. LICOs vary with the size of the household and the size of the community.
The clear impact of child poverty on health status and long-term outcomes are a call for the health sector to take leadership on this issue. Both the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth and the National Population Health Survey found that child outcomes worsen for 31 survey indicators as family income falls. Researchers note that:

Children and youth who live in poverty are at greater risk in terms of health, do less well in school, have to cope with a dangerous or unhealthy physical environment, less likely to graduate from secondary school and then as adults, suffering from job insecurity, underemployment, poor working conditions and so on.

Poor health has also been identified as a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Children born into poor families have poorer health as children, receive lower investments in human capital, and have poorer health as adults.

In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously passed a resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. However, the number of children living in poverty has only increased with 1.2 million Canadian children live in poverty. Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Further, Canada has participated in the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which outlines, among other rights, the right for every child to develop to the fullest and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life through standards in health care, education, and legal, civil and social services.

Resources:

Oh Canada! Too Many Children in Poverty for Too Long.... 2006 report card on child poverty in Canada.  

Canadian Council on Social Development: Measuring Low Income in Canada  

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child  
C. Policy Proposals

Creating a Child Poverty Reduction Strategy for British Columbia and Setting Targets

Advocate for a comprehensive child poverty reduction strategy in British Columbia. This strategy should be driven by an intergovernmental/interministerial approach and include specific and meaningful targets for child poverty reduction.

- Create an interministerial body to develop a provincial poverty reduction strategy. This body would work closely with other levels of government and additional stakeholders (i.e., NGO’s, academic institutions, advocacy groups, BC Representative for Children and Youth) to implement and monitor the strategy. ActNow BC provides an example for interministerial cooperation around an issue.

- Quebec, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia have either passed or introduced poverty reduction platforms that outline provincial targets and strategies for poverty reduction. The Manitoba government has also introduced several broad-based measures to reduce poverty.

- Evidence indicates that there are benefits in the selection of health targets. These include the coordination of program resources and an opportunity to monitor and evaluate specific indicators. Quebec and Newfoundland have both created targets and strategies for poverty reduction.

Poverty Reduction Resources:

Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador:  

Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Act:  
[Website](http://www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/legc/index.htm)

Quebec Government Action Plan to Combat Poverty  
[Website](http://www.napo-onap.ca/en/napo/forwardbackwards.htm)

Manitoba Healthy Child:  
[Website](http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/)

Addressing Poverty in Manitoba:  
[Website](http://www.gov.mb.ca/finance/budget05/poverty/poverty.pdf)

ActNow BC:  
[Website](http://www.actnowbc.gov.bc.ca)
Enhancing Surveillance Capacity

Advocate for the annual administration of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) to assess the state of children’s development at kindergarten. Annual collection of the EDI will enable the latest data to be integrated into strategic approaches to early childhood programming for community planners and policy makers.

- The EDI (Early Development Instrument) is a validated instrument used to gauge the state of children’s development of populations of 5-year olds as they enter kindergarten and is currently undertaken every 3 years. The EDI measures three broad domains of child development: language/cognitive, social/emotional and physical development.

- Living in the context of poverty profoundly affects children’s early development. What children experience during the early years sets a critical foundation for their entire life course. This is because early child development (ECD), including health, physical, social–emotional and language–cognitive domains strongly influences basic learning, school success, economic participation, social citizenry and health—all important for breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

- There is an opportunity to have EDI data collected on an annual basis. Measurement guides policy, provides early warning of failure or success, and helps to allocate resources more effectively. Benefits of the annual collection of EDI data include:
  - Provides a population measure of vulnerability (i.e., proportion of children scoring within the lowest 10% of the population) and an opportunity to compare this information by geographic areas (i.e., neighbourhoods, school districts)
  - EDI data can be mapped with various socioeconomic indicators in an area
  - Annual collection allows the identification of trends in ECD and enhances accountability through monitoring/evaluation of programs
  - The Health Sector has enhanced their commitment to children development through the proposed inclusion of ‘ready to learn’ targets involving annualized collection of the EDI in Health Authority Performance Agreements.
Advocate for ongoing support for the annual Child Poverty Report card and for the BC provincial government to set targets related to the reduction of child poverty.

- First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition works with community partners to release an annual child poverty report card. The report card provides comparative data on child poverty rates, as well as a series of policy recommendations (Increase in Minimum Wage, Realistic Welfare Rates, Housing Strategy). There is an opportunity for the HOC to partner with First Call in the production and dissemination of this annual report card.

- The HOC will advocate for sustained funding for the report card, assist in the dissemination of the report card and assist in the expansion of the report card to include community level information across the province (e.g., LHA, Community).

- Recognize the differential rates of poverty among different groups. For example, a single parent female is at a much higher risk of living in poverty.

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<tr>
<th>Higher Risk Populations in Canada</th>
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<td>All Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>With disability</td>
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<td>Aboriginal Identity</td>
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<td>All Immigrants</td>
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<td>Lone mother families</td>
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Surveillance Resources:

British Columbia Atlas of Child Development 2006
ecdportal.help.ubc.ca/atlas/BCAtlasofChildDevelopment_CD_22-01-06.pdf

BC Child Poverty Report Card 2006:

First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition
www.firstcallbc.org

Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) - University of British Columbia
www.help.ubc.ca
Enhancing Income Assistance Strategies

Advocate for changes to provincial income assistance programs to ensure support during times of need and transition periods. The ultimate goal is to ensure that no family in British Columbia lives in poverty.

- Even the most effective strategy of investing in human capital will miss the social needs of vulnerable groups who face a concentration of disadvantages that limit their participation in the mainstream of society. Such people need supports of diverse forms, including financial assistance, to live with dignity.

- The BC Assistance program has become primarily a program for individuals who are not expected to work and includes people with disabilities, people with persistent multiple barriers, persons temporarily excused from work and children in the home of a relative. BC Income Assistance benefits are not generous by the standards of other provinces and there seems little justification for the continued erosion of benefits in real terms.

- Government can make a difference. A comprehensive income assistance policy platform is recommended by researchers and advocacy groups to reduce child poverty. Key pieces include:
  - Raise welfare rates by 50% and index to the cost of living.
  - Roll back ‘employable’ age for receiving income assistance. Parents whose youngest child is age 3 or over were recently re-categorized as employable. Previously these parents were “temporarily excused” from job seeking and participating in mandatory training until their youngest child was age 7.
  - Raise the minimum wage to at least $10/hour and end the $6/hour training wage.
  - Ensure access to school programs by removing financial barriers (i.e., the elimination of school program fees to families with low incomes)
  - Increase access to social housing

Canada’s Increasing Income Gap
Canada’s gap between rich and poor is growing. The after-tax income gap has never been this high in at least 30 years, and it has been growing faster than ever since the late 1990s. In 2004, the average earnings of the richest 10% of Canada’s families raising children was 82 times that earned by the poorest 10% of Canada’s families. Canadian families are experiencing greater inequality and greater polarization of incomes compared to families raising children a generation ago. Only the richest 20% are experiencing gains from Canada’s economic growth, and most of those gains are concentrated in the top 10% (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2007).

Income Assistance Policy Resources:

BC Progress Board: The Social Condition in British Columbia

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
http://www.policyalternatives.ca/
Making Child Care Accessible

Advocate for the development of a provincial child care plan that commits BC to building a quality, accessible and publicly funded child care system.

- A comparison of Canada/British Columbia to European countries indicates that we are severely lagging behind in our infrastructure to provide early child care services. Only Quebec, with a universal program, approaches international standards of accessibility. Other than Quebec, less than 20% of Canadian children aged 0-6 find a place in a regulated service (For comparison: Belgium 63%; Denmark 78%; U.K.: 60%; Sweden: 3-4 yr old: 91%, 5-6 year old: 95%)\(^7\). Canada/BC also ranks behind most industrialized countries for investment in early learning programs.

- High quality and accessible child care and early learning is critical to reducing the level of child poverty in the province. Accessible and high quality child care provides multiple opportunities to improve the health of children and improve opportunities for workforce participation for families. Further, vulnerable children will benefit the most from access to high quality care and supports \(^7,8\).

- The research support for public investment in quality child care also highlights benefits in areas such as population health, women’s equality, work-life balance, community-building and children’s rights. Estimates of the return on investment in a public, universal child care system are 2:1 \(^9\). Further, a 2002 national poll found that 90% of Canadians agree with the statement “Canada should have a nationally-co-ordinated child care plan”\(^9\).

The Quebec Example

Quebec is the only province where child poverty rates have been consistently declining since 1997. This is likely attributable in part to a package of family support benefits implemented in 1997 including rapid expansion of affordable early learning and child care services, an expanded child benefit and enhanced parental leave.

Spending on ELCC programs: How does Canada compare?

Figure 9. Public spending on ELCC programs for children 0-6 years as a % of GDP
Child Care Information Resources:

Child Care Services: Investing in a Sustainable Future in BC  

A Summary of BC Child Care Cuts and Impacts  
www.advocacyforum.bc.ca/pdf/CCcuts_summary_jan07.pdf

Child Care Advocacy Forum  
www.advocacyforum.bc.ca/

REFERENCES


9  The Millward Brown Goldfarb survey was administered to a random, national-proportionate sample between November 27, 2002 and December 12, 2002. The results of such a sample of 1,200 are accurate to within +/- 2.9%, 19-out-of-20 times. Available: http://www.childcareadvocacy.ca/archives/2003/0127e.html