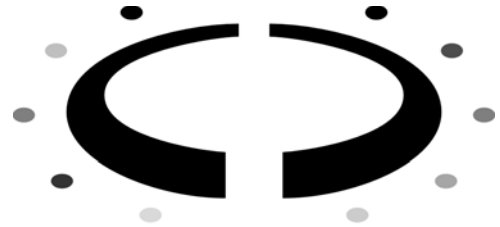


Key Messages: Community Reconstruction

Final Report March 30, 2005



Community Council

The Caring Community: Accounting for the Impacts of Provincial Government Changes

The Community Reconstruction Project is a study of the impacts of provincial government changes on vulnerable populations and on social services provided by non-profit agencies in British Columbia's Capital Region from July 2002 to January 2005. The project is an initiative of the Community Council, funded by the United Way of Greater Victoria and supported by a Steering Committee composed of diverse individuals and organizational representatives.

The 28 community agencies that participated in this project represent providers of services in rural and urban areas to families, women, children, youth, First Nations people, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and people living in poverty. Twice a year during the study, these agencies completed surveys and met to discuss findings, strategies and recommendations.

The findings from the study showed extensive evidence of harmful impacts on the clients and on the capacity of all of the participating agencies, and some evidence of helpful impacts affecting discrete populations. The boards, staff and volunteers of the participating agencies are concerned about the negative outcomes of many of the provincial government's changes. They identified the key government changes made since 2002 that most impacted vulnerable people, agency services and the community as a whole. Then the agencies made recommendations for redressing the most damaging impacts.

Impacts of Provincial Government Changes

In each of the five rounds of data collection, agencies consistently identified the following harmful impacts of government-initiated changes.

1. Reduced Personal Income for Vulnerable Individuals and Families

'We've seen an increase in poverty, homelessness and people returning to violent situations because of lack of resources for kids or parents.'

– neighbourhood social service agency, January-June 2004 survey

1.1 Changes to income assistance

These changes included reductions to benefit rates for several classes of recipients, addition of more restrictive eligibility criteria and removal or restriction of many supplementary supports. The government cut basic support rates for employable single people and couples, including parents. They cut housing allowances for families with children. They imposed a three-week waiting period for new income assistance applicants. It became more difficult to obtain welfare because evidence of two years of work experience was required in order to qualify for support. The government initiated a two-years-in-five rule for being on welfare. New restrictions were placed on additional support such as crisis grants and homemaker services. Supplementary coverage for eye exams or dental work was excluded. Also eliminated were the existing earnings exemptions, clothing allowances and transitional MSP premium payments for most income assistance recipients who obtained employment.

1.2 Personal impacts of these changes

Individuals and families have become poorer and lack resources to meet their basic needs. As a result, agencies are seeing sharp rises in the numbers of clients who face:

- Homelessness and substandard housing, including more families who are homeless or at risk of being homeless.
- Hunger, which means that parents are unable to feed their children properly and individuals are too hungry to function effectively in counseling sessions or training programs.
- High levels of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and fear.
- Desperation, leading to increased overuse of drugs and alcohol, more violence, and more people turning to prostitution and illegal sources for money.
- Lack of support after moving from welfare to low-wage employment, leaving many people with jobs in dire financial circumstances. In particular, families – both two-parent and lone-parent – are unable to afford child care or adequate food or shelter, so their children are more at risk for poor nutrition and health as well as unsafe, insecure housing.

2. Less Support for Vulnerable Individuals and Families

'What have been withdrawn are all the preventative things. Crisis management is in place, but all the things that prevent crisis have been taken away.'

– umbrella social service agency, November 2004

2.1 Changes in programs and funding for services to vulnerable populations

Cuts were made to many services and programs that helped those who need longer term help to stay out of crisis, overcome family problems or attain self-sufficiency. Child care funding and child care subsidies were decreased. Eligibility for legal aid was reduced. Reductions to community-based program funding have resulted in fewer available or accessible resources for disadvantaged populations. Ministry staff cuts resulted in higher caseloads, more web-based and voicemail access, less consistent personal contact with social workers and financial aid workers. This array of changes curtailed people's access to both community-based services in non-profit agencies and to government ministries.

2.2 Personal impacts of these changes

Many individuals and families who need support to become self-sufficient or just to survive are suffering due to gaps in the social safety net. The difficulties that they are facing as a result of these cuts will lead to significant human, social and financial costs to our community in the future. Those in the most severe crises still get some help. Others, who have taken some steps toward self-sufficiency, cannot get needed support. Because they no longer have resources to assist them, they are failing to overcome their barriers. For example:

- While policies for keeping children with their families have resulted in fewer apprehensions of children, cuts to supportive programs for at-risk families – many of whom are under increased pressure due to income assistance cuts – mean that more children are suffering.
- Women in abusive situations can no longer get legal aid unless there is evidence of physical abuse, so they are at higher risk of remaining in or returning to abusive relationships.
- Youth with high needs but at medium risk no longer have access to supportive programs, so they and their families sometimes move into the high-risk category.
- People lacking literacy or computer skills or who do not have phones or computers are not getting the information and support they need or do not understand ministry communications. More agency staff time is required to assist them.
- Policies that have redirected people in need have not always worked. For example, the B.C. government focused resources on a province-wide helpline for victims and cut funding to local providers of victim services. Local support services have not been receiving the referrals that they expected from the provincial helpline, so sexual assault victims and others are not getting connected to the community services that could help them.

3. Decreased Capacity in the Community to Care for Vulnerable Individuals and Families

'As people are getting more desperate, demand for our agency services is increasing. We are under more pressure to provide services that are beyond our mandate.'

– agency serving people with disabilities, January 2005

3.1 Changes in role and relationship of government with its community partners

Changes in the systems for delivery of services have decreased the capacity of this community to care for its citizens. Much of the responsibility for social service delivery has shifted to the community, with no accompanying shift of the resources and extensive funding cuts to the community agencies doing much of this work. New contracting arrangements required more paperwork, placed more restrictions on program eligibility, and established performance-based funding that left agencies without sufficient upfront money to do their work effectively. Ministry communications about upcoming changes were poor and often last-minute.

3.2 Community impacts of these changes

The majority of participating agencies reported that their ability to provide services has been adversely affected by funding cuts, changes to funding contracts, and uncertainty about future funding. Fewer programs and services now exist, but more clients are coming to their doors, often with new needs that do not fall within agency mandates. Agencies reported being under increased pressure to exceed their service mandates in the face of this increased need. These new holes in the social safety net mean a poorer, less responsive community. For example:

- People are less able to contribute to their community when they do not have adequate help in their struggles to meet their basic needs or to become self-sufficient.
- Stressed service providers are trying to help stressed individuals and families.
- Community social service sector efficiency is reduced because, during a time of rising demand for their resources, they are dealing with less financial stability, more provincial paperwork requirements, deteriorating communication with government ministries and more need to focus on fundraising.
- The community is less able to meet its citizens' increasing social and health needs.

Rebuilding the Community's Capacity to Care

Participating agencies identified key steps necessary to repair the impacts of government changes. The provincial government can become accountable for the impacts of changes by acting on the following recommendations.

1. Increase Personal Income for Vulnerable Individuals and Families

Increase income assistance benefit rates and remove restrictions to eligibility that prevents individuals and families from meeting their basic needs and achieving sustainable self-sufficiency. This could include:

- Raise assistance rates benefits, such as shelter and support benefits, and improve supplements such as dental and eye exam coverage, homemaker services and crisis grants, to a level of support that ensures people's survival needs are met and that children and adults are not hungry, homeless, or without basic medical care.
- Remove eligibility criteria that cause undue hardship to people at risk, such as rigid program eligibility criteria, the three-week wait and the requirement of two years' consecutive work experience for first-time income assistance applicants.
- Provide a greater range of support to assist individuals in attaining long-term self-sufficiency and making the transition from welfare to employment. This could include one year of additional transition-to-work supports, such as earnings exemptions, allowing part-time work while on assistance, paying MSP premiums and ensuring access to affordable child care.

2. Provide Adequate and Appropriate Support for Vulnerable Individuals and Families

Build a provincial strategy for meeting the needs of hard-to-serve clients and those who are falling through gaps in the social safety net. This could include:

- Revise assistance classifications to include individuals who need supportive programs and services but who are presently excluded. Some people with significant barriers to attaining self-sufficiency are currently ineligible for classification as Persons With Disabilities or Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers. For example, they may have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder or an erratic mental health condition but they are not eligible for disability; they may still be recovering from an addiction; they may be trying to leave prostitution. ‘Quick-fix’ programs are not sufficient in such cases. Some individuals are not even eligible for current programs. Others do qualify but cannot achieve the program outcomes because they need more long-term support.
- Remove access barriers to legal aid that have prevented women and children from extricating themselves from abusive situations.
- Provide more counseling, rehabilitation, housing, life-skills training and other such support for people with mental health and addictions problems, more and more of who are hungry, homeless and without treatment or help.

3. Strengthen the community’s capacity to care

Work cooperatively with the community social services sector to develop practical strategies for rebuilding community capacity to meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. This could include:

- Assess the impacts of policy and funding changes, both short and long-term, on citizens and on the whole community.
- Work with community agencies and the people most directly affected to plan policy changes and determine projected impacts before implementing changes.
- Provide more stability for agencies to plan and implement services, such as establishing longer-term funding contract cycles and rationalized funding processes. This would allow service providers to more effectively balance the use of their limited resources between serving their clients or administrative requirements and fundraising.

Conclusion

The findings of the Community Reconstruction Project show that Boards of Directors, volunteers and staff of community agencies are deeply committed to providing effective support to the people whom they are mandated to serve. The past three years have been very difficult. The demand for services has increased and become more complex. The capacity of the agencies to fulfill their mandates has been reduced.

In order to move forward, community agencies look forward to working more collaboratively with government to rebuild the community’s capacity to care.

PROJECT GOALS

Increase community knowledge by tracking the impact of provincial government changes on individuals and families in the Capital Region.

Build stronger relationships among non-profit agencies and other community sectors by coming together to discuss information and explore strategies.

Mobilize new resources in our community (government, non-government, and private sectors) for meeting the needs of the people most impacted by widely publicizing project findings and their implications for the region, and by encouraging the community to work together on effective strategies.

PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

Community Social Planning Council
Of Greater Victoria
United Way of Greater Victoria
University of Victoria History Department
and School of Social Work
Vancouver Island Public Interest Research
Group
BC Government Employees Union
Association of Family Serving Agencies
Burnside Gorge Community Association
Victoria CoolAid Society
Association of Service Providers for
Employability and Career Training

Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria

Vision: a sustainable quality of life for everyone in BC's Capital Region.

Mission: providing leadership to bring the community together.

Supported by members, the United Way of Greater Victoria, contracted services and the municipalities of Esquimalt, Oak Bay, Saanich and Victoria.

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