



Stop devaluing community social services; Continual program cuts hurt the most vulnerable

March 13, 2013

Vancouver Sun

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Every day throughout British Columbia, some of our most vulnerable citizens need assistance with basic life issues - women and children fleeing domestic violence; immigrants and refugees looking for jobs or coping with language and settlement issues; people with disabilities who need help with speech, occupational or physical therapies; parents who need child care or infant development assistance; people living in poverty, or those with addiction issues, who need supported social housing or counselling; and aboriginal families, who have culturally specific needs around one or more of the above.

When people need this kind of help, they turn to community social services provided by various of our provincially funded agencies. Most of us know someone who at some time has had to rely on these services just to keep house and home together, to maintain basic health, or even to survive. But community social services cannot survive without a commitment from government to recognize the vital role that these services - and the workers who provide them - play in our communities.

Since coming to power in 2001, the B.C. Liberal government has launched an unrelenting attack on community social services, making program cuts and closures that have left the sector chronically under-funded. Since 2004, the sector has given up more than \$300 million - with more cuts to come. According to this year's budget documents, the government plans to drastically reduce the average amount of money it spends on adults with developmental disabilities over the next three years. Adults with fetal alcohol disorder and autism who receive services under the personal supports initiative will see the biggest decline, with the average resources per client in that program dropping from \$24,000 to \$16,000 this year alone - a 33-per-cent decline, even as the program's caseload is expected to more than double.

The consequences of government neglect are obvious. Cuts to health care, mental health services, women's services, and now services for adults with developmental disabilities have only increased the pressure on an already overstressed community social services sector. Workers are now dealing with unsustainable workloads due to service cuts, program closures, growing waiting lists and chronic underfunding.

Adding insult to injury is that community social services workers are the lowest paid in B.C.'s public sector. In most of these jobs, the starting wages have actually been reduced. For a residential care worker in 2002, the starting wage was \$16.83. Now it's \$15.54. Over the same decade, the cost of living increased by 18.1 per cent. Because of this, recruitment and retention have become a major problem. Workers are often forced to take a second or third job just to make ends meet.

Community social services are based on the belief that people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds are valuable and contributing members of society. During difficult periods, or when a crisis arises, it's important that communities respond by providing the supports, services, or skills that people need to deal with life's challenges. And virtually every family in B.C. has been touched by support from the community social services sector at one time or another. Community social services are about creating and maintaining supportive, healthy, stable and caring communities. The workers who provide these services are the heart and soul of our communities. The provincial government needs to re-invest in this sector right now, and provide the resources it needs to better serve our communities and our citizens.

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