

Time to tackle the high cost of poverty in the province

BY MARJORIE MACDONALD, SCOTT MCDONALD AND VICTORIA LEE, THE VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 23, 2013

We all know poverty results in suffering and puts innumerable pressures on families. That alone should be reason enough to do something about it.

But when you add costs directly attributable to the health problems suffered by disadvantaged British Columbians, it's clear poverty reduction is something we need to act on right now.

British Columbians understand this, and expect something to be done. With the provincial election underway, those seeking public office should be aware that research by Vision Critical reveals 81 per cent of British Columbians agree that our provincial leaders need to develop a poverty reduction plan.

Instead of pouring more dollars into the acute care system, more investment is needed to proactively address the root causes of poverty-driven ill health.

Research by the BC Healthy Living Alliance shows poverty is costly and bad for our health. When you divide British Columbians into five groups based on income, those in the lowest income group are two to three times as likely to suffer from heart disease. For diabetes, it's two to five times higher. And the number of expensive visits to the emergency department is nearly double compared to those British Columbians in the highest income group.

In all, close to \$1.2 billion in health care costs would be saved each year if all disadvantaged British Columbians were as healthy as those with higher education and incomes. Any poverty reduction would be money well spent. Government can reverse the trend by providing more investment in quality child care, affordable housing and income security. Action in these areas would lift many individuals and families above the poverty line.

B.C. has the second highest rate of child poverty in Canada. So policies and investments that break that cycle should be a priority. Research spanning decades shows that quality child care leads to better outcomes for disadvantaged children. They are much more likely to stay in school longer and earn higher wages.

Affordable child care also allows families to raise their household incomes through work, education or training. Economists in Quebec calculate that increased tax revenues, largely from working mothers, have more than paid for their universal daycare system.

Secure housing also contributes to better health. Studies show it costs less to house our homeless population and improve their physical and mental wellbeing. Although some progress has been made in recent years, there remains a shortage. Demand for social housing is projected to require an estimated 56,600 additional units by 2036. One in six renters spends 50 per cent or more of their income on housing. Housing for those in low-paying jobs often comes at the expense of healthy food.

Reasonable rents reduce stress and provide a better chance families will have enough money left for groceries, utilities and other basics. And those unable to work should be assured income assistance that covers the costs of rental housing and a nutritious diet.

Income security measures are the ultimate stopgap and do make a difference. In the 1970s, Canada had one of the highest levels of seniors' poverty among industrialized nations but today we have one of the lowest. Seniors' real income increased by 18 per cent between 1980 and 2003 with the introduction of public pension benefits.

Implementing a poverty reduction plan will make a difference, but requires leadership and accountability. B.C. needs a plan with legislated targets, timelines, measurements and a designated minister.

B.C. could take a lesson from Newfoundland and Labrador. They had the worst poverty rate in Canada when Premier Danny Williams introduced a poverty reduction strategy. Between 2004 and 2010 they were able to reduce it 44 per cent, and are on track to reach their target of having the least poverty in Canada by 2014.

All of us are paying a high premium for poverty. Those running for office on May 14 should put that money to better use and invest in prevention.

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