



## Undertaking a Living Wage Campaign with Local Government



### Why should local governments care?

#### Tens of thousands of working families live in poverty in BC

Child poverty in BC is very much a low-wage story: 31.8% of poor children in BC – 44,500 children – lived in families with at least one adult working full-time, full-year (*Child Poverty Report Card, First Call, 2013*). A growing economy with employment opportunities should not translate into parents working many jobs and still risk falling into poverty.

#### Parents in low-wage jobs are struggling to raise their children

Families who work for low wages face impossible choices – buy food or heat the house, feed the children or pay the rent. The result can be spiralling debt, constant anxiety and long-term health problems.

Canadian researchers have reported that family income plays a significant role in influencing child development. Of 27 factors identified as having an impact on child development, up to 80% were seen to improve as family income increased.

#### Local governments pay the price for the low-wage sector

When children live in poverty, or when parents are compelled to work multiple jobs to stay afloat and end up with little time with their children, all of society pays the price. It is the local governments – including municipalities, unincorporated communities and band councils – and their school boards that must consequently pay for additional services and policing costs required to care for children whose parents are working multiple jobs. Directly or indirectly, high school non-completion has enormous fiscal implications in terms of expenditures on health, social services, education, employment, criminality and lower economic productivity.

#### There is wide public support for action by local governments

A poll undertaken by the Columbia Institute in 2011 showed that voters throughout BC are very supportive of living wage policies. Just over two in three (67%) of respondents asked about a living wage said they would favour their local government adopting a bylaw to ensure that all its directly employed staff, as well as contracted staff, are paid a locally calculated living wage.

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*First Call, Child Poverty Report Card, 2013*

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## How can a living wage improve this reality?

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### Living wages are a simple and just solution

Paying a living wage would allow families with children to escape poverty and severe financial stress, ensure healthy childhood development, and permit families to participate in the social, civic and cultural lives of our communities.

### Local government has a responsibility to be a leader

We look to our local governments to help raise the bar – to set a higher standard. If enough local governments become living wage employers, they will create a market for those local service contractors who, in turn, pay the living wage.

### Living wages are good for business

Better pay translates directly into a healthier local economy. Low-income families spend almost all their money close to home, and businesses that have adopted the living wage report higher productivity and reduced staff turnover.

## How to develop a local government campaign

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### Develop a broad-based coalition

It is important that various sectors of the community are included in a coalition that is aiming to get a living wage policy passed by your local government.

**Labour:** It is a good idea to have the local labour council coordinate connections with labour partners – especially those who represent low-wage workers and local government employees.

**Faith Groups:** Many living wage campaigns have been successful due to the involvement of faith groups. They are often one of the largest civil society groups in the community.

**Parent Groups:** Groups such as the local district parents association can be very important in emphasizing the links between low wages and child poverty.

**Progressive Businesses:** Most communities have progressive businesses that play a role in social justice issues. A business advocating for living wages is often taken more seriously than community or labour groups.

**Local Community Groups and Charities:** Whether they're homeless shelters or food banks, these groups can easily identify the effect low wages have on the community.

**Immigrant Groups:** A disproportionate number of low-wage workers in many communities are from an immigrant background.

**Academic/Social Policy Groups:** Local social planning councils, anti-poverty groups, provincial coalitions and academics can be good allies in providing research resources and adding authority to your call.

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### **Calculate your local living wage rate**

The Living Wage for Families Campaign and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-BC Office have developed a well-thought-out methodology for calculating a living wage for any community in the province. They are available to get you advice as to how you can calculate your own living wage number.

Calculating your own number is important in helping you present a quantifiable and locally based “ask” to your local government council. It is also an excellent tool to get potential allies and the general public thinking about living wage issues. For more information visit [www.livingwagecanada.ca](http://www.livingwagecanada.ca)

### **Develop a strategy that is relevant to your community**

Every community is different and strategies that are developed need to relate to the local community. As a coalition, you’ll need to research what has happened in other areas and think about what may work in your community. Some communities decide to approach local businesses, others approach community allies, others do both. You need to discuss and decide what will work for you.

### **Hold a living wage event**

If you want to mobilize people, it is always important to have something concrete for them to do. Hosting a living wage event is a perfect example of how to do this.

You could host an event to launch your campaign, explaining what you are asking for and why it is important. You could hold a discussion about how the living wage is calculated for your community. You could hold a forum with local businesses.

Consider getting a variety of speakers at your event who can speak to the various audiences and concerns they may have. It is always good to include a perspective from a low-wage parent.

These events are also a good way to gain publicity about your campaign. Use the videos or resources on the Living Wage for Families Campaign website [www.livingwageforfamilies.ca](http://www.livingwageforfamilies.ca). Remember that any event is only a means, not an end. Think about how any event you organize can contribute to your wider aims.

### **Build relationships, explain in detail and deal with concerns**

Getting a living wage policy passed will take time. You need to reach out to different stakeholders, educate them about the issue and persuade them to support you. Develop a variety of communication tools and materials - the Living Wage for Families Campaign can help you with this. Make sure you have thought of answers to people’s concerns - see the Myths and Facts about Living Wages webpage at [www.livingwageforfamilies.ca](http://www.livingwageforfamilies.ca) for guidance.



**The living wage is the income necessary to enable more workers and their families to participate in society. A living wage will enable workers to live with dignity and engage as active citizens in society.**

**In April 2010, the City of New Westminster in BC became the first municipality in Canada to pass a living wage policy.**

## **Include low-wage workers as speakers and advocates and provide training**

It is a good idea to train people in the community to be living wage advocates, especially those working in low-wage jobs. Training workshops should make sure advocates are prepared for public speaking and the media, have a firm grasp of the living wage calculation and can answer concerns about the living wage. They should also be able to offer positive examples of living wage successes. Again, the Living Wage for Families Campaign can offer support and advice about training.

## **Identify a political champion on your local government council**

To get a living wage policy passed, you need a local councillor who is willing to work with your coalition to help get the policy passed. A local political champion will be best placed to guide you through council business and how policies are drafted and passed. They will be able to help you identify potential allies on the council and how best to persuade them. They will be able to advise you about the best time to formally bring a proposal to council.

## **Have a specific “ask” to bring to council**

When you feel you are in a strong position to formally ask your local government council to consider passing a living wage policy (once you have allies on board, completed a local calculation and had positive contact with a number of councillors), be very clear as to what you are asking for. Contact other cities that are already working on this issue to see how their living wage policies are framed. It is very important to ensure that any living wage policy includes contracted workers on local government contracts. Consider asking for a study to cost and consider the implications of a living wage policy in your community as a first step.

Most importantly, don't enter this stage of your campaign until you have a good chance of winning. A failure to get a living wage policy passed reduces the chance of a living wage policy being passed in other communities, and at a future date in your own community.

## **Sources**

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Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009. *Report on the State of Public Health in Canada*. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2009/fr-rc/index-eng.php>

