

# Reforming B.C.'s Income Assistance and Employment Programs

## Urban Core Policy Statement and Action Plan

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Urban Core is a volunteer-run network of nonprofits, businesses, and individuals who deliver social services and are committed to supporting a continuum of economic strategies that provide a sustainable livelihood and improved incomes for Vancouver Downtown Eastside residents and beyond. Many members of Urban Core are formal partners with the provincial or municipal government in their work and serve British Columbians who require Income Assistance (IA) and employment services. We offer the following submission on reforming IA and the Employment Program of BC (EPBC) based on this experience. Urban Core members support the recommendations of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition and Raise the Rates and present our recommendations as complementary.

For many in British Columbia, attaining economic self-sufficiency is an extended process due to health and education challenges. Existing IA programs and the EPBC do not account for this reality within their inflexible requirements, often removing supports at critical junctures, and denying non-Employment Insurance (EI) eligible clients access to certain training programs. For those whose economic self-sufficiency is temporarily or indefinitely beyond reach, multiple barriers prevent access to relevant income supports. The eligibility requirements of specific IA programs such as Persons With Disabilities (PWD) or Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB) present further obstacles for some of British Columbia's most marginalized applicants.

Despite the best efforts of service providers, IA workers and WorkBC contract holders, the existing systems are not working for many of the people who need them most. This submission outlines a number of recommendations for BC IA and employment programs. These recommendations address the issues outlined above and provide pathways for government to support British Columbians in their ongoing effort to achieve stability and self-sufficiency, contribute to community prosperity and produce savings to government in health and emergency interventions.



# Barriers to access and misdesignation



## Problems with current system

- The IA application is too complicated and lengthy.
- The online IA application system poses a significant challenge for those who lack digital literacy or access to technology. In several instances, applicants seek assistance from advocates, literacy organizations and employment support workers, who are not adequately resourced for this work.
- Many people with significant barriers to employment are struggling on basic IA (designated Employment Obligated 'EO') due to accessibility barriers and outdated eligibility criteria to access PWD and PPMB IA categories.
- Barriers to access IA are so high that some marginalized citizens aren't able to access IA at all, resulting in increased homelessness, illness and despair, and costs for health and emergency services.



## Recommended Actions

- **Improve the IA application process.** (1) Work with BC government Service Design team to identify and eliminate the most frequently cited barriers to accessing IA information and services. (2) Provide in-person services to help individuals complete IA applications.
- **Strengthen community supports.** (1) Compensate community agencies providing IA application advocate services appropriately. (2) Seek opportunities to co-locate IA officers within existing community services.
- **Improve access to PWD and PPMB IA categories.** Specifically (1) reform IA applicant categorization process to ensure individuals are categorized appropriately and quickly. (2) Update the eligibility tool for PPMB status to recognize mental health and addictions as barriers to employment. (3) Eliminate 12-15 month waiting period to access PPMB IA designation.
- **Commit to continual improvement.** (1) Consult end users in the IA reform process. (2) Develop ongoing feedback mechanisms to ensure optimal user experience.



## Desired Outcomes

- IA information and services are deemed accessible, streamlined and personalized by those who use them.
- IA recipients have timely and friendly online and in person channels to ask questions about IA, they feel welcome to ask questions and are satisfied that their questions are answered.
- Government workers feel satisfaction and fulfillment by offering personalized service to IA clients.
- Individuals are able to easily access the appropriate IA category to meet their needs and abilities, particularly PPMB and PWD.
- IA recipients have ongoing ability to contribute to the design and optimization of services.

# Problematic IA distribution and exemptions



## Problems with current system

- Cumbersome, bureaucratic protocols, such as the once-monthly issuance of cheques to be picked up in person at limited outlets, are time-consuming for IA recipients and undermine their ability to pursue work opportunities.
- Once-monthly synchronized IA payments are correlated with sharp increases in community-wide harm.
- There is widespread misunderstanding about earnings exemption limits and losing benefits. Individuals report significant fears about declaring earnings and 'clawback', disincentivizing seeking or increasing work.



## Recommended Actions

- **Develop a new evidence-informed distribution framework that emphasizes convenience and community wellbeing.** Consult investigators leading the BC Centre on Substance Use's 'Cheque Day Study' on the potential impacts of changing payment timing and frequency. Also seek input and feedback from recipients of IA and employers to develop framework.
- **Alleviate pressure on the most vulnerable IA recipients.** Remove the arbitrary earnings exemption limits and clawbacks for PPMB and PWD clients.
- **Eliminate the application of the two year financial independent test.** Additionally, acknowledge it as a misguided strategy for promoting self-reliance.



## Desired Outcomes

- IA distribution does not negatively disrupt or impact people's lives, ability or desire to work, and supports community health and safety.
- British Columbians living well below the poverty line are not subject to arbitrary and punitive policies that disincentivize working or reporting earnings.

# British Columbians fall through the cracks of EPBC



## Problems with current system

- WorkBC contract agreements make it difficult for contract holders to work with the hardest to employ clients. The single goal of moving people off of assistance deters people with barriers to employment from accessing employment services.
- Many training programs are only accessible for EI-eligible individuals, excluding many people facing barriers to employment.
- Many people in need of employment services have had a lifetime of negative interactions with government systems including education and legal, and are unwilling to walk through the door of 'institutional' WorkBC centres.
- People who 'fall through the cracks' are seeking support from non-profits, social enterprises and literacy organizations, which are not adequately resourced for this work.
- There is little to no recognition of the value of volunteer, casual, or part-time work as part of a continuum of income generating strategies that lead to better health, economic, and community outcomes. This is particularly true for EO clients.



## Recommended Actions

- **Reform the Employment Program of BC.** (1) Pause the procurement process for 2019 WorkBC Contracts. (2) Renew existing contract holders for 1 year. (3) Conduct a thorough review of the Employment Program of BC, engaging with end users and with WorkBC contract holders.
- **Invest in community supports.** Create flexible and sustainable funding for social enterprises and non-profits that are filling gaps in Ministry service provision.
- **Embrace the full income generation continuum.** (1) Recognize and create funding streams that support non-traditional employment as part of a continuum of income generation that promotes better health, economic and community outcomes - do not limit these to PWD IA recipients. (2) Look to emerging innovation models, such as EMBERS Eastside Works (formerly 'The Lux') low-barrier income generation hub and other community-based trainers to advise on policy reform.
- **Develop new ways to measure success.** Better housing, health, and social and educational outcomes are better markers of a successful program than whether someone has left income assistance.



## Desired Outcomes

- Employment services are provided on a person-centered basis, where integrated, customized, and sustained support lead to greater stability as an outcome.
- Integrated IA and employment programs recognize and support the broad range of ways in which people earn income that may not fit into the traditional view of a 40-hour work week.
- Non-traditional, flexible and/or community-based employment and volunteer opportunities are recognized and supported as legitimate training or transitional work opportunities.

## Acronyms

- IA = Income Assistance
- EPBC = Employment Program of BC
- EI = Employment Insurance
- EO = Employment Obligated
- PPMB = Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers
- PWD = Persons With Disabilities

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