

Welfare Reform in BC

Five years later, who would declare it a success?

WORDS | **BRUCE WALLACE, MSW**

April 1, 2007 will be the five-year anniversary of the implementation of the current welfare laws in BC. Five years ago, how did BCASW members respond to the provincial government's promise "to end the culture of welfare dependency and introduce a new era of employment and self-sufficiency"?

The changes were announced on "Black Thursday," January 17, 2002, the day the provincial government introduced a budget requiring significant cuts to social spending in BC. BCASW swiftly responded with a news conference that heard UBC's Graham Riches saying "Let there be no doubt that Black Thursday's welfare reform decisions violate international law and in certain respects the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Government actions require legal challenges ... All social workers, indeed all British Columbians, need to be asking if this really is the British Columbia we wish for the future."


In an article describing the new welfare system, BCASW member Marge Reitsma-Street describes how the proposed changes became law in BC: "In spite of the significant changes no witnesses were called, no hearings were held, and no research into the legislation's impact was examined. The government permitted only a few hours of debate on the bills before approving them, despite requests of hundreds of people and groups who volunteered to appear before them."

That summer, at the BCASW AGM, members voted to censure Minister Coell expressing their loss in confidence in the Minister who identifies himself as a social worker but introduced legislation violating the principles espoused in the Social Work Code of Ethics and placed social workers in BC in a position of being asked to carry out unethical policies. In the fall of 2002, BCASW actively campaigned for changes to the Ministry's Persons with Disabilities Client Review Process, with our concerns subsequently confirmed by BC's Auditor General. In 2003, BCASW members passed a resolution that social workers actively lobby the government to repeal the two year time limit on welfare assistance in BC.

BCASW and its members continued to voice their concerns and present evidence of the systematic harm while the Ministry continued to ignore external evidence and repeat its "good news" mantra. Still, the concerns seem to have generated changes—notably the revisions to welfare time limits and the review of the disability caseload. Many of the concerns of BCASW and other organizations and coalitions have been verified and legitimized by two independent investigations into the ministry—one by the Auditor General and another by the provincial Ombudsman's office.

Now, five years later, the public seems to be more aware that assisting far fewer people may not be helping and a booming economy is not in itself a safety net. With poverty rates increasing in BC and homelessness increasingly visible to the public, welfare reform in BC cannot be declared a success. In a recent Ipsos Reid poll, 74% of respondents supported an increase to welfare

rates and 89 % agreed that "access to welfare should be a right for all British Columbians."

There is a role for BCASW to seek ways for the public to be engaged in substantive and radical change that creates programs that work in the best interest of those who need it and which have public confidence and support. Clearly, we need a new agenda in BC; we need a provincial poverty reduction agenda—an agenda not to reduce the welfare caseload but to reduce poverty in BC. 

Bruce Wallace is a member of BCASW and the Research Coordinator at the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) and the researcher of Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC. For more information visit www.vipirg.ca or download the report at www.policyalternatives.ca.