

## **Five years after the cuts, poverty is worse**

By Graham Riches and Jean Swanson

April 1st marks the fifth anniversary of BC welfare policies that cut benefits and created new barriers to accessing assistance. The government said in 2002 that the changes were designed to move people on welfare into work. While some people have found work, mostly due to a growing economy, thousands were moved to even deeper poverty, and homelessness has at least doubled. Major reports by the City of Vancouver and the GVRD say that the main cause of increased homelessness is the new barriers to accessing welfare enacted in April, 2002. Even the Premier's own BC Progress Board, says BC has more people living in poverty than any other province. BC's child poverty rate (23.5% in 2004) is the highest in Canada and significantly above rates in all OECD countries (except Mexico); since 2002 BC's charitable food banks have increased in number from 85 to 97 and monthly users (a third are children) have increased to 81,248.

In the February budget, the government did bring in \$58 million worth of increases, which are better than the cuts we're used to. Single people now get \$375 for rent if they can find a place for that. And they get \$1.66 a day more for food and everything else to add to the \$6 they already had. But it's important to understand that even with these increases, many thousands of people on welfare, including children and some people with disabilities have less purchasing power now than they did in 2002, and nearly all have incomes that are less than half the poverty line. In fact, if singles on welfare had the same purchasing power today as they had in 1980, they would be getting \$822, not \$610. Little wonder that people have to panhandle, squeegee, and look through garbage for food and things to sell?

In addition, the 2002 barriers to getting on welfare: the three week wait, the need to prove you have worked for two years prior to getting welfare, the requirement for multiple appointments to get a cheque, and requirements for computer orientation, still keep people in need from getting on welfare. While the Ombudsman has forced the Ministry to change procedures so that theoretically people in need can by-pass the 3 week wait, the other barriers still apply, and advocates report that numerous people in dire need still can't get immediate help.

If our economy is so hot, you may be asking, why aren't these people working? The Ministry of Income and Employment Assistance has itself acknowledged that virtually everyone who remains on assistance has some barrier to employment, such as addiction, mental-health or other sorts of social and health problems, and is likely to be there for a year or more, far longer than in previous years. This makes it now more urgent than ever to address the inadequacy of the welfare rates in meeting basic living needs.

With the 2010 Winter Olympics fast approaching and the imminent arrival of the international community it is timely to take stock of the province's deeply rooted and disturbing poverty. If the Olympian ideal is the achievement of excellence in the international arena, why not British Columbia's social policies?

Not only have BC's welfare policies caused homelessness and unnecessary suffering, they violate international human rights. In 1976 Canada ratified the United Nations *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, agreeing to 'respect, protect and fulfill' the right to an adequate standard of living for all. In 2005 the UN adopted Right to Food guidelines, also supported by Canada, which provide a template for developing national poverty reduction and food security actions plans with clear goals, benchmarks, indicators and monitoring. Yet in his 2005 report BC's own provincial health officer said, "Families and individuals on social assistance in BC have little or no money after paying for shelter to purchase food and other necessities." BC could take action now and develop a five or ten year poverty elimination action plan, starting by increasing welfare rates at least 50%, ending the arbitrary barriers that are causing homelessness, and raising minimum wage to \$10 an hour (see more on this at [www.raisetherates.org](http://www.raisetherates.org)).

Many of our Olympic visitors will be from the Nordic countries where poverty has been wrestled to the ground. Norway has already written its UN economic and social rights obligations into domestic law so BC would not win the gold medal, but even a silver medal for ending poverty would be great. Of course, this would take a huge dose of political will, but so did the 1962 introduction of Medicare by Saskatchewan. BC's commitments to welfare and human rights, along with the achievements of its athletes, could yet shine on the domestic and international stage.