

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Advocates Welcome Welfare and Disability Rate Increase, Calling for System Overhaul

Victoria, BC (July 20, 2017) – Today the Government of BC, has announced an increase to income assistance and disability rates. Effective September 20, 2017, the new monthly rates will be \$710 for a person on income assistance and \$1,133 for a person receiving disability assistance, an increase of \$100. The raise in the basic income assistance rate is the first since 2007 and marks a thaw in the 10 year rate freeze imposed on people living in poverty across the province.

“This first increase in over a decade is a breath of fresh air,” states Stephen Portman, Advocacy Lead for Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS), “while much more is needed to stem entrenched poverty and inequity at a systemic level, this change is an important signal that poverty reduction is a priority.”

Encouraged by this initial step, advocates at TAPS are calling for further changes aimed at addressing long standing issues confronted by people living in poverty. A significant increase to the earnings exemption would promote work place participation and ease some of the burden created by BC’s housing affordability crisis. Strengthened medical and dental benefits would lessen the strain on those with chronic illnesses. Changes to dependency clauses that declare people on income and disability assistance to be in marriage-like relationships after residing with another person for only 3 months would reduce the risk of financial dependence. Changes to eligibility criteria and intake processes could help avoid severe economic hardship and homelessness among those trying to access assistance.

While this rate increase is welcome news, challenges faced by people living in poverty and dependent on services provided by the newly renamed Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction are widespread. In recent years, BC’s welfare ministry has radically altered its service delivery model in ways that have made it very difficult for the most marginalized people in the province to access basic services (i.e. closing ministry offices and reducing office hours, providing the majority of services over a centralized phone line, placing arbitrary limits on phone call length, and requiring that the lengthy initial application be completed online).

While TAPS is optimistic that greater change may be ahead, mending the holes in BC’s tattered safety net will require a great deal more work than an increase in rates, but for the first time in a long time there is hope that much can be accomplished.

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