



What We Heard : Engagement Summary Report

Updating TogetherBC: B.C.'s Poverty Reduction Strategy

Spring and Summer 2023

Prepared for:

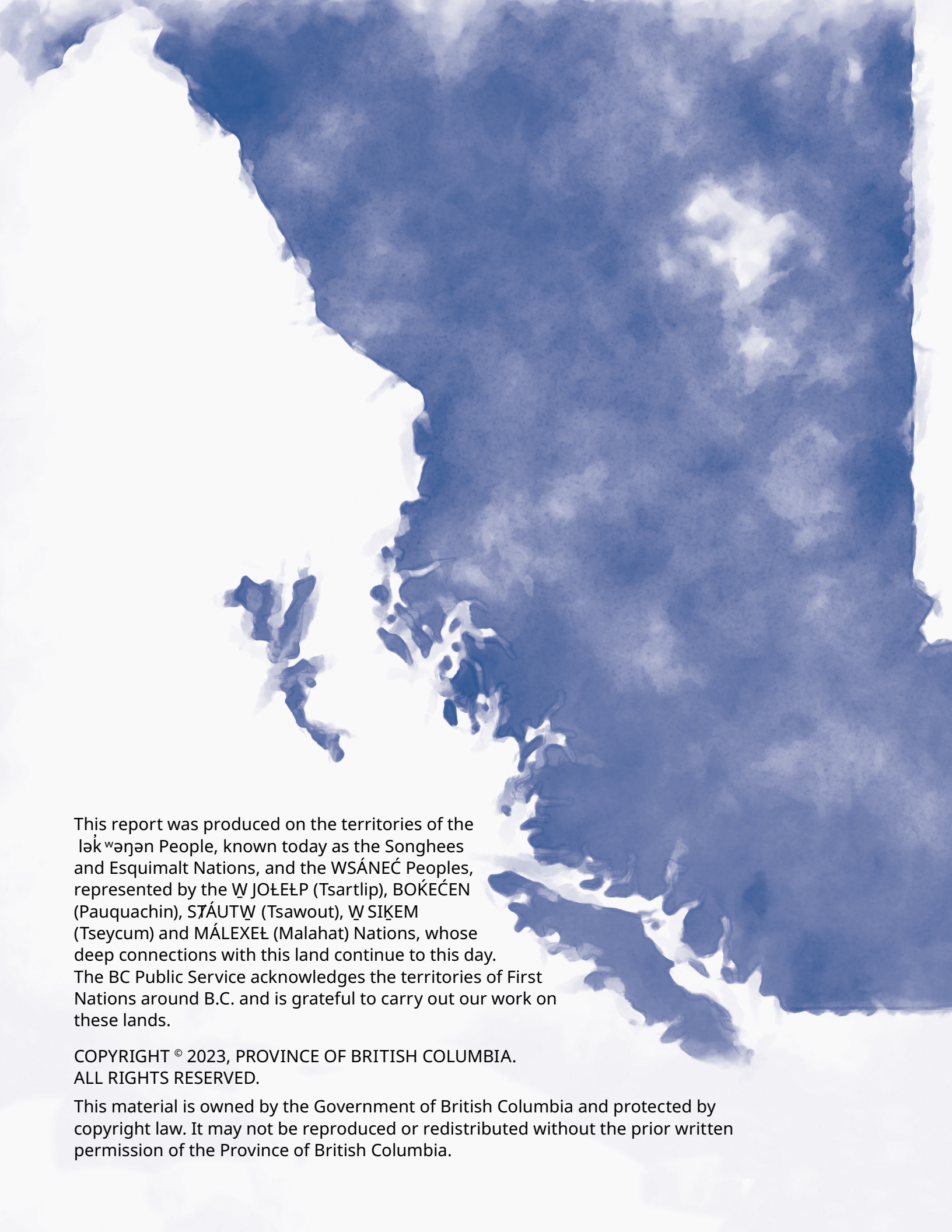


Ministry of
Social Development
and Poverty Reduction

Prepared by:

argyle:

a division of Believeco:Partners



This report was produced on the territories of the lək̓ʷəŋən People, known today as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, and the WSÁNEĆ Peoples, represented by the Ƶ JOŁEŁP (Tsartlip), BOKÉĆEN (Pauquachin), SƦÁUTƵ (Tsawout), Ƶ SIKEM (Tseycum) and MÁLEXEŁ (Malahat) Nations, whose deep connections with this land continue to this day. The BC Public Service acknowledges the territories of First Nations around B.C. and is grateful to carry out our work on these lands.

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Message from the Minister

We want people to live a life of dignity, with the services and supports they need not just to survive but thrive. That's what TogetherBC, our 2019 poverty reduction strategy, has been about from the beginning. That's why we have been taking action on food security, affordable housing, and skills training and employment, all with the goal of reducing poverty.

We have made poverty reduction a priority since the day we formed government in 2017. Before this, B.C. was the only province without a poverty reduction strategy. Now we have one that is legislated, with targets to reduce child poverty rates by 50% and overall poverty rates by 25%. Between 2016 and 2021, we reduced poverty by 45% and child poverty by 55%, helping more than three hundred thousand people out of poverty.

New and rising challenges of global inflation and high interest rates are hitting everyone hard, especially Indigenous Peoples, racialized communities, single working-age adults, people with disabilities, and transgender people, who experience poverty more often and more deeply. And the climate crisis is having huge impacts on those living in poverty. Extreme temperatures and wildfires create disruption, displacement and increased costs. They also disrupt seasonal harvesting practices that are critical to food security, especially for First Nations people and other people living in rural and remote communities.

So, we need to do more. That's why, in spring and summer 2023, B.C. hosted a wide-ranging public engagement, which included an online survey, virtual townhalls, small group sessions and a conversation toolkit that groups used to create their own conversations and to share input. More than 10,000 people – over 70% of them with lived experience of poverty – participated. We are so grateful for the valuable insights, and they will significantly shape our next poverty reduction strategy, to be released in spring 2024.

We heard:

- Housing remains people's number one priority. We heard calls to increase the supply of all types of housing, including shelter spaces, transitional and rental housing as well as owned homes
- Food insecurity is a painful reality for far too many people living in B.C., especially as global inflation drives up costs at the grocery store
- People told us that increasing education opportunities for people living in poverty is an important link in increasing incomes, promoting social mobility and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty
- B.C.'s investments in child care, including fee reductions and \$10 a day child care, provide a strong foundation to build upon
- A lack of accessible and affordable transportation is a barrier to employment, and affects people's ability to maintain independence
- People spoke about the critical need to improve and expand both mental health and wellness care
- We heard that income and disability assistance are ranked one of the most helpful government services, but they remain one of the most difficult to access and that the rates are still too low

Reducing poverty continues to be a cross-government effort – whether it's raising the minimum wage, improving health services, providing families with affordable child care, or new training and education opportunities. Strengthening these cross-government efforts will be part of our next poverty reduction strategy.

Thank you to everyone who participated in our poverty reduction engagement this year. I was honoured to hear peoples' stories and witness some of these insightful conversations: all of these will inform our government's next steps and help break the cycle of poverty.

Together, we will face the challenges before us, and together we will build a stronger, more equitable B.C., for everyone.

*The Honourable Sheila Malcolmson
Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction*

Executive Summary

To inform the update of TogetherBC, the province's first poverty reduction strategy, B.C. completed a wide-ranging public engagement on poverty reduction beginning in Spring 2023. The focus of public engagement was to meet people where they are and ensure the experiences of people living in poverty were central to the discussion. To capture input from as many people as possible, Argyle, an independent engagement firm contracted by the Province, conducted both online and in-person engagement sessions throughout B.C.

Over spring and summer 2023, we heard from over 10,000 people across the province, over 70% with lived experience of poverty. To every person who shared their experiences during this engagement, we express deep appreciation for the time you gave and the emotional labour you did to share your story. Your experiences and insights will help us continue to shape government programs and services that reduce poverty and remove barriers for those most in need of support.

Poverty experienced by Indigenous people is linked to the ongoing and lasting impacts of colonial practices and policies. As poverty may affect all Indigenous Peoples, government undertook a separate, distinctions-based engagement with First Nations, including Modern Treaty Nations, and Métis in late Spring and Summer 2023. Urban Indigenous people were also engaged as an intersectional group comprised of all distinct Indigenous groups, including Inuit and Indigenous people from outside of B.C.. An Indigenous facilitation firm contracted by the Province, Mahihkan Management, ensured a culturally safe, Indigenous-led engagement process. Town hall engagement sessions were held in communities and online. A separate Métis-led engagement was organized through Métis Nation BC. A What We Heard report from the Indigenous engagement process will be available on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page shortly.

The What We Heard report has been organized into 9 overarching themes:



- 1. Reconciliation**
 - a. Cultural Safety
 - b. Indigenous Self-determination
- 2. Affordability**
 - a. Housing and Homelessness
 - b. Food Security
 - c. Climate and Energy
 - d. Transportation
- 3. Health Services**
 - a. Mental Health and Addictions Care
 - b. Health Care Access and Delivery
- 4. Education and Training**
- 5. Income and Employment Supports**
 - a. Income and Disability Assistance
 - b. Employment
- 6. Other Government Programs and Supports**
 - a. Awareness and Navigation of Existing Government Programs
 - b. Integration and Data Sharing
 - c. Better Access to Person-centered Services
- 7. Life Resources**
 - a. Personal Identification Supports
 - b. Banking and Financial Services
 - c. Financial Empowerment and Tax Filing
 - d. Internet Connectivity and Affordability
- 8. Non-Profit Partnerships**
- 9. Equity and Inclusion**

While everyone has unique circumstances, the themes below reflect people's shared experiences of poverty. Themes such as housing, child care, mental health, and income supports continued to be key, as they were in the first poverty reduction strategy engagement in 2017/2018. However, these issues have become more urgent and complex in the context of recent global crises including COVID-19, climate change, and inflation. Understanding the impact of these crises is critical for developing equitable solutions to poverty.

Reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination were top priorities brought forward by Indigenous people as well as advocacy organizations. The legacy of colonial harms, including inaccessibility of culturally appropriate, safe, and community driven services, was identified as a significant barrier to well-being, particularly in rural and remote areas where access felt scarce. A What We Heard report from the Indigenous engagement process will be available on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page shortly.

People expressed inability to meet their basic needs due to **affordability challenges**. When people do not have safe, secure and affordable housing, they are unable to create stability for themselves or their families. Food banks, once seen as a temporary measure, are now seen as an essential service. And while people expressed appreciation for recent child care investments, they noted that barriers remain in terms of affordability and access. We heard about the acute impacts of climate change on people living in poverty, and implications for energy affordability. We heard how extreme weather events have the most impact on those in poverty. In addition, lack of affordable and reliable transportation means people face challenges in accessing needed services, employment opportunities, and health care.

We heard how **health and well-being** are linked to poverty, and the critical need to improve and expand mental health and wellness care, especially because of the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. People often associated their mental health challenges with living in poverty – both as a cause and a result. People living in B.C. continue to experience crisis levels of drug toxicity-

related harms. Other barriers to health and well-being include access and availability of health care services, including long waitlists for services.

We heard about the importance of equitable access to **education and skills training** programs that can lead to meaningful employment and community attachment. We heard that everyone deserves the chance for meaningful participation in the community, but what this looks like will be different for everyone. This was particularly highlighted in rural and remote communities that pose more access barriers.

This engagement process is also informing a review of **B.C.'s income and disability assistance program**, which provides income support to people living off reserve and treaty land in B.C. Recipients of income and disability assistance spoke about how rates were not meeting their basic needs, and the need to transform the system to increase access and decrease barriers. People also spoke about the need for employment supports and incentives that are not punitive, and that meet people where they are, acknowledging their personal circumstances, goals, values, and cultural needs. Challenges in accessing and navigating these income assistance supports was a common theme.

People also pointed out challenges **accessing and navigating other government social programs**. In fact, one of the key findings from this engagement is that the people who need them the most often express limited knowledge and awareness of available programs and services provided by government. Since TogetherBC was released in 2019, many new or enhanced programs and services have been developed for people, but people shared difficulties accessing program information, completing application forms, and finding out about their eligibility. People shared that they were in survival mode and were overwhelmed when trying to access help for themselves and their families. Addressing system navigation challenges and simplifying program access, including support during life transitions, were seen as tangible solutions to ensure that government programs and benefits meant to help people are actually reaching them.

People spoke about struggling to access basic resources that most British Columbians take for granted. Referred to in this report as **life resources**, these include personal identification, banking, internet access and affordable cell phone plans.

We heard from **non-profit organizations** that they are encountering crisis levels of service demands, overstressing their capacity. We heard that while more people are accessing their services than ever before, they are facing increasing costs and significant challenges in recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers. In addition to this, people spoke of the impact of the affordability and housing crises on non-profit employees themselves who are increasingly needing to access the services they provide such as food hampers.

We've seen above that there are many circumstances that intensify the difficulties of poverty. Participants shared instances of discrimination related to disabilities, mental health and housing status, including barriers to employment and housing due to prejudice from landlords and rental companies. We affirm that **equity and inclusion** must be top of mind across all policies, programs and services.

This What We Heard report reflects the many personal experiences and insights shared during the engagement process. It is meant to be a point-in-time capture of the input we received. It is not meant to be a complete or precise picture of the complex causes of poverty for all people, or the breadth of programs and supports B.C. offers. The voices represented here are helping us develop an update to the poverty reduction strategy that accounts for this lived and living experience and works toward breaking the cycle of poverty.

Introduction

All people in B.C. deserve to live a satisfying and fulfilling life. Poverty impacts health and well-being, limits people's opportunities, and perpetuates a cycle of instability and hardship that can become intergenerational. We want to keep reducing poverty in B.C., and make sure our future actions focus on supporting those who need it most.

British Columbia was the only province without a poverty reduction strategy before *TogetherBC: B.C.'s Poverty Reduction Strategy* was released in 2019. Based on the legislated framework of 2018's *Poverty Reduction Strategy Act*, it outlined a cross-government approach to poverty reduction guided by four principles: Affordability, Opportunity, Reconciliation and Social Inclusion. The 2019 strategy included significant investments to achieve legislated targets to reduce poverty for children by 50%, and for all people by 25% by 2024.

Since its release, *TogetherBC* has led to significant progress in key areas such as income support, housing, child care, and support for families. These investments were critical to B.C. meeting its legislated targets to reduce poverty in 2019, in combination with federal investments.

In 2020, B.C. significantly exceeded these targets, largely because of the addition of temporary federal and provincial COVID-19 benefits. Poverty rates increased in 2021 (from 7.6% in 2020 to 8.8%), due to the ending of temporary federal and provincial COVID-19 benefits and global inflation. B.C. continues to meet its targets, and as of 2021, B.C. has reduced overall poverty by 45% and child poverty by 54.6%.

But we know there is more work to do. Certain populations, including Indigenous people, people with disabilities, and single working age adults, didn't see the same reduction in their levels of poverty. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic, global inflation, and extreme climate events have disproportionately hurt people who were already struggling. While B.C. continues to meet its targets, it is expected that data from 2022 will show poverty rates increasing again in B.C. and across

Canada, as the cost of living continues to rise. Ongoing action from all levels of government will be needed to ensure that progress on reducing poverty is sustained and advanced.

B.C.'s engagement strategy was built on advice and guidance from key government partners, in particular the Minister's Poverty Reduction Advisory Committee (PRAC) – which includes Indigenous representatives and elected leaders from First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC) and Métis Nation BC (MNBC).

The engagement approach supports government's commitments to reconciliation, the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration). It also aligns with the Declaration Act Action Plan Action 4.15 to: *"Incorporate Indigenous experiences and knowledge of poverty and well-being into ongoing poverty reduction efforts and the 2024 Poverty Reduction Strategy. The strategy will recognize the ongoing impacts of colonialism and include Indigenous-identified actions and progress measures"*. A What We Heard report from the Indigenous engagement process will be available on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page shortly.

We know enhancing equity in our society brings greater happiness, well-being, and economic stability. We also know reducing poverty is essential to building a more prosperous B.C. where people can reach their full potential. Understanding the barriers that keep people in poverty is critical to understanding what actions are needed to improve access to the services and supports people need.

British Columbia's Poverty Reduction Framework

TogetherBC is based on a strong framework outlined in *the Poverty Reduction Strategy Act* (the Act). The Act commits government to update the Poverty Reduction Strategy at least every five years.

The Act commits government to achieving two poverty reduction targets by 2024:

1. Reduce the overall poverty rate by 25 per cent by 2024
2. Reduce the child (under 18) poverty rate by 50 per cent by 2024

*Based on the 2016 Market Basket Measure (MBM)

The Act also outlines four guiding principles, six priority action areas and 13 key population groups to guide B.C.'s approach to poverty reduction:

Four guiding principles:

1. Affordability
2. Opportunity
3. Social inclusion
4. Reconciliation

Six priority action areas:

1. Housing
2. Families, children and youth
3. Education
4. Employment
5. Income supports
6. Social supports

Key Population Groups:

1. Children;
2. Youth;
3. Women and persons of all genders;
4. Indigenous peoples;
5. Persons living with disabilities;
6. Persons living in rural and remote communities;
7. Immigrants and refugees;
8. LGBTQ2S+ persons;
9. Seniors;
10. Persons and families working and earning low incomes;
11. Persons living with or fleeing abuse;
12. Persons living with mental illness or addiction; and
13. Persons of colour.

Engagement Process Overview

Public Engagement

Beginning on March 1, 2023, the B.C. Government conducted a wide-ranging public engagement to understand lived experiences of poverty in B.C., and how we can reduce and prevent poverty and help those who need it most.

Building on the engagement conducted in 2017/2018 and informed by the Minister's Poverty Reduction Advisory Committee and other key partners, the goal was to understand what poverty looks like in B.C. today and what more can be done to address poverty, especially considering recent local and global events such as COVID-19, climate events, the housing crisis, and inflation.

People with lived and living experience of poverty are key to understanding barriers keeping people in poverty and potential solutions that would have the most impact. For this reason, our engagement focused on receiving input from people and groups facing unique challenges and/or higher rates of poverty. This includes Black people and people of colour; Indigenous people; people with disabilities; women, transgender people, two-spirit, non-binary and other people with diverse gender identities; youth; LGBTQIA+; refugee and immigrant communities; and people with experience of abuse. We also sought input from a wide range of communities, leaders, service providers and organizations supporting people living in poverty.

We conducted both virtual and in-person engagement sessions throughout B.C., offering a broad range of supports to reduce any barriers to participation to the greatest degree possible. This included language interpretation, child care, food, honoraria, transportation support or other expenses required to access sessions.

We also sought to meet people where they are in their lives, by recognizing the time, effort, and emotional capacity it takes to share personal experiences of poverty, especially when it means retelling stories of discrimination, hardship, and trauma. We recognize the courage required and appreciate everyone who took the time to share these deeply personal experiences.

Engaging with Indigenous Peoples

Following the broad public engagement, the B.C. Government undertook a dedicated distinctions-based engagement process with First Nations, including Modern Treaty Nations, and Métis in late Spring and Summer 2023. Urban Indigenous people were also engaged as an intersectional group comprised of all distinct Indigenous groups, including Inuit and Indigenous people from outside of B.C.

The first step in that process was to review existing Indigenous-led reports and recommendations, to minimize engagement fatigue and in recognition that Nations and Indigenous organizations have made their views on poverty and income assistance well-known. Government staff subsequently attended First Nations Gatherings and hosted workshops to gain more perspective on issues and priorities.

An Indigenous facilitation firm contracted by the Province, Mahihkan Management, ensured a culturally safe, Indigenous-led engagement process. Mahihkan designed engagement sessions in coordination with First Nations, Friendship Centres and community partners. These sessions invited community members to share their input, knowledge and experience of poverty and well-being and between May and September 2023. A separate Métis-led engagement was organized through Métis Nation BC.

A What We Heard report from the Indigenous engagement process will be available on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page shortly.

Public Engagement Regional Town Halls

We held five public virtual town halls in regions throughout the province. Each of the five town halls – four hosted by Minister Sheila Malcolmson and one hosted by Parliamentary Secretary Megan Dykeman – were open to the public and specifically discussed needs relevant to each region. We held town halls for the following regions:

- Vancouver Island/Gulf Islands
- Northern B.C., Cariboo, Chilcotin
- Kootenay Rockies
- Thompson, Okanagan
- Mainland/Vancouver Coast

In each session, we invited input through the following questions:

- What are some of the biggest challenges you, your family, and your community are experiencing in terms of covering your day-to-day expenses or moving out of poverty?
- What is working well in your community to address poverty and why?
- What is not working, or where do you see change most needed?

The public town halls were designed to allow for candid conversations that centered and prioritized the lived experiences of participants. To ensure all participants could fully engage and understand others' perspectives, we provided American Sign Language translation, language interpretation, and closed captioning for those who needed alternate formats. As a principle of engagement, especially those with lived or living experience, reciprocity is critical to building relationships and trust. Therefore, in addition to making these conversations as welcoming as possible, we offered honoraria to participants who self-identified as having lived or living experience of poverty. As well, due to the emotionally sensitive and triggering nature of these conversations, we engaged real-time supports from a registered social worker. If participants needed emotional or social supports, they were able to leave the conversation at any moment and be immediately connected with the registered social worker in a breakout room

In total, **293** attendees joined these public regional town halls. Of these attendees, **184** people with lived and living experience received honoraria for generously sharing their perspectives.

Minister's Roundtables

In addition to the townhalls, Minister Sheila Malcolmson convened four in-person roundtables, inviting community leaders and people with lived and living experience of poverty to share stories and experiences about poverty in their communities, as well as grassroots solutions that are working and where more support is needed. These meetings took place in Nanaimo, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Surrey, and Prince George.

In total, **77** attendees joined the four Minister's Roundtables. Of these attendees, **12** people with lived and living experience of poverty received honoraria for their participation.

Conversation Toolkit

Internet connectivity can be a barrier to people living in poverty. This is especially true for people who live in rural and remote communities. To reduce this barrier and provide an opportunity for independent conversations on poverty reduction in B.C., we created a downloadable conversation toolkit. To encourage these conversations, we funded organizations to host their own sessions. Eligible community groups were able to receive up to \$2,000 to put toward hosting costs, including: food; venue space; honoraria; accessibility supports; transportation; child care; equipment; and/or staff time. The application consisted of a simple online form and applicants were assessed within days.

The Conversation Toolkit included:

- A facilitation guide with background information on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy, TogetherBC;
- A schedule of current 2022/23 engagement opportunities;
- Guidelines on hosting a successful community conversation;
- A conversation guide to initiate and host conversations with participants;
- Suggestions on how to promote the small group meetings among their networks;
- Template for the organizer to record notes from participants; and,
- Template documents, including an agenda, code of conduct, and reporting template.

In total, **303** conversation toolkits were downloaded from the project website and 15 organizations received funding to convene their own conversations.

A full list of organizations who convened conversations and submitted a report can be found in Appendix A.

Small Group Meetings

During the engagement period, at the recommendation of the Minister's Poverty Reduction Advisory Committee and initial partner research, we collaborated with organizations supporting key populations such as disability groups, youth organizations, and employment support services to convene small group meetings and receive input directly from people with lived and living experience of poverty. These sessions were hosted in-person and virtually based on preference and included similar accessibility measures as described above, informed by front-line community leaders.

Sessions were coordinated by Argyle, in collaboration with the respective organizational partners, and held across B.C. Most took the form of a focus group, but some served as drop-in one-on-one conversations to meet people where they are and best learn from their experiences. These inquiries were similar to the town halls but with some questions adapted for each group based on their needs and anticipated areas of interest.

In total, we hosted 18 small group meetings speaking to over 150 people, most of which had lived and living experiences and received honoraria for their participation.

A full list of small groups sessions can be found in Appendix B.

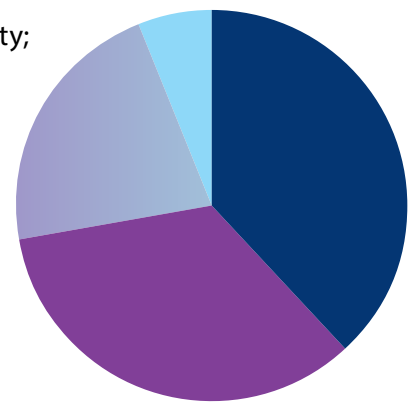
Online Survey

Between March 1 and April 30, 2023, members of the public were able to share their input through an online survey, hosted on the engagement website (engage.gov.bc.ca/povertyreduction). This survey included questions about people's current experiences with poverty, challenges with existing programs and services, and recommendations for government to consider moving forward. It also included questions about government-wide programs and benefits that have linkages to poverty. A final version of the survey can be viewed in Appendix C.

To ensure the survey connected with people who have lived and living experience of poverty, a QR code and website link were included on two issues of income assistance cheques, directly on the MySelfServe online portal, and through social media.

8,387 people completed the online survey. This included:

- 77%** of participants self-identifying that they currently live in poverty;
- 69%** of participants self-identifying as living with a disability;
- 44%** of participants self-identifying as living with a mental illness, or experiencing challenges with substance use; and,
- 12%** of participants self-identifying as being Indigenous:
Of this, **57%** identified as First Nations; **38%** Métis;
1% Inuit; **6%** other North American Indigenous



Engagement Website

The engagement website, engage.gov.bc.ca/povertyreduction, served as the main portal to access all opportunities for engagement including the online survey, registration for the virtual regional town halls, and information on hosting your own conversations and funding support.

In total, over the course of the project, there were **29,810** total visits to the engagement website.

Policy and Written Submissions

For organizations and people who could not share their input through the above methods, the email address BCPovertyReduction@gov.bc.ca was available for written recommendations and policy submissions. In total, 34 policy submissions and 56 individual submissions were received. These submissions include direct recommendations from municipal and regional governments; health authorities; advocacy organizations; NGOs; unions; private companies; and others.

A full list of organizations who submitted policy submissions can be found in Appendix D.



Analysis and Reporting

All quantitative and qualitative data collected during engagement was reviewed and compiled by the project team to inform the results shared in this final report. Quantitative data was analyzed and cross-tabulated to provide a picture of closed-ended responses relating to respondents' lived and living experiences with poverty and several self-reported demographic characteristics. Qualitative data was compiled into a single document with tabs for each type of feedback (i.e., survey responses, town hall notes, and small group meeting notes) to account for the sets of questions posed and feedback collected.

To bring this feedback together, the project team identified overarching themes that were then used to structure and organize all qualitative feedback. This ensured that data from all engagement streams was considered equally. A combination of inductive and deductive qualitative data analysis was used to "code" each comment to one of the themes, or any new themes that emerged, and create sub-themes to reflect the feedback. This resulted in the nine overarching themes that structure the results section of this report.

We want to emphasize that no engagement process or report will ever be comprehensive, and that ideas and opinions can shift with time and throughout space. This report is a snapshot of a moment, and not a representation of a definitive, indefinite truth of the views of everyone with lived and living experiences of poverty in B.C.

Key Themes in Detail

1. Reconciliation

Poverty for Indigenous Peoples is linked to the lasting and ongoing harms of colonial practices and policies. Indigenous people continue to experience ongoing systemic racism and discrimination that is connected to worse health outcomes, and more difficulties finding and keeping housing and employment. These themes are examined in much more depth in a What We Heard Report from the Indigenous engagement process, available shortly on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page. However, it is important to note that Reconciliation, in particular understanding and supporting cultural safety and Indigenous self-determination, is prevalent in all aspects of what we heard during this engagement process.

Cultural Safety

Provincial and Federal governments have historically not been seen as trustworthy due to past and ongoing harms stemming from colonization. Many Indigenous people feel government programs and services are not yet safe spaces for them due to inherent power imbalances and experiences of racism and discrimination. To help address the root causes of this issue and ensure cultural safety in government programs and supports, many Indigenous participants suggested all governments can:

- Improve the quality of service delivery to ensure respectful, culturally sensitive interactions
- Provide comprehensive training programs for government staff
- Promote respectful interactions and safe spaces
- Establish accountability mechanisms to address complaints and concerns
- Offer culturally appropriate food at food banks

Indigenous Self-determination

The themes shared in this report apply to and are sometimes more pivotal for Indigenous people, and we heard many calls to support Indigenous organizations and governments to deliver their own services in these areas, in culturally appropriate and supportive ways. Engaging Indigenous communities in decision-making processes was seen as the first step toward this.

2. Affordability

Affordability challenges are making life more difficult for people across British Columbia. Global inflation has rapidly increased the costs of goods and services people rely on. We heard from people across the province that when it comes to accessing basic needs, affordability has become one of their top concerns. Many people shared stories of being forced to choose between paying rent and buying groceries, and needing to limit spending on other necessities, including medications. People's biggest affordability concerns surrounded housing and food security, but also included child care, energy costs and transportation.

Housing and Homelessness

Across the province, through all streams of engagement, housing was people's number one priority related to poverty reduction. When people do not have safe and secure housing or they spend a high proportion of their income to sustain it, they are unable to meet other needs, such as employment, health, community connections, personal development, and stability. A survey participant shared the toll the lack of affordable housing is having in their community:

“**We have families broken up, children in foster care because their parents can't afford to rent here and are camping or sleeping in their vehicles!**”

(Participant, Online survey)

Despite significant investments being made to address housing supply across the province, lack of access to affordable housing remains at crisis level. Owning a home is seen as an impossible goal for many people living in B.C., and safe and adequate rentals feel increasingly out of reach. We know through the recent homelessness count that homelessness rates are increasing across the province, with thousands of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Many of the recommendations we received were about how to prevent homelessness and provide more stable housing – supporting those at risk by increasing the housing stock, including supportive housing for those with diverse needs.

Increase Housing Stock, Including Supportive Housing

To respond to the housing crisis and support people at risk of homelessness, we heard calls to increase the supply of all types of housing, including shelter spaces, transitional housing, and different types of rental housing. Numerous organizations recommended additional funding for social, affordable, and non-market rental housing units, particularly for people with multiple barriers and those who require complex care.

Many organizations referenced a recent call for B.C. to build 25,000 non-market units a year for the next decade. Non-market housing is a critical preventative measure for people who are at risk of becoming homeless, for example mothers with substance use challenges, high-risk survivors of violence, people with complex trauma, and youth without family support, those aging out of care, young people experiencing mental health and substance use challenges, LGBTQIA2S+ youth, and Indigenous youth.

People told us about the importance of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels with lower rents that make housing accessible to people living on lower incomes, including income and disability assistance recipients. However, they noted that some of these hotels have fallen into disrepair, creating unsafe living conditions. Some suggested these hotels should be publicly funded and apply standards (including proper heating and cooling) to ensure SROs remain a safe and accessible form of housing.

People with lived and living experience of poverty often shared frustrations with services provided by housing providers. This included those funded through BC Housing. Many noted the long waitlists to access housing, despite being on a list for multiple years, and a lack of clear rationale for when or why someone receives housing before another. Some participants suggested rent and housing supports should be tied to income, to ensure people are able to access housing no matter what stage of life they are in.

“**Fix the housing market. Housing should be a human right and 'affordable' housing needs to be affordable for someone earning \$22,000/year.**”

(Participant, Online survey)

Implement Rent Control

Some participants shared personal stories of renovation evictions ('renovictions'), leaving many in desperate and life-altering situations. We heard calls for rent control (also known as vacancy control) as an important priority for people to continue to afford and remain in housing. This policy prevents landlords from dramatically increasing rent between tenants or after income and disability assistance rates have increased. People told us stronger tenancy protections in the Residential Tenancy Act would help address these challenges, as many low income and long-term tenants are at risk of eviction.

Improvements to the Rental Assistance Program (RAP) and Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER)

We heard that the RAP and SAFER programs are helpful for people in making ends meet, and that they help to preserve affordable housing stock, increasing the stability of affordable housing. But many suggested improvements such as:

- Increase benefit rates and index them to inflation
- Increase the income cap to allow for more people to access rental assistance, and;
- Unify RAP and SAFER so older people living in B.C. have a seamless transition between these supplements

Opportunities to Align Housing Strategies across Governments

Although governments of all levels continue to express concern and take action to address the housing crisis, people expressed the need for stronger alignment between governments on concrete actions that would make a difference. Suggestions to address this include some supports that are already underway:

- Establish more collaboration and mandates between the provincial government and municipalities to find sites for temporary modular housing
- Mandate that new developments have a minimum percentage of shelter rate units

- Increase funds for social services and non-profit housing societies
- Establish better collaboration between all levels of government and the private sector to expedite housing construction
- Provide new revenue tools to municipalities to fund affordable housing developments

Food Security

Access to safe, affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food was another challenge raised repeatedly during the engagement. Food is a basic survival need and addressing food insecurity helps alleviate poverty by improving the health, productivity and vibrancy of people and families. When people meet their basic nutrition needs and don't need to worry where their next meal will come from, they are better equipped to engage in education, employment, and community participation, which can help break the cycle of poverty.

Lowering Costs of Healthier Foods

Over half of survey respondents¹ agreed that reducing food costs and improving access to food would have the most impact on poverty reduction. We heard stories of parents going hungry so their children could eat, or families having to choose between groceries or paying rent:

“ ***I am not able to afford food. It's rent and bills or rent and food. I can't have all.*** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

Through our online survey, many people pointed to inflation as the cause of rising food prices. As food costs continue to rise, people feel they are being forced to choose unhealthier, more processed foods that are cheaper and more accessible. This can lead to poorer health outcomes.

¹ 55% of total respondents; 62% of respondents who identified as Indigenous

“ **Making healthy food choices is harder with rising prices.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

“ **I had Brain surgery. Not all my medications are covered. I’m also on a very strict diet so those healthy foods and buying at the healthiest stores are very costly and I can’t always afford it.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

“ **I can’t afford healthy food choices.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

Access to Food Banks and Other Community Food Programs

As food costs increase, so does the number of people needing to use food banks and related programs. People told us when they access food banks, they often encounter a lack of choice in the food that is available. Whether for cultural, religious, or health reasons, people need greater autonomy over their diet. This issue is particularly prominent for Indigenous communities and cultural, religious, and racialized groups with traditional and culturally appropriate foods that may not be available at a food bank. Suggested solutions include gift cards to buy food themselves at a place of their choosing instead of food banks.

“ **Food banks don’t accommodate for [dietary] restrictions. Low-income families are left with low quality food options or none. I can’t use the food bank because of this and I am building debt just from groceries** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

We heard about capacity challenges that food banks themselves are facing due to increased use. People told us that more students, particularly international

students, are accessing food banks. In addition, we heard that people who have not historically been food insecure are increasingly accessing food banks. These capacity challenges lead to problems with access. People told us many food banks are closed on evenings and weekends. For people who work and experience food insecurity, this is a significant access barrier. We also heard about additional access challenges for those who live in rural and remote areas.

Food Insecurity in Rural and Remote Areas

People in rural and remote areas reported experiencing greater food insecurity than those in urban areas. Barriers to food security for rural residents include longer distances to grocery stores, larger service areas for food distribution networks, and a lack of accessible food in the winter. Although people shared appreciation for programs and organizations helping to reduce food insecurity in communities, they noted that major challenges remain, and these challenges are exacerbated during major climate events:

“ **With climate change, with the highways being destroyed that really showed the fragility in the food system and the need to focus more on local production and storage and all of that distribution.** ”

(Participant, Public Health Association of B.C. small group meeting)

Opportunities to Build on

People also highlighted things that are working to address food insecurity. This includes strong coordination and collaboration among community organizations such as those that support populations with specific needs such as working families, people experiencing homelessness, seniors, and BIPOC communities. There has been a shift towards more dignified forms of food access that also help people connect with other community resources. Additionally, supports to help organizations address challenges like reduced volunteers and increased operating costs have been helpful. These supports include gas vouchers that help volunteers deliver food to people in need.

Organizations told us they appreciated recent government announcements for \$200 million for food security initiatives and \$214 million for school food programs. Organizations that serve people who are experiencing food insecurity, such as newcomers and urban Indigenous people, suggested more sustainable funding is needed for organizations that are involved in food security initiatives to meet historic levels of demand, as well as to improve data collection on the rates of food insecurity in B.C.

Other suggestions to address food access challenges included:

- Provide more sustainable, long-term funding for food access organizations and build partnerships across sectors including the non-profit, government and private sector.
- Provide capital funding for food security infrastructure projects like kitchens, mobile meat processing vans, and building renovations to help food organizations build capacity to meet rising demand.
- Help non-profit organizations build their capacity to report on community needs, track outcomes, and apply for grant funding through improved data collection efforts.
- Provide funding for food education, such as nutrition, meal planning, preserving fresh produce, and growing food.
- Include Indigenous Peoples including Elders in food security conversations to ensure access to traditional and culturally appropriate food.

Access to Child Care Supports

Survey participants and organizations expressed strong support and enthusiasm for B.C.'s investments in child care including fee reductions and \$10 a day child care. With lower-cost child care, caregivers are more able to enter the job market. However, due to increasing affordability challenges across household expense areas, child care expenses are still seen by many as a barrier to employment, in particular for people with very low incomes or recipients of income and disability assistance.

Parents receiving income and disability assistance who are eligible for the child care subsidy are still reporting a lack of available child care spaces or challenges with the subsidy not covering the full cost of care. This results in difficulty getting or maintaining employment.

People called for B.C. to continue to increase access and affordability of child care across the province, especially in rural and remote communities where there are often fewer child care options.

While people showed support for recent child care initiatives, some highlighted that Indigenous early learning was overlooked in these programs. One recommendation was for government to implement a framework of Indigenous Early Learning and child care within the \$10 a day child care program.

We also learned about challenges accessing child care due to lack of available spaces. Waitlists are long, and some child care providers charge an administration fee for access to waitlists. This unexpected cost puts some families in further hardship. Some suggested that to increase the availability of child care spaces, government must urgently focus on ensuring early childhood educators are compensated adequately based on their education and the importance of the work they do.

Flexibility and inclusivity of child care is also important. Caregivers with jobs outside the typical 9am-5pm schedule, such as people who do shift work or work evenings and weekends, expressed difficulty in finding child care providers that could accommodate their hours, leaving a burden on family members. We also learned about the need for child care services to be inclusive of the unique needs of children with disabilities and other support needs as it can be especially difficult for these families to find care.

“**We need a childcare spot for every single child who needs one, for working parents!**”
(Participant, Online survey)

Climate and Energy

The impacts of climate-related events on those in poverty have become increasingly clear over the past number of years. This includes increasing energy and food costs and the impact of heat domes, fires and floods on personal health and safety. As climate change impacts increase and become more wide-ranging, the importance of considering impacts on those living in poverty increases as well.

High Energy Costs

A lack of access to basic energy services can have profound impacts on health and well-being. As more extreme temperatures are being recorded, we heard stories about how high energy costs for heating and cooling are causing distress and disproportionately impacting people experiencing poverty. This, in combination with other affordability challenges, has meant that some people are going without hydro to prioritize their other bills

“ The cost of heating homes cause people to have to choose between eating or not dying because of cold. ”

(Participant, Online Survey)

People proposed solutions for energy affordability, including:

- Enable energy security for all by addressing affordable access to essential energy services like heating, lighting, and cooking
- Provide direct financial support for households facing the burden of high energy cost
- Introduce an income-qualified energy bill assistance program
- Ban electrical disconnections and implement arrears forgiveness programs
- Provide no-cost retrofit programs for low- and moderate-income households.

Preparing for the Impacts of the Climate Emergency

We know that climate events can compound challenges for low-income people. We heard how the heat waves across British Columbia in 2021 had a disproportionate effect on those with low or fixed incomes and those living in subsidized housing. People told us that recent climate events, such as wildfires, flooding, and extreme heat have made it harder for people to cover their day-to-day expenses. They reported higher costs of food, of transport, and relocation expenses related to ongoing climate events. In addition, negative health outcomes have been increasing due to inadequate heating and cooling systems, lower air quality, and mold. The health impacts are even more apparent and severe when considering recent record-setting temperatures across the province:

“ Climate change as a contributor to poverty: increase in hydro bills; no access to air conditioning; mediocre supports for heat dome issues available to PWD or those in poverty. ”

(small group meeting)

“ We need more support for extreme heat and cold weather – a lot of people don't have air conditioning. ”

(Participant, Town hall session)

To mitigate the effects of extreme heat/cold and displacement, people expressed the need for comprehensive plans that address the needs of people and families before, during and after climate events. We heard that people most acutely impacted by climate change, including those living in poverty, should receive additional supports. People also suggested increasing subsidized housing and rent control as preventative measures, in addition to funding more emergency supplies (like fans and air conditioning units) before climate emergencies happen. These preventative measures would help reduce climate anxiety and help create supportive environments for those living in poverty.

Transportation

We heard from many people, especially in our regional town hall meetings, that, in addition to housing, food, and energy, the increase in transportation costs is having an effect on many people in B.C. This includes gas and vehicle costs as well as public transportation. People told us that the increase in transit costs means that their activities are increasingly limited. In addition, some people told us that the transportation supplement for people with disabilities who receive disability assistance does not usually cover daily transit use. This transportation supplement is not available to income assistance recipients. These affordability barriers have cascading effects in other areas of life.

We heard how a lack of accessible and affordable transportation is creating barriers to employment, impacting people's ability to maintain employment and independence. This creates further access barriers for programs and services like education, health care, and child care.

Access and cost of transportation were felt more deeply by those living in rural and remote areas, where people need to travel farther for some services, especially specialist health care such as support for mental health and addictions.

As we learned from the Red Women Rising report², free public bus transportation is critical in small, rural, remote, and isolated communities to protect Indigenous women and girls from violence. People spoke out about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit people – with many specifically referencing Highway 16, or the “Highway of Tears.” Suggested actions to address this crisis include publicly owned intercity and inter-regional 24/7 bus services.

In addition, it was noted that reliable transit and transportation services for people who are unable to navigate the public transit system, including people with disabilities, needs to be improved. Extending the BC Bus Pass to include handyDart Service was repeatedly recommended.

“ **There needs to be consistent/reliable transportation and customized transit for people with disabilities.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

In B.C.'s 2021 Budget, the Province announced the ‘Get on Board’ program to provide free fares for transportation service for children under 12. People told us they strongly supported this program and would like to see it expanded. Some organizations suggested:

- Extend free transit for youth aged 13 to 19;
- Extend free transit for all ages, or;
- Sliding scale, or free transit for all people who experience poverty.

In particular, we heard how increasing access to transit is critical to poverty reduction and improved quality of life, as it enables people, including those living in poverty, to access services like post-secondary education, employment, and health care.

² Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (2019)

3. Health Services

Health, including mental health, is another factor in the cycle of poverty. Throughout the engagement, we heard how limited access to healthcare is worsening poverty, and how in turn the experience of living in poverty is increasing health and mental health challenges. People spoke about the critical need to improve and expand both mental health and wellness care. Prevention and early intervention were seen as necessary to combat long waitlists people face when in crisis.

“ **No housing and lack of food creates health issues, both physically and mentally, which then leads to complications in accessing work and allowing those people to become productive members of their communities.** ”

(Participant, online survey)

Mental Health and Addictions Care

Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health has been a top concern for individuals and for non-profit organizations that are often the first point of support. Considering this and the ongoing opioid crisis, we heard about opportunities to improve supports for mental health and addictions care in the province, ranging from early intervention for those at-risk of developing mental health and substance use challenges, to comprehensive treatment approaches for those whose conditions have become serious and often life-threatening.

Many people told us that better access to mental health and addictions services would have a big impact on poverty reduction. Additional services could prevent long hospital stays, keep people out of the corrections system and support people to maintain employment. They often noted how this would also make a major difference in communities, reducing issues such as homelessness and poverty-related crime.

The impact of the toxic drug supply was shared most often by Indigenous people, those in rural and remote communities, and those in specific urban settings like the Downtown Eastside. We heard how important and meaningful access to community-based mental health support can be, particularly within the context of the ongoing opioid crisis. This includes substance use and harm reduction services that have flexible hours or can be rapidly accessed when needed. We received calls for these services to be grounded in the social determinants of health, and to be person-centered, trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, culturally safe, and evidence-based.

We heard calls for children and youth mental health support, as well as help when people are transitioning from youth support to adulthood. We heard that providing the right intervention at the right time and addressing risk factors such as childhood trauma could prevent life-long and intergenerational hardship and trauma.

People made links between mental health, addictions, and homelessness, and pointed out gaps in addressing the root of these issues. They further pointed out how difficult it is to maintain employment when these issues go unsupported:

“ **Mental health impacts my ability to get a job and to go to school.** ”

(Participant, Foundry small group meeting)

They also called for quicker access to these supports and services in times of crisis and clearer information on how to navigate the mental health and addictions system for themselves and on behalf of their family members:

“ **There needs to be quick access to mental health services and addictions treatment centres.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

To account for the complexities of mental health and addictions challenges, people said that they would like to see a greater variety of accessible supports, including:

- Funding mechanisms to enhance people’s access to treatment and care
- Access to a full spectrum of care, from prevention and early intervention to treatment and recovery
- Supports that prioritize equity and access – for example, through virtual supports for remote and rural communities, Indigenous-led services, and services for newcomer and refugee communities
- No-to-low-cost counselling for all people living in B.C., including children and youth
- Support from therapists, registered clinical counsellors, or social workers over medication from psychiatrists
- Access to a variety of services for all Persons with Disability (PWD) and income assistance recipients

Health Care Access and Delivery

Throughout the engagement, we heard that difficulties accessing health care at each level, from family doctors to specialist care, is intensifying economic hardship and preventing people from exiting poverty. In the online survey, over 1/3 of respondents shared that improving health supports (including mental health or substance use supports) would help them break the cycle of poverty.

Increasing Access to Doctors and Medical Staff

Those without family doctors and general practitioners spoke about using emergency rooms for simple or routine medical concerns. They acknowledged this puts undue stress on medical centres across the province, especially in rural communities. This issue is not unique to people experiencing poverty, but rather is an ongoing challenge to people in B.C.

Nearly 70% of online survey respondents identified as living with a disability. People spoke about challenges in completing a Persons with Disability (PWD) application, pointing to the doctor shortage across B.C. as a key reason. There were calls for expanding medical practitioners’ scope of practice to enable more medical professionals beyond doctors and nurse practitioners to fill out the medical report section of PWD forms. This would provide greater ability for people to access the benefits they need.

Stigma and Barriers to Disability-related Supports and Services

Conversations highlighted barriers to accessing disability-related supports and services. Participants expressed difficulties with the application process for disability benefits, including the need for repeated confirmation by healthcare providers for each service used. Participants also voiced concerns about the discomfort and obstacles associated with others knowing about their disabilities. Visible markers, like distinct transit passes, were seen as perpetuating stigma. Mental health-related disabilities and the experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing were specifically mentioned as subjects of stigma and unequal access to services. This extended to job applications:

“ ***If I [found] full-time employment that would solve all my problems... But most people don’t want to hire a Deaf person.*** ”

(Participant, Disability Alliance of B.C. small group meeting)

² *Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* (2018)



Menstrual Health and Equity

We heard about the continued impacts of period poverty – which is the lack of access to menstrual products due to income and other barriers including stigma. Period poverty is tied to gender equity, dignity and inclusion and is compounded by current cost of living issues; women and other people who menstruate are faced with difficult decisions between buying menstrual products or other basic needs like groceries or medication. There is a strong link between experiencing period poverty and missing days of school and work.

People expressed appreciation about provincial sales tax being waived on menstrual products and the B.C. government's 2022 announcement of \$750,000 to fund the Period Poverty Task Force including grants to pilot different approaches to expanding access to free menstrual products. To build on this, further suggestions were provided. For example, people shared ideas about further opportunities to provide products through public buildings and community programs including food hubs. Advocates also suggested menstrual products could be made more accessible by having 24/7 period pantries that stock menstrual products, or by providing gift cards so people who menstruate can purchase the products that fit their needs.

Dental and Medical Costs and Coverage

We received feedback that out-of-pocket costs for dental care and other services are unaffordable which deterred people from accessing care. Delaying medical and dental care work leads to more extensive issues and worsened health and quality of life. People felt the costs of services have risen, while the level of government assistance has not.

People shared stories about struggling to pay for medical devices that are not covered by B.C.'s Medical Services Plan (MSP) or Pharmacare, including medical necessities like wheelchairs, assistive devices, walkers, mobility devices, hearing aids, and vision aids. Services typically not covered by MSP such as physiotherapy, massage, chiropractic care, and podiatry are inaccessible to many in poverty, despite their importance for people with disabilities and chronic and acute health conditions. Similar to other areas, we heard from people being forced to choose between medical needs and other basic needs, like rent and food.

“ **My medical expenses are high [which leaves] less \$ For everything else.** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

One key group affected by these costs are parents and caregivers, including single parents, of children and youth with disabilities. We heard about the challenges of balancing work and care giving, especially when schools and child care providers often lack capacity to provide full-time care. We heard about the extra disability-related costs these families are facing that are often not covered by existing programs. Some parents and caregivers even wondered whether giving their child up to the foster care system would provide better access to supports that they were struggling to provide, despite the devastating impact on their family. To address this, people asked government to consider a benefit or supplement that would assist parents and caregivers who are being pushed into poverty as they struggle to care for children with complex care needs.

Regarding dental services, we received calls for synchronization of the B.C. Government's fee schedule allowance to match the B.C. Dental Association's fee guide, to cover 100% of dental costs. Alternatively, some suggested the Province could increase funds available for dental plans and additional medical services.

4. Education and Training

People told us that increasing education opportunities for people living in poverty is an important link in increasing incomes, promoting social mobility and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. These opportunities include appropriate and inclusive K-12 education with provision of extra supports to those with barriers to completing high school. It also includes accessible skills training and post-secondary education to help prepare people for well-paid, sustainable employment.

Creating Equitable Education Opportunities

People told us about the necessity of preventative supports for those facing challenges in the mainstream education system. This includes people struggling to meet their basic needs due to poverty, those at risk of or experiencing homelessness and those with trauma, mental health and substance use issues. A key recommendation was ensuring that Kindergarten to Grade 12 public education funding is sufficient to mitigate inequities between high- and low-income neighbourhoods. It was noted that by investing in quality education for all students, with extra supports for those who need them, the Province can foster a more equitable society and empower people to reach their full potential.

Skills Training

A recurring theme in discussions was the importance of creating opportunities for people to pursue skills training for employment that aligns with their personal goals and experiences and results in living wage employment. Participants emphasized the need for greater autonomy in choosing training and job paths, as well as the significance of life skills development.

It is important to recognize not everyone has the same background, work experience or career aspirations. Instead, people we spoke with stressed the importance of developing programs and initiatives that meet them where they are. This can include a range of skills training programs, vocational training, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship support. This can lead to greater personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency.

Gaps for Rural and Remote Communities and Newcomers

People living in rural and remote areas spoke about a lack of education and skills training opportunities. This was also felt acutely by Indigenous people living in remote communities. A common suggestion was to provide funding and transportation to make education and skills training more accessible. The Indigenous What We Heard report, summarizing our engagement with Indigenous Peoples, available on B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy web page shortly, elaborates on this and many other barriers faced by Indigenous people in rural and remote communities.

“ *Mak[e] reeducation and retraining easier and less loopholes.* ”

(Participant, Online survey)

We heard from an organization serving newcomers to Canada that this population can find it particularly hard to navigate education and training systems. People noted that providing accessible post-secondary education and training for newcomers could open doors to better employment prospects and economic stability, and lead to important social connections and inclusion. We heard about particular challenges for international students including high tuition costs and the difficulty transitioning from education to employment. People also raised the ongoing challenge for newcomers of finding employment in their previous field without Canadian work experience which can trap them in low-wage work and poverty.

5. Income and Employment Supports

Income and Disability Assistance

One major focus of the engagement was gathering feedback to inform an update to the legislation governing how the Province delivers income and disability assistance, in order to better align the program with B.C.'s poverty reduction and reconciliation objectives.

Survey respondents ranked income and disability assistance as one of the most helpful government services, while at the same time ranking it one of the most difficult to access. People noted that by the time they were at the point of applying for assistance, they were already in crisis. Access challenges related to the shame and stigma of applying for assistance and difficulties with navigating the complex application process were especially pronounced for those with disabilities and mental health and substance use challenges.

Once on assistance, recipients reported that income and disability assistance rates are inadequate and do not keep pace with inflation. With ongoing affordability challenges, people who rely on income and disability assistance find themselves in inadequate living situations, face increasing food insecurity and may be forced to stay in unsafe living situations.

People also reported living in fear of losing their benefits due to complex and punitive program rules, such as clawbacks of other forms of income and financial penalties for not following rules. People raised a key concern that Government considers a spouse's income to determine someone's eligibility for assistance. We heard about the fear of consequences for getting fired or quitting and the fear of leaving assistance for employment due to reapplication delays if employment falls through.

There are many recent studies and reports recommending substantial changes to B.C.'s income and disability assistance programs, which will inform updates to B.C.'s Poverty Reduction Strategy and income and disability assistance program legislation.

What we heard through this engagement is not exhaustive of the range of recommendations provided by advocates, academics and people with lived experience.

Income Assistance Application Process and System Navigation

We heard about system navigation challenges, experienced most by people without reliable internet, newcomers, people experiencing homelessness, seniors, people in the midst of experiencing traumatic events, and those experiencing mental health and addictions challenges. People told us about issues with complex forms, difficulty uploading documents, lack of personal identification, and general issues navigating the system to determine eligibility or appeal a decision.

People appreciate the 2022 expansion of the Community Integration Specialist program, which more than doubled the number of people in the position — a role that helps people experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness to access income support and other benefits. There were calls to continue to expand this model and build the principles into other government services.

Income and Disability Assistance Rates

Even with five increases to assistance rates since 2017, recipients of income and disability assistance still report substantial financial struggles in the face of ongoing inflation. Over half of survey respondents reported ***“income support is not high enough”*** as one of their biggest challenges in meeting their day-to-day expenses. When ranking which actions would have the most impact in reducing poverty in the province, 62% felt that improving income supports would have the most impact, second only to addressing housing supply or cost (75%)³.

Across all engagement streams, we received calls to increase income and disability assistance rates, including suggestions to index rates to inflation and align with established standards, such as the Market Basket Measure, Canada's official poverty line. Higher rates were noted as especially important for those with life circumstances that prevent them from working, such as people with complex disabilities.

³ Respondents could choose multiple options, so percentages will total over 100.

There were also many calls for government to adopt a basic income, also referred to as a guaranteed livable income, to provide everyone a sufficient income to meet their basic needs, regardless of their work status. An additional suggestion was to where appropriate, consider providing one-time lump-sum cash transfers to prevent people from falling into, and/or becoming entrenched in, poverty.

Combining Shelter and Support Allowances

Income support programs often separate shelter and support allowances, which can create administrative complexities and may not accurately reflect the true cost of living. People receiving income assistance felt combining these components into a single allowance would simplify the system and provide them with more flexibility in managing their finances, especially as housing costs are so high in B.C.

Support for Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

Suggestions were made to broaden the criteria in PWD applications to recognize diversity of disabilities (for example, recognizing invisible and visible disabilities, and the different impacts having one or more disabilities has on people's daily lives). This expansion was seen as key to ensuring people with disabilities that are typically less recognized receive the support they need.

We received suggestions related to improving access to PWD and Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB) supports. People emphasized the need for a more streamlined and accessible application process and shorter wait times for PWD applications, as delays cause hardship and stress and can contribute to worsening health. This was a particular concern for those with more than one disability. There were calls to simplify the PPMB application process and improve the timeliness of processing applications.

“**Getting to a multiple barriers status took two long engagements with disability advocacy groups, and finally a personal plea to my member of the provincial legislature....**”

(Participant, Online survey)

Aligning Benefits and Programs with Income and Disability Benefits

It was noted that income and disability applicants often require other government supports and services and that efforts could be made to streamline and integrate different application processes. For example, it was suggested that building capacity to complete B.C. Services Cards in public-facing income and disability assistance offices could make people's experiences smoother. It was also suggested that screening applicants for eligibility for other government programs at the same time would reduce hardship and stress for people and eliminate their need to provide the same information multiple times.

Some advocacy organizations also recommended providing pathways for those receiving provincial disability assistance to be eligible for and easily access the upcoming Canada Disability Benefit that is under development at the federal level, to ensure consistency and fairness.

Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

Given the complex intersection of stigma, racism, and discrimination for those living in poverty, there were calls for significant improvements in service provision. People shared experiences of feeling shamed and discriminated against when applying and accessing assistance. In addition, we heard that questions asked during reporting processes can be insulting and re-traumatizing. This was particularly expressed by urban Indigenous Peoples. Suggestions that have been noted elsewhere in this report include mandating consistent and enhanced training for frontline service providers to foster understanding of the systemic causes of poverty including colonization and to ensure that everyone who needs to access the system is treated with respect and dignity. They noted that this would help prevent people from having to advocate for themselves within a system in which they feel they have little power or influence.

Updating Spousal Requirements Attached to Income Supports

One of the most common messages we heard is that people have extreme fear about losing income or disability assistance due to their spouse's income. We heard people avoid getting into relationships to prevent having their assistance reduced or cut off completely, for fear the ministry may consider their partner a spouse. Eligibility is determined for a family,

not an individual. Money a spouse earns is deducted from assistance payments for a family unit. Many say it is unrealistic that one spouse would financially support another in today's world. Denying a person assistance due to their spouse's income or assets creates a financial dependency on them, and it's harder for the person to leave if the relationship becomes unhealthy. People expressed that this policy made them feel a lack of personal autonomy:

“ Having a spouse essentially prevents someone from receiving disability or income assistance. Money a spouse earns is discounted from assistance payments to an extent that virtually everyone with a working spouse will be unable to receive assistance, or their spouse will be forced to take a significant income cut. This keeps persons with disabilities out of supportive relationships in fear of losing their assistance. This eliminates their independence. ”

(Participant, Online survey)

To address these concerns, many organizations suggested:

- Increase the amount a spouse can earn before it impacts their partner's assistance, giving people more independence and preventing abusive situations
- Provide each person in a couple with an individual rate of assistance, ensuring each person's assistance rate is not reduced when getting into a relationship
- Do not use a spouse's income or assets to determine eligibility for assistance

Updating Income Exemption Requirements

Many people expressed that they would overwhelmingly prefer to work than remain on assistance, given the financial stability and social inclusion that employment provides. However, they also told us that the current income exemption limits are considered a disincentive for people receiving assistance to pursue employment opportunities or to pursue further education that might improve job prospects. People are scared about doing something

wrong and having money taken away, especially when the process for receiving assistance was stressful and time-consuming in the first place. In an Indigenous context, we heard that current earnings exemptions for income assistance should be allowed to account for seasonal work such as hunting and fishing.

To address this issue, many recommended reducing or eliminating clawbacks for other sources of income and increasing the amount people can earn from employment before it is clawed back. People reasoned that removing these barriers could be a relatively low-cost solution, allowing people to retain a larger portion of their earnings. This could encourage workforce participation and reduce reliance on income and disability assistance. Some participants were unaware of recent employment exemption increases or were fearful that they might do something unintentionally that could impact their assistance. It was suggested to reduce clawbacks for spousal income, Canada Pension Plan, Employment Insurance, RRSPs, and financial gifts.

We heard people want more flexibility built into income exemption requirements, particularly considering intermittent and seasonal work for income assistance recipients, as is done for disability assistance recipients, with an annual rather than monthly earnings exemption. Another common recommendation was to exempt Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan benefits, because people paid into them while employed.

Employment

Throughout our engagement process, we heard that people find dignity and value in being able to work and contribute to their community. We also heard that the income from employment is critical to making ends meet, given the low level of income assistance rates. Despite wanting to work, people face challenges finding work that aligns with their skills and experience, provides decent wages, and considers their needs including child care, transportation and accessibility accommodations.

In addition, there is a fear of leaving assistance because employment might not be secure. People expressed a desire to remain provisionally in the system once employed in order to gain a stronger sense of security. They also felt pressured to find and accept jobs before they are physically and mentally ready to enter the workforce.

Employment and Affordability Challenges

Similar to what we heard during the 2017/2018 engagement for the first TogetherBC, people across the province told us the cost of living has risen exponentially, while wages have not kept pace. We heard that people are taking on multiple jobs simply to make ends meet, and in some situations that work is precarious or unsafe.

Many people noted that having a job (or several) no longer provides protection from poverty, especially given rising housing and food costs. Some people and groups called for government to mandate a living wage across the province to help reduce income inequality and improve the financial stability of low-income workers.

Improving WorkBC as a Service for Everyone

WorkBC provides employment services and supports to job seekers. While many participants shared positive experiences and emphasized the importance of the services offered, they also highlighted areas for improvement:

- Improve service awareness and accessibility:
 - Provide better awareness about available services
 - Simplify the overall navigation of the system
- Provide enhanced support for those with greater barriers to employment
 - Tailor employment supports for specific populations that addresses their unique needs and experiences
 - Go where the services are needed rather than waiting for people to seek out support
- Continue to provide longer-term supports to support job retention
 - Ongoing monitoring and check-ins with employees to ensure the right fit
 - Access to comprehensive supports that help maintain employment
- Provide more training and internship programs that directly link to current job openings
 - Support connections between WorkBC service providers and employers for more formalized training
 - Prioritize groups that have challenges accessing employment, including newcomers

“ **One challenge for newcomers...is the lack of network. Some internship programs and fellowship programs [would help] these people have theory and practical training and then be introduced to the job market...WorkBC should have partnerships with employers.** ”

(Participant, Options small group meeting)

Providing Supports and Incentives to Hire People Facing Multiple Barriers

Across B.C., we consistently heard about the need for greater support and incentives to facilitate hiring people facing multiple barriers, including people with disabilities. Participants shared they experience significant barriers when seeking employment, including stigma and discrimination, lack of accessibility, and limited awareness among employers about the skills and capabilities of people with disabilities.

To address these challenges, people called for the government to take an active role in supporting employers to hire people with disabilities and those with multiple barriers. We heard several recommendations related to implementing targeted incentives, such as tax credits or wage subsidies, to encourage employers to create more inclusive work environments. Examples of impactful programs include the Single Parent Employment Initiative and the B.C. Work Experience Opportunities Grant. These incentives help to offset potential costs associated with accessibility accommodations or training, while also fostering a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

“ **NCFC was able to hire 5 people to fill 8 positions who faced barriers to employment through the BC Work Experience Opportunities Grant in 2021 and 2022... We are discouraged by the lack of BC Work Experience Opportunities Grant for 2023, but hope that it or another program like it will be available in the future.** ”

(Written submission from Nelson Community Food Centre)

6. Other Government Programs and Supports

Many of the barriers people experience with income and disability assistance were also identified with other government programs and supports, including navigation and accessibility issues and extending to awareness of programs and their often complex rules and eligibility criteria. This was referenced in regard to child care programs, employment training, and health programs like mental health and substance use.

Awareness and Navigation of Existing Government Programs

People talked about a lack of knowledge regarding current government programs and services available to them and how to apply. They discussed their difficulties trying to access easy-to-understand program information. They shared that each program had separate complex application forms and processes, and that they had to provide the same personal information and retell their story again and again, which often compounded trauma.

“*...supports...must be navigated easily (the more agencies that help, the more opportunity for confusion and failure). You are building too much bureaucracy and waste and duplication, rather than multiple entrances into the help.*”

(Participant, Online survey)

These challenges were described as particularly pronounced for seniors, who experience additional barriers accessing information and navigating program applications that are increasingly online. We heard from the B.C. Seniors Advocate that close to 70% of low-income seniors are not confident completing online forms or applications, and 32% of low-income seniors do not have access to the internet at home.

Simplifying Program Information and Access to Increase Uptake

To enhance access to government programs, we heard that information-sharing and communications for these programs should be significantly improved, so that people would be aware of and understand how to apply for programs they are eligible for. Improvements could include proactive outreach to people who are likely to be eligible for programs and simplifying program information. Clear and concise communication about program details (the “what”), program eligibility (“the who”) and instructions on how to access them (the “how”) would empower people to navigate the system more effectively, resulting in increased program uptake and a sense of trust that systems are being designed to serve people, rather than creating barriers.

To address these challenges, some people recommended provincial information hubs that provide personalized guidance on available resources in a welcoming environment. This would streamline program navigation and reduce confusion for those accessing multiple programs. These hubs could help with applications and offer related resources, like internet access, printing facilities, and literacy support for filling out forms.

Increasing Community Navigators

The idea of having community navigators or peers came up as a useful solution to frontline service provision. One idea that arose in some small group meetings was having navigators or peers to connect people living in poverty with not-for-profits offering client support for the programs or benefits available to them. Another suggestion was having services that are often hard to access (e.g., legal counsel) available in community spaces like malls. This type of low-barrier space can help to bridge the gap between the person and the system and make navigating the process of enrolling and accessing programs easier. Finally, many shared that social support advisors who work with the same clients and follow cases over many years have been helpful.

Integration and Data Sharing

In addition to the above, people suggested some ways that services could become less bureaucratic and more person-centred, especially given advances in information sharing technology in recent years. They noted that complex application processes could be significantly streamlined through better collaboration across programs. Suggestions included aligning program eligibility requirements and application processes between programs that serve similar client populations supported by better data sharing.

Data Sharing and Automatic Enrolment Opportunities

Facilitating data sharing between provincial programs and federal programs was seen as an area for improvement. Many noted that they were needing to share the same information repeatedly when applying to different programs. They suggested that creating or streamlining current methods of data sharing, with client consent, would be a great help to people who had already applied for other programs. This was also a key suggestion for streamlining transitions between different programs. It would include those aging out of income assistance or disability assistance (provided by the provincial government) at age 65 and transitioning into Old Age Pension (OAP) and Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) (provided by the federal government). This would reduce stress for people and avoid disruption or loss of benefits as they transition to a different program.

We heard that these changes could also support enhanced integration between healthcare and social services to provide more coordinated support for people with diverse needs, leading to better outcomes.

Better Access to Person-Centered Services

People pointed out that government systems are designed to provide fair and consistent benefits and supports from person to person, which is important, but can also limit their ability to address people's unique needs and circumstances. We received suggestions to move services to a more inclusive, person-centred approach that meets people where they are. These include:

- Ensure geographic accessibility of services:
 - Take into consideration the financial limitations of people who cannot afford transportation costs
- Decentralize services and provide options closer to where people live, especially for those who walk, wheel, or bike
- Establish collaborative processes between government and organizations involved in providing support services:
 - Would lead to more efficient service delivery, leverage the client-facing work many organizations are doing, and build on established, trusted relationships
- Widely distribute information to improve awareness and system navigation
 - Clear guidance on starting points and recommended steps to access services would help people navigate the system more effectively
 - Offer information in a variety of languages and formats to ensure accessibility for diverse populations
- Deliver compassionate service to foster a supportive environment:
 - Approach clients with compassion and recognize them as people with unique situations
 - Create welcoming spaces that convey a sense of positivity and hope for those seeking assistance
- Provide non-judgmental support:
 - People in precarious situations often feel lost or vulnerable, and it is essential to support them without judgment or humiliation
 - Many people expressed feeling judged by staff when inquiring about or accessing programs and benefits
 - People expressed feeling anxiety, discomfort, or shame when seeking supports

Life Transition Support

Engagement participants also noted gaps in support for people during critical life transitions. People in transitional situations, including those leaving extended hospital stays, foster care, correctional systems, or experiencing gender-based violence, often face significant challenges and risks during these times. We heard that youth and people with multiple barriers feel these challenges acutely.

For example, in a session with people with disabilities, we heard there is no safety net when transitioning from being injured or disabled back into employment. People recommended more help with a gradual return to work.

Integrated youth services, like Foundry, were noted to be extremely beneficial in supporting youth with wraparound services during critical times in their lives. However, many participants noted concerns about losing the type of supports Foundry provides once they turn 25. Strengthening the support provided during these times can mitigate potential hardships and facilitate a smooth transition into the next phase of life, preventing people from entering into poverty.

“ ***The Foundry income subsidy is very helpful because it allows you to find work and get your feet under you and that is a really good support because it is 18 months*** ”

(Participant, Foundry small group meeting)

Gender-Based Violence

We also heard that ending gender-based violence would have a major impact on preventing poverty. We received feedback from a women’s education, advocacy, and support organization about the unique, systemic barriers, such as economic abuse, financial dependence, precarious housing situations, and the gender pay gap, that keep women and gender-diverse

people locked into systemic cycles of poverty. These issues often force survivors of violence into the position of choosing between staying with an abusive partner or facing poverty. For those with children, especially low-income single mothers, attempting to leave an abusive partner can lead to cascading harms, such as homelessness or involvement with the child welfare system.

We heard that improving the availability of long-term, subsidized, quality family housing throughout the province, including on-reserve, and based on survivors’ needs and support networks, would support survivors of gender-based violence in being able to leave dangerous situations without fear of homelessness. This approach not only provides a secure environment for survivors but also enables them to access the necessary resources and support to heal and rebuild their lives.

While emergency crisis supplements are available, we heard that the turnaround time must be faster, and more people need to be made aware of these types of supports.

“ ***I have been very fortun[ate] to receive the help from the ministry since August last year. As a domestic violence survivor it has been my only source of income, in addition the ministry helped to get my SPEI with WorkBC. I’m getting the support needed for me to improve my life and my kids’ life. But I wish more people could have access to [these] programs as well. People don’t know what supporting tools are here.*** ”

(Participant, Online survey)

7. Life Resources

Life resources are used in this report to describe the essential tools people need to meet their basic needs and participate in modern society. This includes access to personal identification (ID), low-cost/low-barrier banking and financial services, including tax filing, and access to internet and cell phones.

Personal Identification (ID) Supports

Most government programs, as well as many offered by non-profit organizations, require government-issued identification to apply for services. Participants expressed that not everyone has current identification including BC Services Cards, birth certificates and Status Cards or the ability to keep it safe. This was particularly true for people experiencing homelessness who are most at risk of ID loss or theft. People also referred to time required to apply for or replace some forms of identification. This was noted as a significant barrier to applying for government program and accessing housing and employment. Suggestions included:

- Reduce administrative barriers to obtaining provincial government ID, and speed up processing times
- Create, and increase support for, ID storage facilities
- Work with the federal government to improve access to Status cards, as long processing delays are creating barriers to accessing needed services

Banking and Financial Services

People expressed the need for targeted banking and financial services, including protecting consumers from predatory loans. Suggestions included:

- Work with credit unions and banks to improve access to inclusive, affordable banking and financial services
- Support banking models specifically designed for low-income people and First Nations communities such as Pigeon Park Savings in the Downtown Eastside and Cormorant Island Community Branch which serves Alert Bay and the 'Namgis First Nation
- Enhance connections to savings and asset building opportunities to build financial security
- Enhance consumer protection and education to reduce financial risk

Financial Empowerment and Tax Filing

We heard from organizations and people that financial empowerment is a key component of breaking the cycle of poverty. In the engagement, people shared suggestions related to tax filing and financial literacy, including:

- Support access to tax filing services given that many important income benefits are provided through the tax system:
 - This includes automatic tax filing.
 - Some people living in B.C. do not file tax returns, which means some people in need are denied the benefits available to them.
- Strengthen and expand funding to community organizations to provide free financial help and services including financial crisis counselling.
- Ensure availability of programs specifically designed for low-income people or those not well-served by conventional offerings, such as seniors, youth, newcomers, and Indigenous people.
- Incorporate financial empowerment opportunities into employment and income assistance programs

“ Many folks in poverty don't understand how to figure out what benefits might be available for them, or don't understand the value of filing their taxes. ”

(Participant, Online survey)

Internet Connectivity and Affordability

Access to the internet is crucial for connecting to education, employment, information, community networks, and other essential services. This has become even more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic as services provided by government, non-profit organizations, and the business sector have increasingly moved to online delivery. Unfortunately, the cost of internet access including access to computers and mobile devices continues to be a barrier for people experiencing poverty. Many people and organizations we spoke with shared positive experiences with the subsidized internet plans for eligible low-income households provided by the major telecommunication providers. Several people called for these types of services to be expanded so people can access the services they need to prevent and exit poverty.

Access to the internet was also a significant concern in rural and remote areas including Indigenous communities. While the provincial and federal government have a partnership agreement to connect all remaining households in rural B.C. to high-speed internet, people in these communities worried about the cost of being able to afford the monthly-service plans and noted that these areas were often served by smaller telecommunication companies that did not offer subsidized service plans for low-income households.

“ The government needs to make the internet more affordable to ensure digital inclusion. ”

(Participant, Online survey)



8. Non-Profit Partnerships

Non-profit organizations are critical resources in communities across B.C. and provide essential supports to people experiencing, or at risk of, poverty. As was demonstrated during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, non-profit organizations are able to quickly mobilize and innovate to support communities in ways that government is not able to do. A key theme of this engagement, in comparison to the 2018-19 engagement, was the need for additional resources for the non-profit sector so it can continue to meet rising community needs.

Increasing Community Demands

We heard that non-profit organizations are on the frontlines of responding to multiple intersecting crises. These include ongoing impacts of COVID-19 such as increased mental health and substance use issues combined with the toxic drug crisis. It also includes the impacts of the affordability crisis and climate events. As a result, non-profit organizations are experiencing historic demand for their services and facing significant difficulties continuing to deliver the programs and services that people rely on.

Some non-profit representatives expressed that they are having difficulty supporting the “most vulnerable” because they are seeing higher volumes of people needing to access services. This included people with full-time employment seeking out housing and food supports. Many non-profit organizations even noted that the affordability crisis is leading to members of their staff needing to become users of the programs they provide, including food hampers and transit vouchers.

This increased volume has also translated to capacity issues for non-profit organizations who are trying to address systemic issues by advocating for policy and program change. For example, a number of organizations wanted to participate in this public engagement but were unable to because of increased workload and staffing issues.

Non-Profit Funding and Sustainability

Across engagement streams, we heard that increased funding to support operational costs would be instrumental to retain non-profit staff and capacity. People thought that this could help prevent poverty by giving organizations more long-term stability to do

their meaningful work. We also received feedback that trust-based funding should be encouraged, such as unrestricted funding for long-term programming that could be used in a variety of ways by the organization and allow them the flexibility to use that funding where it is most needed. The \$34M Non-Profit Recovery and Resilience Fund, delivered by Vancouver Foundation on behalf of the province in 2022-23, was noted as an example to build upon.

“Some grants require you to demonstrate that you are on the brink of failure, but you can't lie on grant applications. There is a significant amount more that we could be providing. Others also require you to start a new program, but that's not reasonable for many [organizations].”

(Participant, Minister's Roundtable in Nanaimo)

People told us that by aligning funding with the mission and values of these organizations, non-profit partners can focus on the most critical needs of the communities they serve. Participants noted that this approach not only fosters a sense of trust between funders and non-profit organizations but also helps resources to be allocated efficiently and effectively.

“[We need to] adequately fund administration, technology, and marketing for non-profits. To sustainably support people in poverty, the non-profits engaged on the front line must be able to pay rent, recruit and retain staff, meet their goals with the benefits of working technology, and reach their target clients through marketing and advertising.”

(Written Submission, Family Services of Greater Vancouver)

9. Equity and Inclusion

“*Walking around in worn out shoes, clothes that are worn and faded... you're denied services because of the way you look. Personal biases get in the way. People can't relate when they go back home, to their warm meals and their [comfortable] homes. Community and emotional care are as important as finding a job, having housing, etc*”

(Participant, EMBERS small group meeting)

In addition to basic needs, we heard repeatedly that having social connections and supports are vital to exiting poverty. This includes having a network of family, friends, or peers; regular social interactions; meaningful employment; physical and emotional safety; and a sense of belonging where one lives, works, and spends time.

In small group meetings with organizations who serve people experiencing poverty, disabilities, and health concerns, people expressed how social inclusion is crucial to living a healthy and dignified life. Many participants noted the importance of community

spaces where they know they are welcome to ‘show up as they are’ (including employment service agencies, community centres, neighbourhood houses, etc.). This was especially notable in densely populated neighbourhoods like Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, where we heard many feel deeply connected to the spaces and people in close proximity to their homes.

Persistent social stigma tied to disability, race, income, and other identity characteristics intensifies the challenges faced by people living in poverty, hindering their access to resources and basic needs. This stigma also compounds the stress, shame, and isolation experienced in their daily lives.

Use a Human Rights Framework in Poverty Reduction Work

In discussions with organizations who serve people experiencing poverty, we received suggestions that all poverty reduction work should be grounded in a human rights framework. We also heard the recommendation to update the B.C. Human Rights Code by adding “social condition” as a protected category or prohibited grounds of discrimination. This would enshrine people’s rights to access government programs and supports without experiencing stigma or discrimination attached to their social condition (which includes experiencing poverty, quality of housing, and educational attainment).

Conclusion

We connected with people across British Columbia to understand the impacts of poverty: what programs and services are helping, where improvements can be made to help people exit poverty, and what gaps still exist to prevent people from falling into poverty.

The themes of the report: reconciliation, affordability, health services, government programs and supports (including income and employment supports), life resources, non-profit partnerships, education and training, and equity and inclusion, demonstrate the need for a cross-system approach to address poverty reduction.

The important feedback heard from over 10,000 people across B.C. is critical to ensuring that the next poverty reduction strategy is grounded in lived experience and makes meaningful changes in peoples’ everyday lives while helping to break the cycle of poverty over the long-term.

Appendix A: Conversation Toolkit Submissions

The following organizations convened their own conversations using the Conversations Toolkit:

- Archway Community Services
- Burnaby Neighbourhood House
- Cool Aid Housing - Tally Ho Poverty Reduction Conversation Group
- Eastside Community Action Project Society
- Greater Trail Community Skills Centre
- Ishtar Women's Resource Society
- Island Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre
- Lift Community Services
- Richmond Poverty Reduction Coalition
- Single Mothers' Alliance
- Victoria Brain Injury Society
- Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services Society
- Victoria Brain Injury Society
- Women Transforming Cities
- Women's Empowerment Group

Appendix B: Small Group Meetings

The following organizations helped to organize small group meetings with people with lived and living experience:

Organization	Date	Location
First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society	February 8, 2023	Virtual
Disability Alliance of BC	February 21, 2023	Virtual
Poverty Reduction Coalition	February 23, 2023	Virtual
PHABC – North Central Roundtable	March 30, 2023	Virtual
EMBERS	April 12, 2023	Vancouver
TRRUST Collective Impact	April 17, 2023	Virtual
Prince Rupert Unemployed Action Centre	April 19, 2023	Prince Rupert
Stronger BC – Young Leaders Youth Council	April 24, 2023	Virtual
Canadian Mental Health Association	April 26, 2023	Virtual
Nanaimo Brain Injury Society	April 26, 2023	Nanaimo
Nelson Rural Empowered Drug Users Network	April 26, 2023	Nelson
Foundry – Vancouver Granville	April 27, 2023	Vancouver
PHABC – Northwest Roundtable	April 27, 2023	Virtual
Foundry – Provincewide	April 28, 2023	Virtual
Options	April 28, 2023	Surrey
Immigrant Link Centre Society	May 5, 2023	Port Coquitlam
PHABC – Northeast Roundtable	May 11, 2023	Virtual
Period Promise	May 12, 2023	Virtual

Appendix C: Online Survey

The following organizations convened their own conversations using the Conversations Toolkit:

1. What best describes your personal experience with poverty?

Please choose all that apply:

- Currently live in poverty
- Previously lived in poverty
- Family or friends live, or lived, in poverty
- Interested member of the public
- Work for a non-profit or advocacy organization
- Work in the private sector
- Work for government
- Other (please explain): _____

2. From your experience, what top three areas would have the most impact in reducing poverty in BC?

Please choose only three out of the following:

- Improving employment opportunities and supports (pre-employment, training, work experience opportunities)
- Improving education supports
- Improving income supports
- Improving health supports (including mental health or substance use supports)
- Addressing child care shortages or cost
- Addressing housing supply or cost
- Reducing food costs and/or improving access
- Improving social supports (e.g., opportunities to connect with others and participate in your community)
- Addressing racism and discrimination
- Help navigating and accessing current supports
- Other (please explain): _____

Please do not include any personally identifiable information about yourself or others in your responses.

3. From your experience, which people in your community are facing the most challenges getting the supports they need?

Please choose all that apply:

- Children and youth (under age 19)
- Seniors
- Young adults (between ages 20 and 27)
- People and families who work and earn low incomes
- Women (cisgender and transgender)
- Single working-age adults
- Non-binary people and others in the 2SLGBTQ+ community
- People living with or fleeing abuse
- Indigenous Peoples
- People living with mental illness or addiction
- People living with disabilities
- Black people and people of colour
- People living in rural and remote communities
- Other (please explain): _____
- Immigrants and refugees
- _____

4. From your experience, what would help people in your community break the cycle of poverty?

Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

The following questions are only for people with current or previous lived experience of poverty. If you do not have this lived experience, please skip questions 5-7, and proceed to question 8 (on page 43).

5. Please tell us some of the biggest challenges you or your family have in affording your day-to-day expenses.

Please rank in order of most impactful to you, with 1 being the most impactful challenge. Write numbers in the boxes to the item. Feel free to leave challenges that don't apply to you unranked.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employment income is not high enough | <input type="checkbox"/> Health care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Income support is not high enough | <input type="checkbox"/> Medication or medical equipment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Utilities (i.e. electricity, water bills) | <input type="checkbox"/> Dental care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Phone bill | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buying food | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain): _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare | |

6. Have any of the following events over the past few years made it harder to cover your day-to-day expenses?

Please rank in order of most impactful to you, with 1 being the most impactful challenge. Write numbers in the boxes to the item. Feel free to leave challenges that don't apply to you unranked.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> COVID-19 | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of job |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inflation | <input type="checkbox"/> Change in job market |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing cost | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain): _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Climate events (fire, flood, extreme heat, etc) | _____ |

7. Are there any barriers to your well-being? (e.g., substance-use, ongoing racism and discrimination, separation from community, etc.)?

Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

8. When faced with financial struggles, where do you go for information on what supports could be available for you?

Please choose all that apply:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 211 | <input type="checkbox"/> Service BC Office |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friends or family | <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry of Social Development Office |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internet | <input type="checkbox"/> WorkBC Centre or WorkBC.ca website |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Local politician's office | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain): _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Minister's Office | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Media | |

9. The B.C. government offers several programs and supports to help people who are facing poverty.

Please tell us if you have accessed or heard of any of these programs.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item

	Accessed	Heard of	Not Aware
Financial and health support through income and disability assistance			
Monthly payment for seniors to top up federal income through the Senior's Supplement			
A bus pass for low-income seniors and persons with disabilities through the BC Bus Pass Program			
Support for single parents receiving income and disability assistance to secure employment through the Single Parent Employment Initiative			
Child care affordability supports through ChildCare BC initiatives			
WorkBC Employment Services, training programs and supports			
Short term occupational skills training to secure employment through Skills Training for Economic Recovery Program			
Community mental health or substance use services			
Free Transit for Youth under 12 through the Get on Board program			
Post-secondary financial assistance through the B.C. Access Grant Program			
Rental Assistance Program through BC Housing			
WorkBC Wage Subsidy Program			
Community and Employer Partnerships, training and work experience program			
Assistive Technology Service, to help people with disabilities get jobs and thrive in the workplace			
Rent supplements for lower income seniors through Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER)			

If you have accessed any of the services listed in question 9 above, please complete the following two questions.

If you have not accessed any of these services, please proceed to question 13 (on page 50).

11. You indicated that you have used, or currently use, one or more of the above programs or supports.

Please tell us how easy or difficult it was to access this support(s).

Please only fill out for programs or supports you have accessed

	Very Easy	Somewhat Easy	Neutral	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	Neutral/ N/A
Financial and health support through income and disability assistance						
Monthly payment for seniors to top up federal income through the Senior's Supplement						
A bus pass for low-income seniors and persons with disabilities through the BC Bus Pass Program						
Support for single parents receiving income and disability assistance to secure employment through the Single Parent Employment Initiative						
Child care affordability supports through ChildCare BC initiatives						
Child care affordability supports through ChildCare BC initiatives						
WorkBC Employment Services, training programs and supports						
Short term occupational skills training to secure employment through Skills Training for Economic Recovery Program						

	Very Easy	Somewhat Easy	Neutral	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	Neutral/ N/A
Community mental health or substance use services						
Free Transit for Youth under 12 through the Get on Board program						
Post-secondary financial assistance through the B.C. Access Grant Program						
Rental Assistance Program through BC Housing						
WorkBC Wage Subsidy Program						
Community and Employer Partnerships, training and work experience program						
Assistive Technology Service, to help people with disabilities get jobs and thrive in the workplace						
Rent supplements for lower income seniors through Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER)						

11a. Please provide more detail about how easy or difficult it was to access this support(s).

12. You indicated that you have used, or currently use, one or more of the above programs or supports.

Please tell us how helpful this support(s) was in meeting your needs.

	Very Easy	Somewhat Easy	Neutral	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	Neutral/ N/A
Financial and health support through income and disability assistance						
Monthly payment for seniors to top up federal income through the Senior's Supplement						
A bus pass for low-income seniors and persons with disabilities through the BC Bus Pass Program						
Support for single parents receiving income and disability assistance to secure employment through the Single Parent Employment Initiative						
Child care affordability supports through ChildCare BC initiatives						
WorkBC Employment Services, training programs and supports						
Short term occupational skills training to secure employment through Skills Training for Economic Recovery Program						
Community mental health or substance use services						
Free Transit for Youth under 12 through the Get on Board program						

	Very Easy	Somewhat Easy	Neutral	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	Neutral/ N/A
Post-secondary financial assistance through the B.C. Access Grant Program						
Rental Assistance Program through BC Housing						
WorkBC Wage Subsidy Program						
Community and Employer Partnerships, training and work experience program						
Assistive Technology Service, to help people with disabilities get jobs and thrive in the workplace						
Rent supplements for lower income seniors through Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER)						

12a. Please provide more detail about how helpful or unhelpful this support(s) was.

13. What two changes would you make to the income assistance and disability assistance rules?

Please feel free to skip this question if you do not have experience with income assistance or disability assistance.

Change #1: Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

Change #2: Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

14. What changes would help people on income assistance and disability assistance increase their participation in the workforce?

Please feel free to skip this question if you do not have experience with income assistance or disability assistance.

Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

15. What barriers do people face when they are on income assistance and disability assistance?

Please feel free to skip this question if you do not have experience with income assistance or disability assistance.

Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

16. In what city do you spend most of your time?

Please write your answer here: _____

17. What gender do you most identify with?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Man
- Woman
- Non-Binary
- Please describe yourself: _____

18. How old are you?

Please choose only three out of the following:

- Under 19
- 19 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

19. Do you identify as Indigenous?

Please choose only three out of the following:

- Yes
- No

19a. If you identify as Indigenous, which of the following do you identify with?

- First Nations
- Métis
- Inuit
- Other North American Indigenous
- Prefer not to answer

20. With which, if any, of the following groups do you identify

Please feel free to skip this question if you do not have experience with income assistance or disability

- Children and youth (under age 19)
- Young adults (between ages 20 and 27)
- Women (cisgender and transgender)
- Non-binary people and others in the 2SLGBTQ+ community
- Indigenous Peoples
- People living with disabilities
- People living in rural and remote communities
- Immigrants and refugees
- Seniors
- People and families who work and earn low incomes
- Single working-age adults
- People living with or fleeing abuse
- People living with mental illness, substance challenges, or addiction
- Black people and people of colour

21. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Please write your answer here (please limit to about 100 words)

Appendix D: Written Submissions

We received direct written submissions from the following organizations:

- 100 More Homes – Penticton
- 411 Seniors Centre
- Alberni Clayoquot Regional District
- Battered Women’s Support Services
- B.C. Alliance for Healthy Living
- B.C. Complex Kids Society
- B.C. Poverty Reduction Coalition
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Care Not Cops
- City of Richmond
- CUPE B.C.
- Disability Alliance B.C.
- Disability Without Poverty
- Ecotrust Canada
- Exchange Inner City
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver
- First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society
- Foundations for Social Change
- Home Sharing Support Society BC
- InclusionBC
- Just Transition Working Group (BC Climate Emergency Campaign)
- Living in Community
- Living Wage for Families BC
- Loblaw
- MOSAIC
- Nelson Community Food Centre
- Pivot Legal Society
- Prosper Canada
- Skills Centre
- Tamarack Institute
- Together Against Poverty Society
- Urban Matters
- Vancity Credit Union
- Vancouver Coastal Health
- Vancouver Urban Core Community Workers Association, in collaboration with Exchange Inner City and LED Lab
- West Coast LEAF
- Women Transforming Cities

