

Opinion: Social service agencies call for policy framework

Common purpose: Public consultation needed to streamline, improve services

BY MICHAEL DAVIS, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 14, 2014

On May 14, Vancouver City Council unanimously passed a resolution calling on B.C. Premier Christy Clark to start a conversation with British Columbians to create a Social Policy Framework.

Vancouver joins five other cities, the Surrey Board of Trade, the BC Association of Social Workers and 30 community social service agencies across the province asking for a such a "framework."

What is this framework and why does B.C. need one?

There are lots of challenges facing individuals, communities, and the province. Virtually every family in British Columbia will access social services: young families search for daycare; parents struggle to support a child with developmental disabilities; victims of domestic abuse, violence or sexual abuse must leave home, deal with the police and justice system, all while trying to protect their children; teens find themselves living on the street, coping with homelessness, poverty, and sometimes addiction or mental health issues; new Canadians struggle to find their way in new communities; parents and grandparents search for affordable, appropriate accommodation and supports as they age. The needs are increasing while resources grow tighter. We can't simply throw more money at the issues, but holding the line, as inflation and population grow, mean service providers are stretched ever tighter.

The services trying to address some of our most complex social issues cross ministerial silos, bridge across governments, and include non-profit and corporate sectors. There is often a lack of common vision, or even common language describing the issues. Programs are a labyrinth of daunting complexity, often with duplication of administrative functions adding to costs.

In parts of the province with booming economies, like the Peace River region with its abundant oil and gas, public officials and front line workers in the community are extremely concerned about the impact of rapid growth. One mayor told me if they did not get more cohesive and effective social policies from the province, LNG development and the BC Hydro Site C project would tear their towns apart.

Some of these issues seem intractable. We have struggled with them for decades now, many recurring with frustrating regularity. And B.C. lags behind other provinces in some truly shocking ways. For example, in one of the richest provinces in one of the richest countries in the world, we have 150,000 children living below the poverty line.

Few of us believe this is OK. We do believe our province is stronger when every individual and every community can contribute to the highest level of their abilities. And we believe part of the answer to

these challenges begins with a provincewide discussion to start creating a social policy framework that would define a vision of better lives for our children, our parents, and ourselves.

A social policy framework would lay out objectives guiding us to that vision and the

strategies to get us there. It could provide measurements of success based on outcomes. It could provide expectations for ministries to ensure collaborative and coordinated policies and services. It could provide the framework for the creation of new regulations and policies, streamlining the delivery of critical services and managing costs, while improving the results for those who need it most. It could outline a process for communities to become more engaged in thinking about how services and supports work for them.

In a perfect world, if everything we wanted came true, what would our communities look like? On that, I think most of us could agree.

Our communities would be stronger. Our children would be safer; they would show up at school fed and ready to learn. New Canadians would feel welcome and have the supports they need to contribute to our communities at their highest potential. We would all have the supports we need when things go sideways, as they do for almost all of us at some point in our lives. We would be more engaged and more connected people. And, when we needed them, health services would be there.

But how to get there?

In early 2012, the Alberta government began a conversation to begin creating a Social Policy Framework that engaged 31,000 Albertans. In February 2013, it passed the enabling legislation to put the framework in place.

In February 2014 Alberta's provincial government passed a Children's Charter. And it is now working on a provincewide poverty-reduction strategy.

We believe our province is stronger when every individual and every community can contribute to the highest level of their abilities. And we believe a B.C. Social Policy Framework can help get us there. We have the resources to address our problems. We need the common purpose, the articulated vision, and the shared strategies to get us all pulling in the same direction.

So we are calling on Premier Clark to begin this conversation with British Columbians. Help us all work toward a stronger British Columbia.

Michael Davis is a public relations professional and Chair, Board Voice Society of B.C., a collection of community social services agencies.

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