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Lost in the shuffle: Policy changes leave women in north-western British Columbia bewildered, broke and with fewer places to turn¹

Making ends meet on welfare in BC is a struggle. Recent policy changes are making this struggle even harder, particularly for single mothers living in rural northern areas where the impact of these changes is magnified in particular ways. The purpose of this Report Card is to raise awareness of the dynamics and consequences of income assistance policy changes for single mothers living in more remote communities. This is the subject of an ongoing study of single mothers who live on income assistance and who have pre-school age children undertaken by researchers from three BC universities and two community groups. The study traces the lives of women in East Vancouver and the Bulkley Valley region as they live through the effects of policy changes such as the reduction in support allowances and the requirement that mothers of children three or older seek paid work. While such changes create numerous hardships for women in both places, those in the north face particular challenges.

Some of these challenges have to do with the general economic context of life in the rural north versus the urban south. It is more difficult for single mothers to leave income assistance for economically secure and sustainable work when they live in severely depressed local economies where the few well-paid jobs that remain tend to be in male-dominated resource-based industries. The jobs in which women work in the rural north tend to be in a low-paid and highly seasonal service sector. Postsecondary education is also less accessible in the north. Given the relatively sparse population base and the wide geographic areas served, another important contextual dimension of rural northern

¹ The research for this report was generated from the Income Assistance Project, a study funded through CHILD, a SSHRC MCRI project. The Income Assistance Project is a qualitative longitudinal study that investigates how low-income, lone-mother families are affected by provincial policy changes that have reduced social assistance and enforced paid work obligations for assistance recipients. The research team consists of Penny Gurstein (UBC); Michael Goldberg (SPARC); Jane Pulkingham (SFU); Jo-Anne Fiske (U.Lethbridge); Dara Culhane (SFU); Sylvia Fuller (UBC and CCPA); Paul Kershaw (UBC); Silvia Vilches (UBC); Jillian Stockburger (UNBC); and Laverne Gervais (UNBC). This report was primarily written by Jillian Stockburger and Sylvia Fuller with editorial input from the rest of the team.

communities is the increased importance of any given social or community service and the repercussions of losing these.

“We hardly eat breakfast, because most of the time we don't have enough groceries.”

The monetary reduction of shelter allowance and benefits, as well as the new dollar for dollar deduction of any earned income or child support payments, means that many single mothers on income assistance now have even less money for food and other basic needs. While shelter costs are often lower in the north than in the urban south, they are still significant, and the stock of housing is smaller. As a result, almost all of the mothers who are participating in this study in the north are living in housing that is too small, poorly located, and/or of poor quality. As one mother stated, “with my two kids and myself it's hard to find a decent place to rent with the amount they're giving ... I'm only allowed \$520, but \$550 is about as low as the rent goes and I still have to pay the hydro and the phone bill and whatever else.”

Faced with a gap between their shelter allowance and actual expenses for rent and utilities, single mothers must make up the difference out of the rest of their cheque, leaving very little for groceries or other needs. Living in the rural north, however, means that there are fewer resources to offset this loss. Although most of the women in our study use food banks on a recurring basis, food bank services are limited in this area. There is one food bank in Smithers, but people can only use it once a month. Smithers is also a significant traveling distance for people in outlying communities in the Bulkley valley such as Telkwa and Houston, particularly since public transportation is unavailable. Moricetown just opened its own food bank, in response to complaints from Smithers residents that people from Moricetown were overburdening the Smithers food bank, but services are limited.

Inability to provide enough food for their children naturally creates enormous stress for mothers. One mother confessed: “[S]ometimes when we're right out of groceries it makes me cry because they're like really hungry and I can't give them what they want... it's hard for me to see that.” New clothes or recreation that requires any type of fee is typically out of the question; “being on welfare I can't afford cable. I can't afford anything, any recreation, anything at all for the kids.”

Government restructuring: Rapid change, confusion, funding cuts and service withdrawal

Since April 2004, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) has undergone a major restructuring process in keeping with a 2002 provincial government plan for the devolution of services to “community-based governance.” The Ministry budget was also cut. Ironically, while the restructuring is ostensibly intended to increase the responsiveness of MCFD services to community needs, smaller rural communities are seeing their service infrastructure diminish. A general sense of confusion prevails in the

wake of the rapidity and broad scope of service changes. Part of the problem may arise from the devolution of MCFD headquarters to regional governance centres. These are intended to be more responsive to community concerns. However, moving to this system of governance is consolidating services in regional centres, increasing reliance on distance call centres, and limiting direct access to services in smaller communities. This is particularly problematic for low-income single mothers who have limited access to computers and therefore to e-government services. These same women generally cannot easily afford to travel long distances.

Provincial funding cuts are not limited to the MCFD. Another factor increasing the hardship of low income single moms and their children in the Bulkley Valley is the reduction in provincial funding for many provincial and community-based services including women's centres, legal aid, programs for children and families, and court houses. As a result, many of these services have been scaled back or eliminated. When asked if there were any agencies in town that could have supported her or advocated for her when having difficulties determining her rights within the Income Assistance system, a participant replied "not a one, not a one."

The disproportionate effect of such cuts in rural areas is important to emphasize (Baker, 2003; Caledon Institute, 2002). In smaller communities, the loss of a single program can have devastating consequences. One such example is the Parent Zone, operated by Smithers Community Services Association, which was forced to close down this past April. The Parent Zone offered many programs that aided low-income mothers and families, like early childhood education, parenting classes, a parenting support group, and a drop-in. While some of the services have been transferred to a service for pregnant women and mothers with infants, this change excludes many parents, including low income single mothers with toddlers and children over the age of 12 months. These types of program closures are typical for the region.

As some services and programs are closed, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members assume that the disruptions are due to the process of setting up the Regional Aboriginal Authorities. This is contributing to racial tension in the community. A transformation to Aboriginal self-government (which otherwise might have been viewed as a positive step, moving away from colonialism) is now tied to a decrease in funding, lack of communication, and the closure of well-established programs. This is one key example of the repercussions of *New Era* policies. It seems that everywhere you turn service providers are receiving their pink slips and low income mothers have no place to go.

Restructuring and constantly changing policies also affect service provision within the income assistance system. Ministry employees seem to be overwhelmed by the changes. One of the mothers describes her experience of this: "because [the welfare workers] are in a situation where the rules change so much, and they have so many people coming into their offices, I don't know if it's burnout, but they just look at you and have a blank look on their face, 'well, I don't know. Check with your worker, make an appointment.' That was the same answer I got every single time." Interestingly, this mother found it very

difficult even to get an appointment with her worker “because he never would allow me to book an appointment. He just said, ‘Well, I think we can deal with this on the phone’ ... you know, and that was really frustrating because they seem so terribly short-staffed. They seem so overworked in there.”

Isolation and a culture of surveillance

Trying to make ends meet with limited means and trying to find employment in a depressed local economy with few good jobs are stressful. So too is accessing help, which is more difficult now because the policy changes limit the provision of services both by the government and by community agencies. Compounding these stressors is the fact that mothers in this small community are also especially alert (and vulnerable) to the “culture of surveillance” associated with income assistance. A climate of unpredictability and distrust prevails. Mothers’ fear about being denied benefits at any moment for any reason is very real, as are the consequences of this apprehension. Not only are there fewer available community supports, but mothers are less likely to turn to family, neighbour and community supports in this climate, compounding their sense of physical and social isolation. One single mother living on Income Assistance in the Bulkley Valley talks about how this preys on her mind: “I’m worried about if I don’t do this, and I don’t do that for welfare... they make you jump through hoops with everything.” Service providers in the region also point out that single moms simply stay at home and keep to themselves to stay ‘under the radar,’ making it more difficult for them to access the help that they need and for service providers to reach out to them.

Conclusion

Government policies make a real difference in people’s lives. Income assistance benefits and other government-provided and funded services can provide a crucial safety net for those in need without which reasonable economic security and greater participation in the life of the community is simply not possible. Recent policy changes and service restructuring are ravaging an already-too-thin safety net. Not only are such shifts compromising the economic security of single mothers and their children in northern rural communities like the Bulkley valley, they are tearing apart the social fabric of their communities.

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