

August 19, 2009
Opinion Column
Vancouver Sun

By Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond
Representative for Children and Youth

Subject: Child Poverty

Children in care: Is there a way out?

If there is truth in the basic principle that society is judged on how we treat our most vulnerable, B.C.'s lack of progress in reducing child poverty should provoke a lot of soul searching.

Children in families coping with inter-generational or sudden poverty and deprivation are at a significant disadvantage.

They often lack nourishing food and have poorer school performance. They are challenged by impaired language, reading and memory skills, and high degrees of stress and isolation. Often these children live in poor housing in impoverished neighbourhoods with few social supports.

Their comparatively poor health outcomes, as Provincial Health Officer Dr. Perry Kendall recently observed, require harder work on the core problems of poverty.

These children pay a painfully high price. The cost to British Columbians is also great. Paying for the long-term effects of poverty is more expensive than supporting children and families in their time of crisis and need. As well, ensuring that our children have what they need to grow strong and healthy is the right thing to do in a just and equal society. The lack of opportunity for all children to succeed equal to their peers requires more effective interventions. And the depth and breadth of poverty seeping into the fabric of B.C. families demands a response.

But does B.C. have a plan? Is it integrated, coordinated, and focused on making a change?

Not at this point.

Other provinces do, aligning their systems more effectively and retooling their tax systems and supports to reduce poverty.

For example, Ontario has made a unanimous legislative commitment to reduce poverty by 25 per cent across the board in five years, helping those who are in short-term poverty and those in deep inter-generational poverty.

In B.C. we have a number of fragmented supportive programs, like child care, income assistance, housing programs, and various tax credits. Some of these I monitor and review for effectiveness and responsiveness. I do know that they are not pulled together within a systematic framework built on outcomes, targets and performance measures, or aimed at provoking change and improvement.

We do not have a seamless, coordinated system, with strong single accountability, appropriate to our duty of care to vulnerable families and children.

Families coping with poverty in today's tough economic situation have a very difficult time.

Many of the hard-working, caring front-line workers in the social serving system despair that they cannot assist families with their presenting problems (housing, food, education supports), and sometimes intervene in more intrusive ways in their lives.

The relationship between child protection rates and poverty is well known. If taking a child into care becomes the default system when government is dealing with a family in strained and deprived circumstances, the results do not bode well for the outcomes of the child.

Instead of parents receiving emergency or transitional housing or shelter allowances, a child might be removed.

I recently publicly released an investigation report into one such case, in which a young B.C. family in crisis with no resources was instructed to find better housing.

They were living with family, some of whom had been the subject of past child welfare investigations and issues. These young parents had no means or support to obtain emergency shelter assistance or income assistance.

A young baby was removed from his mother and father, even though they were capable and loving parents. There were no issues of child abuse or neglect, addictions, or poor parenting.

They just didn't have appropriate housing.

The infant was in three different foster homes in the first three months after being taken into care, and a fourth one after he was critically injured. A plan of care was never developed for him, as is required by law and policy in B.C. He

sustained a severe brain injury while in care and eventually was returned to his parents, still struggling in poverty.

Today, at the age of three, he has cerebral palsy, epilepsy, hearing impairment, is blind in one eye, doesn't walk yet and will need life-long supports. This case, along with the more than 3,000 advocacy cases handled in my office, and my work with those in the social serving system, cry out for us to do better.

B.C. needs a child-poverty plan widely championed by political, community and business leaders -- a plan that is coordinated and comprehensive. We need strong accountability and a commitment by everyone to ensure that progress is made, for the sake of B.C.'s children. It's the right thing to do, and critical that we do it now.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth.