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Editorial: An invitation to fight poverty

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The battle against poverty is never-ending, but that doesn't mean we should stop waging the war. A community coalition's plan to combat poverty has been endorsed by all 10 Greater Victoria MLAs and members of Parliament. While that's commendable, they are all in opposition; let's hope government MLAs and MPs will accept the invitation to become involved.

The Community Social Planning Council, which announced the endorsement of its plan by the MLAs and MPs this week, was formed in 1936 as the Council of Social Agencies to address the needs of the poor in the midst of the Great Depression.

While conditions are much better now than they were 80 years ago, poverty has not been banished, and in fact, is increasing.

While no official measure for poverty exists in Canada, Statistics Canada reports that nearly 15 per cent of Canadians have "low income," a level at which families might be in straitened circumstances in paying for food, clothing and shelter.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development says poverty in Canada has been rising steadily since the mid-1990s.

More than 13 per cent of Canadian children — and half of First Nations children — live in poverty. Last November, child and youth advocacy group First Call said B.C. has the highest child-poverty rate in the country, estimating that nearly a fifth of B.C. children live in poverty.

Poverty is a disease that grinds people down; it hinders physical, mental and social growth.

Compared to the more affluent, people living in poverty are more likely to commit crimes, experience poorer health, have a shorter life expectancy, have lower education levels and be less likely to advance in careers and employment.

Of course, those living in poverty suffer its effects the most, but poverty is a burden for all of us, morally and otherwise. It should touch our hearts that a significant segment of the population lives in want, but if that's not enough, it also touches our pocketbooks. We all pay the costs of poverty's attendant ills — poor people tend to be users of public resources and programs, rather than contributors.

Governments are fond of saying they fight poverty by strengthening the economy, but economic growth alone won't eliminate poverty. A boom makes some rich, but it leaves more behind, as housing, food and transportation become more expensive.

A growing economy that widens the gap between rich and poor is not sustainable. In a 2011 report, Andrew Berg and Jonathan Ostry, economists for the International Monetary Fund, argue that massive inequality stifles investment and leads to more boom-and-bust cycles.

After analyzing data from dozens of countries, they concluded that reducing income inequality by 10 per cent can

extend the length of economic expansions by 50 per cent.

And the greater the inequality, they say, the greater the likelihood of financial crises, as lower-income people borrow more and save less in trying to keep up with the lifestyles of the more affluent.

The economy is important, of course — it generates taxes and other resources that can combat poverty. In fact, a strong local economy is one of the components of the Community Social Planning Council's action plan.

But the fight against poverty is a war with many fronts — the plan also includes employment, child and youth care, the justice system, health care, housing, transportation and education. These are the tools and supports that help lift people out of poverty. Properly done, they are investments, not expenses.

Conventional wisdom has it that the rising tide lifts all boats, but focusing solely on the economy leaves too many to sink or swim. We should all be in the same boat.

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