

Local Government Toolkit for Poverty Reduction

As the level of government closest to the daily lives of citizens, municipalities and regional districts can have a meaningful impact on poverty reduction and prevention. While many of the decisions about health care, social services and justice are made at the provincial level, there are still levers for change which local governments can control and which can result in observable local impacts. Here is an overview of actions which can be taken within the BC local government context to address poverty and build sustainable, inclusive communities.

Leadership at Municipal Hall

- Adopt inclusion and accessibility as a lens when evaluating any municipal decisions or programs: will this help build social inclusion in our community? Will everyone be able to access this service or program, and if not what can we do to increase accessibility?
- Maintain local data on social indicators to help municipal councils and staff in planning and measuring the impacts of decisions about social infrastructure.

By-laws

- Use by-laws or licensing fees to discourage businesses that prey upon economically disadvantaged people, such as payday loans, cheque-cashing or title loans. Local governments around BC (including Abbotsford, Esquimalt, Surrey) have taken measures that limit the locations or raise the cost of doing business in the municipality in recognition of the negative economic and social impacts of these businesses.
- Avoid by-laws or fines that criminalize aspects of poverty such as homelessness, financial distress, and employment instability. Examples include fines for pan-handling, banning overnight sleeping in parks, and turning over fees to collection agencies.

Tax Structures

- Use permissive tax exemptions to support non-profit organizations or social enterprises that generate employment or support services for vulnerable people.
- Provide tax incentives that motivate landlords to support short-term or start-up businesses, especially where those businesses provide jobs and/or skills training for people facing barriers to employment.

Zoning Controls

- Allow secondary suites, encourage purpose-built rental properties and provide other zoning and development incentives to increase the stock of affordable housing.
- Reduce delays and streamline planning processes for developers to reduce the soft costs of constructing housing units, making it more feasible for developers to include below-market cost housing in their projects.

Community, Land Use and Neighbourhood Planning

- Maintain up-to-date profiles of neighbourhoods to understand risk factors and be alert to changing needs, such as declining economic landscapes, numbers of residents receiving income supports, changing use of municipal services, and others.
- Encourage and support community or residents' associations through regular staff and council liaison, and by providing meeting and gathering spaces in municipal buildings.
- Regularly assess the social and physical infrastructure in all neighbourhoods and invest in new or upgraded municipal infrastructure (roads, parks, buildings, services) in areas where revitalization is needed.
- Ensure inclusivity of input in community planning activities by working with non-profit organizations and coalitions to reduce barriers to participation by people who are marginalized or traditionally under-represented; this applies to long-term planning as well as local area actions such as Good Neighbour Agreements.

Planning for Childcare in Development Processes

- Maintain and build active partnerships across sectors to develop and support a system of early care and learning for children. The City of Vancouver has a Joint Childcare Council to provide leadership in childcare and child development in Vancouver. City staff work with developers, architects, landscape architects and early childhood educators to make childcare centres part of urban development, so as housing stock grows there are sufficient appropriate childcare facilities built alongside. To learn more about this approach, visit <http://vancouver.ca/people-programs/developing-a-childcare-centre.aspx>

Municipal Procurement

- Incorporate social inclusion and sustainability criteria into procurement decision-making, including preferential weighting for social enterprises and other businesses that commit to hiring and/or training local residents with employment disadvantages. For more details see <http://locobc.com/2013/12/12/new-report-buying-local-tools-forward-thinking-institutions/>

Recreation and Culture

- Continue programs to help low-income residents take part in recreation and cultural activities. The LIFE Pass program enables many Greater Victoria residents to incorporate healthy living activities in their lives.
- Continue and expand services at libraries, as hubs for community information and places where residents access learning and social opportunities. The Greater Victoria Public Library is innovative and effective in leveraging community partnerships to serve people living on low incomes and promote quality of life for all our region's residents.

Leveraging Partnerships

- Encourage municipal police and emergency services to invest in outreach and prevention activities, addressing root causes of poverty through partnerships in the community.
- Support initiatives that connect schools with municipal programs and community groups to address the multi-generational impacts of poverty.

Discretionary Granting

- Consider setting aside some discretionary granting funds for poverty reduction and prevention projects that offer a strong social return on investment.

Transportation

- Work through the BC Transit Commission to maintain the Transit Ticket Assistance Program in the region, keep the cost of transit low, expand transit subsidies for seniors, youth and low-income residents, and maintain services to ensure people can depend on the system to get them to school or work on time, reliably.
- Continue investing in safe networks for non-vehicle transportation options, such as walking or cycling, to ensure people without cars can move around the city without barriers.

Living Wage Policy

- Adopt a Living Wage Policy for the municipality and its contractors, to reduce and prevent "working poverty" among municipal employees and contractors. New Westminster was the first municipality in Canada to adopt and implement a Living Wage Policy in 2010, and others across Canada are evaluating its benefits. For more information, see: <http://www.communitycouncil.ca/initiatives/living-wage>

Collaboration across Borders

- Work within the municipality and with neighbouring local governments to address place-based services for vulnerable people, ensuring services are accessible within walking or easy transit distance for all residents. Build networks within geographic communities even if a jurisdictional border divides them.

Support Policy Change at Higher Levels

- Work through the UBCM and FCM to advocate for improvements in provincial and federal government policy including (but not limited to) a British Columbia / Canada Action Plan on Poverty; subsidized child care; improved social assistance and disability benefit rates.