



NEWS RELEASE

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Human rights groups call for increased welfare rates, protection of the right to food

Vancouver BC, Coast Salish Territories – Five Vancouver human rights groups – many of them participating in this week's Welfare Food Challenge – are calling on the provincial government to raise social assistance rates and take urgent action to address food insecurity in the province.

"We're about halfway through the welfare food challenge, but for tens of thousands of people in BC, the challenge of trying to feed themselves on \$18 a week never ends" said Laura Track, a lawyer with the BC Civil Liberties Association and participant in the 2016 Welfare Food Challenge. "Our five organizations have worked on poverty-related issues for many years, but doing this Challenge has been a visceral reminder of the toll poverty and hunger take and the need to increase welfare rates now."

Adds DJ Larkin, Staff Lawyer with Pivot Legal Society: "Eating for only \$18 a week is a challenge. I've had to forego fresh fruit and vegetables, I'm eating processed foods like instant noodles – and I'm still hungry. If it is this challenging for someone with adequate housing, a kitchen, dishes and time to cook, I can't begin to imagine how impossible it is to feed yourself adequately living in an SRO without a kitchen, often without a fridge and with none of the necessities to make and eat nutritious food."

Some 185,000 people rely on social assistance (aka "welfare") in BC, including 35,000 children. Social assistance rates have been frozen since

2007 and sit well below the poverty line. Rates are vastly inadequate to meet recipients' basic needs and protect their human rights. BC is the only province in Canada without a poverty reduction strategy. The result is an epidemic of hunger, health problems, homelessness, housing insecurity, and fractured families when children are removed from parents too poor to provide them with adequate nourishment.

"Income assistance rates have stagnated for the last decade while the cost of basic necessities like housing and electricity has dramatically increased – for example, BC Hydro rates have increased by 50% over the same time period, and are projected to continue to rise," notes Erin Pritchard, a lawyer with the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre. "As income assistance rates become increasingly out of step with the cost of basic necessities, people are left having to make impossible choices, like choosing between heating their homes and feeding their families."

"At least 80% of the more than 35,000 BC children on welfare are growing up in single-parent families, the vast majority of them headed by women," adds Alana Prochuk, Manager of Public Legal Education at West Coast LEAF and also a participant in the Welfare Food Challenge. "Our province's impossibly low assistance rates mean that many of these single moms are scrimping on food for themselves in order to save their kids from extreme malnutrition. Many of these women also live in fear that their children will be apprehended by the child protection system because of poverty – not because of abuse or a lack of love."

In 2015, the BC Civil Liberties Association conducted research on food insecurity and its impacts on families' human rights. The resulting report, *Hungry for Justice: Advancing a right to food for children in BC* documented serious physical and developmental harms associated with inadequate nutrition, particularly for the tens of thousands of children whose families do not have access to an adequate diet of healthy food.

"The government's welfare rates practically guarantee suffering and malnutrition," says Track, who authored the report. "Over 100,000

people in B.C. relied on charity – food banks, soup kitchens and the like – to meet their food needs last year. It is unacceptable in our wealthy province that anyone, let alone families with growing children, should have to rely on the generosity of strangers in order to meet their basic needs. Governments have obligations under international and Canadian law to ensure people's rights are protected. That includes the right to food."

"The government of Canada has signed international human rights treaties that protect the right to food, housing and an adequate standard of living" says Aleem Bharmal, Executive Director of the Community Legal Assistance Society. "It has an obligation under international law to take steps to protect and fulfill these rights. Moreover, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects the right to equality and security of the person. Given the devastating health impacts caused by poverty and inadequate food – impacts that in many cases are directly attributable to assistance rates that are set by the government – as well as the disproportionate impacts on already disadvantaged groups including women, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, immigrants and racialized communities, inadequate welfare rates may also violate *Charter* rights."

The Welfare Food Challenge is organized by Raise the Rates and asks participants to subsist on food they can purchase for \$18, which is the amount left over for food per week after deducting the average cost of rent in an SRO, cell phone minutes, and a small amount for personal hygiene from a \$610 welfare cheque. The Challenge began on Sunday, October 16 and runs for one week.

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