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Child-care void costs women: Governments urged to provide national program

The Vancouver Province
10 May 2005
by Glenda Luymes

While the provincial and federal governments play tug-of-war over child-care policy, B.C. women are paying the price, a women's advocacy group said yesterday.

Grassroots Women called on both levels of government to push ahead with a national child-care program after releasing the results of a year-long study on the current system.

"All levels of government are claiming to support childcare, but our study exposes the reality for working-class women," said public service worker Monica Urrutia. "Quality childcare is completely unaffordable, leaving women to make do on their own."

The study of 70 working-class women shows some quit work or drop out of

school to take care of their children, while others rely on extended family or leave their kids alone at home.

Hetty Alcuitas, a single mom with two kids, said the system keeps her trapped on welfare.

"I'm kind of stuck," she said. "I can't afford childcare, but it's hard to look for a job when you have kids."

Alcuitas' four-year-old daughter, Maya, attends pre-school two hours every weekday through a government subsidy.

The income level to qualify for the subsidy was recently lowered, making it more difficult for women to receive child-care assistance and forcing some to take low-paying jobs to keep their funding, said Alcuitas.

"It bothers me that this affects the next generation, too," she said. "I want to give my kids a good future."

Marlee Ouellette, a mother of three, said she gets by with the help of friends. When she was working at a seafood plant, a neighbour looked after her children when her child-care money ran out. She was required to work 25 days in a row, but her subsidy only covered 20.

Grassroots Women is also concerned about the Live-in Caregiver Program. Women from the developing world come to Canada to provide child care to wealthier Canadians.

"It's ironic because these women are barred from bringing their families to Canada, and they're coming here to take care of other peoples' children," Urrutia said.

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Poor school start tied to cutbacks: Rise in number of vulnerable kids 'a tsunami'

The Vancouver Province

15 Mar 2005

Excerpt from Article by Elaine O'Connor

Government funding cuts in 2002 coincide with a huge increase in the number of kindergarten kids assessed as likely to fail at school.

"We have only two classrooms and were hurt by government funding cutbacks in recent years," Lola Tham, preschool director at Strathcona Community Centre, said yesterday.

"Our neighbourhood has particular challenges with immigrant and language adaptation and the impact of nearby drug-addiction areas."

Tham was speaking at a meeting on the implications of data from the Human Early Learning Project, a study evaluating preschoolers' mastery of basic skills and readiness for school.

Its detailed analysis of Vancouver neighbourhoods revealed that, in 2004, 75 per cent of preschoolers in Strathcona were classified as vulnerable, up from 53.2 in 2000, and the highest numbers in the city.

A key cause of that spike is a weakening of students' communication skills and

knowledge. The number of vulnerable kids in this one skill area soared to 67.2 in 2004 from just 26.6 in 2000.

"That's a tsunami. That's huge," said University of B.C. professor Clyde Hertzman, a project director. "That's not some sort of random variation."

He said the increase coincides with cutbacks in child-care subsidies in 2002.

Money is being restored, but Hertzman said long-term vision is the key to real improvement.

"In B.C., child-care programs come and go more frequently than restaurants come and go," he said.

"We have to get out of the six-month-to-a-year funding cycle."

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Strathcona tops city in kids not ready for kindergarten: Study finds pockets of at-risk kids citywide

The Vancouver Province, 14 Mar 2005

Elaine O'Connor

EXCERPTS from article

Kindergarten students in Strathcona are the worst prepared for school in Vancouver and are at risk of failing to develop the basic skills needed in later years, according to a UBC-led study.

The 2004 Human Early Learning Project was based on assessments by kindergarten teachers of student school readiness using an Early Development Instrument questionnaire.

It rated a child's competency on a scale from 0 to 10 in five key areas: physical health, language and cognition, social skills, emotional maturity, and communication and general knowledge.

The study found that since 2000, Strathcona has seen an enormous rise in the number of children at risk. Up to 75 per cent of all kindergarten children in Strathcona are now in danger of not attaining competency in one of the five developmental areas, up from 53.2 in 2000.

Pockets of vulnerable children are also popping up in wealthy districts such as Kerrisdale, Shaughnessy and the University of B.C. Endowment Lands.

In most of the five areas, there was improvement in average scores over 2000 in each neighbourhood. But the study shows pockets of at-risk kids are growing in many neighbourhoods, even as overall scores improve.

For example, although average language and cognitive development scores improved moderately overall in Vancouver, with big strides made in Grandview-Woodlands and South Cambie, the percentage of vulnerable students increased in seven neighbourhoods.

The biggest increase was in Strathcona, where the percentage vulnerable increased from 12.7 in 2000 to 18.8 in 2004. Kerrisdale, the UBC endowment lands and Shaughnessy also recorded more students at risk.

And although most neighbourhoods saw improvements in students' communication skills over 2000, (with the exceptions of Strathcona, Fairview,

West Point Grey and Shaughnessy), the percentage deemed vulnerable increased in eight neighbourhoods, notably in Strathcona, where an astonishing 67.2 per cent were deemed vulnerable, up from 26.6 in 2000.

Kerrisdale, West Point Grey and Shaughnessy also saw increases in vulnerable children in the category....

The project is a partnership between B.C.'s four major universities, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Minister of State for Early Childhood Development...

PROVINCIAL PROFILE

Communities with the greatest number of young children at risk of falling behind developmentally are:

- Prince Rupert with 39.6 per cent of kindergarten children falling in the bottom 10 per cent of Early Development Instrument scores;
- Vancouver at 38 per cent,
- Vancouver Island North at 33.4 per cent;
- Stikine at 32.8 per cent;
- Burnaby with 30 per cent.

By contrast, the West Vancouver, Campbell River, Revelstoke, Rocky Mountain and Kootenay-Columbia school districts had the least-vulnerable student populations: Less than 17 per cent of kindergarten children fell into the bottom 10 per cent.

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Re: Parents Want Choice, letter to the editor, Feb. 18

National Post

EXCERPT

25 Feb 2005

Letters -- Kim Adamson, executive director, West Kootenay Family and Childcare Services, Nelson, B.C.

... replacing child care with tax credits and child benefit programs is unrealistic and would be detrimental to Canada's economy.

... approximately one in four of Canada's families are lone-parent families. For a lone parent to stay home would require Canada to support the family entirely, rather than just pay for their child care. And a working parent pays back into the system through income taxes.

Also consider that tax credits will not do enough to support low- and middle-income families. The working poor will still need two incomes to make ends meet and provide adequately for their children. As our population ages, Canada will not be able to afford to have a significant percentage of its workforce stay home.

For an alternative, look to the Nordic countries. Initiatives there encompass extended maternity and parental leaves and a universally accessible child care system. Despite having the high taxes that pay for these programs, these countries remain economically strong, and achieve better academic outcomes than Canada.

... parents do need choice -- choices that support staying home but that also offer quality child care for those who need it.

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Child care plan needed

Cariboo Press (Kamloops, BC)

23 Feb 2005

Letters -- Jennifer Harris

Re: Why fuss over child care?

...National child care would benefit us for so many reasons and would be available to everyone regardless of income.

Reasons why we should "make a fuss":

- More working adults means more money paid to taxes, thus more money into programs.
- A national system would include an educational component that would address our early learning years. The first five to six years are the most important brain-development years.
- We will be able to assess and address health needs before children are older.
- We will be able to provide a better way of life for those at the poverty level.
- We will be able to assess and address those children at risk of entering the over-crowded prison system.
- -Families do not have the support systems they used to have. A national system would provide families with support to raise their children.

A national system will save money, create healthier families and a sustainable country.

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The child-care nightmare: With rising costs, parental anxiety and waiting lists that far exceed spaces available, the situation is 'truly a crisis'

The Vancouver Sun, 11 Feb 2005

Amy O'Brian

EXCERPT from article

Judging from online listings and the Yellow Pages, child-care options in the province are plentiful.

There are nanny services, hundreds of daycare options, pre-schools, after-school programs, and smaller home-based child-care businesses.

But the listings are deceptive.

Ask any parent about child care and you're likely to get a tale of personal woe that includes waiting lists, shrinking bank accounts, and a good dose of anxiety.

"If you talk to most families with young children, they'll say child care is a nightmare," said Sheila Davidson, child and youth advocate for the City of Vancouver.

"[The child-care situation] is a crisis. It's truly, truly a crisis."

It's common practice for prospective parents to put their names on daycare waiting lists days after they conceive, but such proactive planning still does not guarantee them a space.

Robin Eisler, who signed up for downtown licensed daycare two months into her pregnancy, has been told by other parents she and her husband waited too long.

Eisler is planning to return to her physiotherapy practice next month, but is still about 100 names down on the waiting list at the Dorothy Lam Children's Centre, which is her first choice. It's been 15 months since she signed up.

There's a slight chance she will get a call from the popular centre before she returns to work, but instead of waiting for the phone to ring, Eisler has signed up her eight-month-old son Grant at a private North Shore daycare.

"Right now, it's just a quick fix," Eisler said Thursday.

The private daycare centre costs about the same as Dorothy Lam -- about \$1,000 per month -- but doesn't take kids over the age of two. And although Eisler and her husband live in West Vancouver, they both work downtown and were hoping to find daycare closer to their offices.

When Eisler realized her chances of getting into a downtown daycare were waning, she began calling child-care programs on the North Shore. Of the nine she called, only two had spaces available.

And after visiting the centres and interviewing the caregivers, she found many of them were no more than "baby mills" where kids receive minimal stimulation or education, while the operators make a profit.

Federal and provincial ministers are meeting today in Vancouver to try to hammer out a national child-care agreement that would further regulate child care, make it more affordable and more accessible.

The federal Liberals have said they will put forward \$5 billion over five years to fund a national child-care initiative, but the details have yet to be announced.

Sandra Menzer, executive director of the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres -- which operates six non-profit daycare programs downtown, including Dorothy Lam -- said even subsidized child care is not affordable for many people.

Parents who have children in the society's programs pay only about 65 per cent of the cost, but the monthly bill is still about \$1,000 for parents with children younger than three years. The actual cost of care for each child is about \$1,600 and much of the difference is made up by fundraising, Menzer said.

Because of the high quality of care and the central locations of the programs, there are substantial waiting lists for the society's program.

There are about 400 spaces available, and about 1,450 names currently on the waiting list.

"We need a huge increase in the number of spaces," Menzer said earlier this week.

"In Vancouver, there's only enough licensed child care for 12 per cent of children under 12 years old."

At Collingwood Neighbourhood House, there are more than 350 children enrolled

in some type of care program, but there are only 12 spaces for infants -- the category for which care is in highest demand.

There are 1,200 names on the waiting list for child-care programs at Collingwood Neighbourhood House.

The YMCA -- the Lower Mainland's largest provider of child care -- has more than 1,100 licensed spaces, but it too has lengthy waiting lists, especially for infant and toddler programs, said Susan Low, general manager of the YMCA's child-care program.

"There needs to be some help for families," Low said.

Those who can't get their children into licensed daycare centres are finding creative means to get by, including the use of unlicensed or even illegal child-care options, said Pam Best, program director for the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre.

"There is an unlicensed, underground market out there," Best said.

"We don't know if [the unlicensed programs] have criminal record checks, first aid, any training at all, or if they have more than the legal number of children."

But for some parents, unlicensed daycare is the only option.

Even with a child-care subsidy from the province, a single parent earning minimum wage would still have to pay about \$400 per month for licensed group child care.

Eisler makes a decent income as a physiotherapist, but because she's self-employed, does not get the benefit of maternity leave.

"I don't have the opportunity to take a year off," she said.

Instead, she's taken nine months off, and will return to work for three days a week in March, leaving her with next to no spending money.

"Basically, all my income is going to go straight to daycare," she said. "I can't imagine how single moms do this."....

But according to Davidson and other advocates, the government must stop making excuses and put a plan into place.

"It should be happening now," she said.

"It's about the children."

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In Their Own Words

Georgia Straight

From article by Gail Johnson

22 Apr 2004

CHILD CARE

The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. estimates that as of March 31, 2004, the government had cut regulated child-care subsidies by 36 percent, a \$64-million reduction over three years.

The subsidy cuts were achieved by lowering the income threshold for the

program by \$285, so that fewer women qualify.

During the past three years, the B.C. Liberals have cut a total of \$843 million from the three ministries with responsibilities for child care, children, women, and families: the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services; the Ministry of Human Resources; and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

This comes at a time when a study from the Vanier Institute says that 83 percent of single mothers are in the labour market.

WHEN JODIE SOUTHWELL went back to school at the beginning of 2002, she chose a program that would give her the skills she needed to be a residential-care assistant. At the time, the field was a solid one to pursue, but that changed once the government contracted out support staff in residential-care facilities. Full-time jobs with benefits are now hard to come by, and wages are low, in some cases half of what they were before. Since February, after she and her husband split up, Southwell has been looking for work and has had to put her son, now five, in daycare. Here's the catch. Daycare costs \$540 a month. The government contributes about \$370. She still hasn't figured out how she'll cover the difference.

"I'm really stressed out about it," Southwell says in a phone interview from the YWCA's Focus at Work program, which helps women find employment and where she goes every day to print out cover letters and consult with job counsellors. "You try your best but sometimes you just get blind-sided. Women on social assistance always hear the same story: 'You have to get a job.' Six months ago, I went to the [income-assistance] office and told them I needed child care. They said, 'Good luck with that.' I just thought, 'Wow. You're going to be trying to kick me off, but you don't offer to help with child care.'

"I have to use my food money," she adds. "I don't understand why the government won't pay for daycare. They pay for school; why not daycare? Wouldn't they rather pay for daycare than pay to have me on welfare? They want everyone to have a job, but they don't really understand what's involved."

Single moms on welfare with children over age three are required to search for paid work, enroll in a training program, or return to work. But they're in a Catch-22, having to get out every day armed with résumés without decent and affordable child care. Women with children and who have already been on welfare for two years won't be cut off, but their monthly rate will drop.

Southwell, 35, is happy with the daycare she did find. "You don't want to drop off your kids with just anyone; you want them to be safe and well cared for. Here, they do art and singing, and they get a hot meal at lunch."

Southwell was working toward an arts degree and got as far as third year before her student-loan debt stopped her from continuing. She doesn't get any child support from the boy's father. She and her son share a two-room apartment with another person. She's on a waiting list for social housing and owes her roommate about \$3,000. She doesn't have a car; the YWCA (www.ywcavan.org/), not the government, provided her with a bus pass to get to the Focus program every day. Southwell is interested in working with disadvantaged youth, street people, or those with disabilities. Being on welfare is the last thing she wants.

"I am looking for three casual jobs. That's my goal, so that I always have

enough options," she says. "People shouldn't be sitting around; it's not good for your self-esteem, and it's not good to raise your kids in poverty. If they want people to have to find work, they have to have more resources in place to help people. If they want people to work, they need to be more realistic."

WOMEN'S CENTRES

On April 1, provincial core funding of \$1.7 million was cut to 37 women's centres in communities across British Columbia. Although the City of Vancouver stepped in on April 8 to temporarily save the Vancouver Women's Health Collective with \$49,421, many of the province's centres are expected to close as a result of the funding loss.

The B.C. Coalition of Women's Centres says its members provided direct services to more than 300,000 women in 2001, almost one in every six B.C. women and girls. Women's centres help women access counselling and support, and offer job-placement, child-care referrals, and legal advice, among other services. The coalition now says that although it's too early to predict the ultimate outcome, most of the centres it has contacted have either reduced programs and hours of operation, laid off staff, come to rely on volunteer labour, or closed outright.

In a 1999 letter written when she was Opposition women's equality critic, MLA Lynn Stephens promised that a Liberal government would "carry on the core funding for Women's Centres".

Women's centres have gained significant support for the fight to retain funding. Delegates to the October 2003 Union of British Columbia Municipalities convention passed a motion asking that "the provincial government reverse its decision to cut core funding for the province's Women's Centres".

A WOMAN WE'LL call Billie knows the value of women's centres and shelters all too well. At 22, she's been in two successive abusive relationships. The last boyfriend, who also happened to be her cocaine supplier, was so violent that she regularly ended up in hospital. She's still hiding from him, which is why she doesn't want her identity disclosed; he has tracked her down as far away as Squamish in the past. Billie has been off drugs for nine months and is working on getting her life in order. She credits much of her newfound stability to spaces designed strictly by and for women.

"After you've been in an abusive relationship, it's hard to go somewhere guys are," Billie tells the Georgia Straight. "You become scared of guys....It was so beneficial for me to go there [women's centres], even if I just needed to sleep."

According to the B.C. Institute Against Family Violence, 36 percent of women in the province claim they've experienced assault at the hands of an intimate partner at least once since the age of 16. But the institute's Web site (www.bcifv.org/) states that such statistics might be low. Many women fear that reporting violence will make their situation worse. "Power inequity within the relationship, lack of access to assistance, and feelings of shame are other common reasons why conditions of abuse might not come to the attention of the authorities," the site says.

The provincial government has defended the withdrawal of funding to women's centres by emphasizing that it has provided money for "essential services" like transition homes. That doesn't sit well with those who work in the field.

"Women's centres are not essential services in the government's mind; they're very clear on that," says Michelle Dodds, executive director of the North Shore

Women's Centre. "But the reality is that transition houses have a very specific and limited mandate; they are for a small number of women who have to flee a partner. They are for women experiencing violence and who are in crisis.

"All women have had at least one incident in their life when they needed support," Dodds adds, "whether it's abuse, financial concerns--losing their job or being a single mother--health concerns, or legal information. Women's centres are often the last resort for them. When these disappear, they're going to have nowhere else to turn. It's the first place women go as well as the last place."

The lack of support will be felt even more in rural areas. The Queen Charlotte Islands Women's Society in Queen Charlotte City, for example, has had to reduce services to just under 14 hours a week because of the cuts. That means less time for counselling and victim assistance. "It's pretty slim to run a program," says Celina Laursen, coordinator of the centre. "Some women come in because of a crisis; others just want to talk. If someone comes in, you can't just say, 'Sorry, go home.' "

The QCIWS is the only women's centre in the Queen Charlottes; there is one transition home at the north end of the island, in Massett. The next-closest centre is in Prince Rupert, a seven-hour ferry ride away.

"We're quite isolated, so you can't just go to another place," Laursen says.

Colleen Hoglund, coordinator of the Fort Nelson Women's Resource Society, can relate. The nearest centre for women is four hours' drive away, in Fort St. John.

"The cuts put more stress on still-existing services," Hoglund says in a phone interview. "It's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to operate. We're trying to seek alternate sources of money, but we're really limited as to where we can go. It's a small community, so it's hard to go to large corporations. And you can't base your organization solely on project money. It takes away from direct services."

Women's centres often refer clients who are facing domestic abuse to safe homes. Besides helping those in violent relationships, centres address issues like women's safety in the community, sexual harassment in the workplace, poverty, and female health concerns. According to the B.C. Coalition of Women's Centres, in 2001 such groups took 139,000 phone calls from women looking for help and had another 161,099 in-person visits.

"It's really frustrating to think that the only place we have for women is for when they're in a violent relationship or they've been raped," says Terrie Hendrickson, coordinator of the B.C. Health Coalition, who started going to the Vancouver Women's Health Collective a decade ago when she was diagnosed with endometriosis. In a phone interview, she says she has also found the collective to be a source of support in the years since, as she has gone on to experience miscarriage and fertility treatment.

"It's healthy to sit with a group of women and be able to talk, where nothing has to be secretive," Hendrickson says. "You can see what all the options are without feeling out of place. It's the emotional support you get when you walk into a place like this. Women have to be self-advocates. We know about our bodies and we know about our choices.

"I see the sexism on commercials and it really feels like we're losing ground," she adds. "If there's a time when we needed women's centres, now is the time. We need to ensure that human rights are being upheld."

"Women depend disproportionately more on government services than men," says Caryn Duncan, director of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective.

"Women's centres are built on a model of helping women empower themselves, helping them access better health care in a way that's self-directed."

Leanne Ringma, who lives north of Whistler, found that very kind of help at the collective. She's been unable to work since the early '90s because of two conditions: porphyria (extreme sensitivity of the skin to sunlight) and leukemia. She started doing research and discovered that the collective keeps a reference book that contains accounts of women's experiences--good and bad--with doctors and other health professionals in the province. It's available for anyone to read. It helped Ringma understand her illnesses and prompted her to get second opinions.

"It's the only independent voice that consumers of health care have," Ringma says on the line from her home. "You have to become your own expert. Having that kind of support is invaluable."

WELFARE/SENIORS

The Liberals cut social assistance to single parents--the vast majority of whom are women (nine out of 10 single-parent families are headed by women)--by as much as 18 percent. New regulations require employable single parents to search for work when their youngest child turns three. Previously, this was not required until the youngest child turned seven.

New requirements that youth must be independent for two full years before qualifying for welfare means that underage girls could turn to the streets to get away from bad home situations. Those who find work could run into the Liberals' new \$6-per-hour "training wage", which allows employers--mostly in the restaurant sector--to pay new hires \$2 per hour below the minimum wage for the first 500 hours of employment.

There are further cuts to social assistance that eliminate the family maintenance exemption, and again, women are predominantly affected. (Traditionally, poverty rates for single-parent families headed by women are double those of men in the same situation.) Families with two or more children saw reductions in shelter allowances.

There have been problems with disability benefits as well, with 12,500 people ordered to complete a 23-page reassessment form to continue receiving benefits. About 400 people were forced off disability benefits onto welfare, losing enhanced medical and dental benefits, a monthly earnings exemption of \$300, and low-cost transit passes.

Despite promises to "provide better home support", the Campbell Liberals have cut home-support services such as cleaning, laundry, bathing, and shopping help for the frail elderly by 30 percent, with a proposal for all funding to be eliminated eventually. The hearing-aid and talking-books programs have also been scrapped. This disproportionately affects women because they live longer than men (on average, four years longer, according to B.C. Vital Statistics, 1997-2001).

The Liberal promise to "build and operate an additional 5,000 new intermediate and long-term care beds by 2006" has been changed by removing the word additional and replacing beds with spaces. The B.C. Health Coalition says more than 3,300 long-term beds have been closed or are being eliminated.

And PharmaCare changes resulted in 250,000 British Columbians paying more for drugs, with female seniors again affected more than men because the rate of prescription-drug use increases the longer you live.

AT 62 YEARS old, Joanna Edmonds (not her real name) does not live large. She shares a small bungalow with a roommate on Vancouver's East Side, rides her bike to get around, and grows her own food in her garden. But recent government cutbacks have made her pare down even more.

On the line from her home, Edmonds acknowledges that she is managing better now on disability payments--which total about \$760 a month and which she receives because of arthritis, anxiety, and depression--than she did on welfare. When new welfare rules, which dictated decreases in certain cases, came into effect, her rate dipped from \$600 per month to \$500. With her share of the rent costing \$400 each month, never mind payments for phone and hydro, she couldn't make ends meet no matter how bountiful her back yard.

Edmonds used to do international-development work with nongovernmental organizations, travelling to Ecuador, Zambia, Malawi, and Mexico, among other countries. But she says her health is getting worse the older she gets. And she worries about her financial picture as she ages.

"It's hard to get a job in your later years, no matter what your experience," Edmonds says. "It's humiliating. I've earned my living my whole life. Every time you're turned down, you hear no, it has a downer effect....And if I had to work for \$6 an hour, I wouldn't be able to take care of my health properly.

"This is capitalism run wild," she adds. "I'm not a total anticapitalist; I see the value in free markets. But it seems to be intentional on the government's part to drive people into low-wage jobs, to have a large pool of low-paid workers."

Like so many older people, Edmonds is feeling the impact of the cuts from many angles. Rates for long-term care have gone up, requirements to qualify for residential care are more stringent, and treatments like physiotherapy and massage--which Edmonds says help her arthritis--are no longer covered by the medical-services plan.

Although disability, long-term care, and other realities that confront seniors are not necessarily gender issues at face value, one could argue that women are harder hit by the cuts. Women represent a larger percentage of the population, tend to live longer than men, and already have lower incomes. Furthermore, changes to home support mean that most physically disadvantaged clients will get assistance to take a bath just once a week, and only when all other options, like help from family or friends, have been ruled out. Only those who receive personal care or who are incontinent will get laundry assistance. Add to the impact the government's disbanding of the Seniors Advisory Council, and many older women say they feel threatened.

Elsie Day, a long-time social activist and cochair of a grassroots group called Women Elders in Action, aka WE*ACT, says the measure of a society is how it looks after its children and those who need help.

"Ours can't measure up," says Day, 80, in a phone interview. "The cuts are certainly taking a toll." Funded by the Status of Women Canada and housed in the Seniors Centre, WE*ACT helps people over age 50.

Day notes that the average income of a pensioner in B.C. is just under \$18,000

a year. "A lot of people think seniors are wealthy," she says. "What about costs like renting wheelchairs or buying walkers?"

Although the Liberals have touted the advantages of assisted living, Day says it doesn't work for a lot of people. Some like the independence that comes with the setup, but many others simply can't afford it, she says, since multiple costs become the responsibility of individuals, not the government.

According to the November 2003 report, Assisted Living Consultation Response: Health and Safety, by Charmaine Spencer of SFU's Gerontology Research Centre, saving money is one reason the government is behind the arrangement.

"The estimated cost per resident in assisted living is \$50-75 a day, approximately one half of the daily cost of long term care," Spencer's report states. "The new model has several different components and represents a complex mix of housing, health care and other services which regional health authorities are interpreting and providing in different ways, potentially leading to a patchwork approach.

"This creates a very complicated process for the assisted-living consumer, who typically will be an elderly person (aged 85+) with multiple functional limitations, few supports, and a lower level of functional literacy, but who is somehow expected to negotiate 'a fair deal' and to be able to effectively self advocate if problems develop."

"Healthy seniors stay in their own homes. Once they need help and are not able to cope, they should be cared for," Day says. "This has created a lot of stress. Poverty brings on illness."

Day, who grew up in a tiny Saskatchewan town and moved to Vancouver in 1943, says her mother, who lived to 104, had exceptional long-term care. "If she was sick, they brought in a doctor. It was a really good system. If you look at the whole picture now, the way they care for the frail, seniors who need some help, it's disappointing to many of us, and very stressful.

"The only answer we get is that we can't afford it. But we're much wealthier than ever. It's a choice....I'm not against the Olympics, but there should be a certain tax on people who are over a certain tax bracket, not on the low-income tax brackets.

"It's a totally different kind of world than what I knew," Day adds. "We're not using technology as well as we could. We had great dreams of what a great world this would be with all this new technology. Just the opposite is happening."

LEGAL AID

In February 2002, the B.C. Liberal government introduced severe cuts to legal aid that had a particularly hard impact on women. Funding cuts of 38.8 percent over three years, amounting to \$34.3 million, were coupled with the closure of all 60 offices run by the Legal Services Society, the elimination of about 75 percent of staff positions, and the replacement of those services with a provincewide call centre and seven regional offices.

In addition, legal aid was eliminated for poverty-law issues and severely restricted for family-law cases and situations involving violence. Legal aid was also denied for landlord-tenant disputes, disputes with BC Benefits, the WCB, Employment Insurance, and human-rights-complaint hearings. As well, the province dropped automatic prosecution in spousal-assault cases, and programs that help victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence lost \$1 million in funding

in 2002 (and this February's budget cut another \$3 million from victims'-services and community-safety programs).

GAIL NIEBERGALL RECENTLY became a grandmother. Her daughter, Janice (not her real name), and her six-month-old grandson live at home with her in Duncan. The excitement of having a newborn, though, has been overshadowed by tense visits, arguments, and a looming legal battle with the boy's father. On April 28, Janice will appear in court to fight her former boyfriend over custody and access. After having paid for a DNA test to prove that the baby was his, her ex, who works full-time, has secured a lawyer for the trial. Janice, a 22-year-old on income assistance, applied for legal aid. She was denied.

"I'm really angry with the fact that she can't even get a lawyer," Niebergall says on the line from home. "Where is the justice when one person can be represented and the other can't?"

Janice appealed the decision, then got a letter of refusal from the Mid Island Legal Aid office. "Legal aid is available to financially eligible clients for a limited number of matters and your [sic] does not fall within these," the March 22 letter states. "In order to make a referral in your case, you would have to demonstrate that there was recent evidence of physical abuse warranting a restraining order."

"Do we have to wait until he starts beating her?" Niebergall asks.

Her daughter's ex agreed to have his visits with the baby supervised, Niebergall says, something she and Janice wanted, given how aggressively he handles the child. She claims that twice he put a pillow over the baby's face to see if he could knock it off himself. He also refers to his son as a "crybaby", and Janice alleges that verbal abuse is nothing new.

"When I was pregnant, he always called me fat," she says, picking up the phone at her mom's. "One day we went to the store and he was mouthing off, calling me a bitch and saying he should have never put it in me."

Janice says the thought of facing a judge in court on her own stresses her out.

"We are up against a professional [lawyer]," her mom adds later. "We don't know what to do."

The Niebergalls' situation is far from unusual, according to Annabel Webb, a legal advocate at Justice for Girls, a nonprofit organization in Vancouver that helps females aged 12 to 18 who live in poverty. The group (www.justiceforgirls.org/), which is funded by the Law Foundation of British Columbia and Status of Women Canada, doesn't provide individual legal help but promotes social justice and freedom from violence.

"Mothers living on welfare trying to raise their children are in a dire situation," Webb says in a phone interview. "Often, their kids get apprehended....When mothers don't have access to legal aid, they don't stand a fighting chance. There are moms with no legal representation dealing with an abusive partner who's punishing them by trying to get custody of their daughter.

"Some are in and out of ministry homes, group homes, foster homes; some are back and forth in and out of their parents' homes; there are single mothers living on the street, bouncing from hotel room to squats....They are surviving any way they can. The consequences of the cuts are very tangible."

The cuts have had a cumulative effect, she notes. Take those chops to legal aid,

welfare, and child care and combine them with a dismal supply of social housing and a training wage set at \$6 an hour, and many single moms face one hurdle after another.

So extreme are the cutbacks that the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women singled out B.C. in a 2003 report.

"The Committee urges the State party to assess the gender impact of anti-poverty measures and increase its efforts to combat poverty among women in general and the vulnerable groups of women in particular," the paper stated.

Audrey Johnson, executive director of the West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (www.westcoastleaf.org/), whose mandate is to change "historic patterns of systemic discrimination against women", claims that the organization has been inundated with calls ever since the government slashed funding to legal aid.

"Women are vulnerable if they're going through a divorce or perhaps escaping an abusive relationship," she says. "There are power imbalances, and they're facing it all without legal representation. The future of their own well-being and their child's is at risk. There is a huge gap a lot of women are falling through....They don't have the language or tools to fight for their rights."

"The cuts are now beyond bad," Justice for Girls' Webb says. "As an advocate, it's difficult seeing what these girls are going through. It's just heartbreaking. These are gross human-rights violations."

HEALTH CARE

The B.C. Liberals' New Era election platform was very clear on health care. It promised: "We are going to be sure that people have the care they need, when they need it, where they live."

However, patient waiting lists provincewide have gone up by an average of 21 percent since the Liberals took office, and in 2002 the provincial budget raised Medical Services Plan premiums by 50 percent. Single people's monthly rates went from \$36 to \$54, couples' from \$64 to \$96, and families' from \$72 to \$108, raising \$340 million annually.

Then the Liberals delisted several health-care services previously covered by MSP, including eye examinations, podiatry, massage, physiotherapy, chiropractic therapy, and visits to naturopaths.

Women make up the vast majority (85 percent) of the 46,000 members of the Hospital Employees' Union, which has lost 6,000 members to privatization (another 2,500 received layoff notices this January). The HEU says that 85 percent of those who lost their jobs are women, with an average age of 48.

And although some nurses received a generous raise (23.5 percent over three years), other health-care workers such as cleaners, food-service workers, some medical technicians, and laundry workers were left to the mercy of their various health authorities after the passage of Bill 29 in January 2002, which, among its other provisions, removed restrictions against contracting out in health-care workers' collective agreements. Turning over the once-public delivery of health services in hospitals and other facilities to multinational corporations like Compass, Aramark, and Sodexo has resulted in lower wages for those women workers who managed to get rehired by the new employers. Wage cuts of about 50 percent, down to \$9 to \$11 an hour, are standard.

WHEN SHE GOT hired at a long-term-care facility in Victoria in 1990, Brenda Jordison figured she had found her dream job. A single mom, she worked part-time so that she wouldn't have to put her two sons in daycare. She was making about \$27,000 a year, enough for her and her family to live comfortably in cooperative housing and cover the bills. She even enrolled her kids, now 12 and 16, in their favourite sport, lacrosse.

Jordison never figured she'd be approaching her 44th birthday updating her résumé and surfing the Net for jobs. But last fall, when the Salvation Army (courtesy of the Liberals' Bill 29) contracted out staff at Sunset Lodge--where she worked mainly in accounting but also in food services and as a housekeeper--she found herself unemployed, with no pension or security for retirement, and bleak employment prospects.

"When I started, the chances of layoff were slim to none," Jordison (who was chair of the CUPE-HEU joint local at the lodge) says in a phone interview. "I thought I would retire from there. I thought I was very fortunate.

"This has had an immense impact on my self-esteem," Jordison adds. "I get very emotional. It's one thing losing your job; it's another watching somebody else take it. It was done in a very callous way."

She says that most of her coworkers were women between the ages of 30 and 50, some of whom had worked in the facility for almost three decades. Many had no other job training or experience, others were immigrants, and several were single moms. "I know my age is against me," Jordison says. "Who's going to hire women in their 40s and 50s?"

Had she decided to return to the facility under the privatization plan, her wage would have been cut by about half. According to the Hospital Employees' Union, wages for housekeepers dropped to \$9.25 per hour from \$18 or \$19 once contracting out came into place. Jordison considers such figures unreasonable, given that working in a long-term-care environment can be so taxing.

"You're dealing with people under stress, with turmoil and trauma, people who don't want to be there and who are dying," Jordison explains. "A lot of the residents have dementia or have no family. You end up being their only visitor.

"Some have incontinence or suppressed immune systems; there's always something going around," she adds. "You're constantly changing gloves; there's blood and feces. Sometimes the rooms had to be stripped right down and sterilized....You cannot have a weak stomach for that job, and it also takes dignity and respect. It's not like at a hotel, where you get in there and get out. You have to do the job properly because this is their home."

She's getting by on employment insurance while looking for work, but that has meant her own cuts at home, including telling her sons they can't play lacrosse any more because she can't afford it.

"I wish the government understood what they were doing to people's lives," she says. "What was wrong with me having a decent job? I can't keep my kids in programs like sports; I just want to keep them off the streets."

HEU communications officer Margi Blamey describes the government's cuts to health care as the largest mass layoff of female workers in Canadian history. The companies that are now employing workers in long-term care facilities here are based in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She says that

many of the workers who were laid off had 15 to 20 years of experience, which translates into a "huge advantage" in terms of knowledge and quality of care.

"There was a stability of a work force," Blamey says. "The people who worked there were people who wanted to help people."

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