

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# Increasing BC Hydro rates drive request for an electricity affordability program for BC's poor

September 29, 2015 (Vancouver) Legal advocacy group, the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre (BCPIAC) will ask the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC) to implement an electricity affordability program for BC Hydro's 160,000 low income residential customers. The proposal consists of three strategies to address the hardship caused by high hydro rates on low income customers:

- lifeline rates to keep rates more affordable for the poorest customers;
- low income customer service rules including more flexible arrears payment arrangements and waiver of reconnection fees; and
- emergency bill assistance to avoid disconnection.

BC Hydro has increased residential electricity rates by 47% in the last 10 years, and is on track to increase them by at least 10.5% in the next three years. Rates are projected to continue to rise significantly in future years as BC Hydro proceeds with multi-billion dollar projects such as Site C dam which have been exempted from a full public review by the BCUC.

BC Hydro's rate increases have grossly outstripped increases in income for low income British Columbians. For example, BC social assistance rates have been frozen since 2007 at \$610 per month for basic assistance and \$906 for disability assistance, and in the last 10 years the BC general minimum wage has only gone up by \$2.45 an hour.

"Electricity is an essential service, and low income BC Hydro customers have no spare money to pay higher electricity costs. Since electricity is essential to survival, people can only pay their electricity bills at the expense of competing household necessities, such as food and medicine" said Trish Garner, community organizer with the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition.

"About 10% of BC Hydro residential customers live below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-off", said Sarah Khan, one of the lawyers at BCPIAC who is bringing this issue to the BCUC, adding that "Continuous rate increases and stagnant incomes are causing low income people to struggle to pay for their BC Hydro bills."

BC Hydro offers no rates or terms and conditions that specifically apply to low income customers. The only programs available to these customers are energy saving kits and in more limited cases, energy efficiency home upgrades. While these programs are important, they are not offsetting BC Hydro's rate increases.

BC Hydro has just filed a Rate Design Application with the BCUC, and BCPIAC will intervene in this proceeding on behalf of the following groups to request low income programs: Active Support Against Poverty, BC Old Age Pensioners' Organization, BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC, Disability Alliance BC, Together Against Poverty Society, and Tenant Resource & Advisory Centre.

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