

May 2, 2017

To All Candidates in the 2017 BC Provincial Election:

Re: Access Barriers to Applying for Income Assistance

We are writing to you as a candidate in the provincial election on behalf of more than sixty undersigned organizations to collectively express our concerns regarding chronic and serious barriers British Columbians face when attempting to apply for income assistance. It is our hope that you will pursue this issue, as it affects British Columbians in all corners of the province.

Barriers to accessing income assistance have been steadily worsening over the past several years as the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (the “Ministry”) has increasingly moved to online application processes. This has been coupled with a corresponding reduction in the number of Ministry staff available to provide in person or over the phone assistance to those citizens applying for income assistance. By way of example, fourteen Ministry offices have closed across the province since 2005, while other offices have reduced hours or have been replaced by generic ServiceBC offices. This under resourcing of the Ministry coupled with its insistence on an increasingly technological interaction with the public has led to the entirely foreseeable consequence of downloading much of the responsibility to provide accessible services onto community agencies, such as those signing this letter.

The latest iteration of the online application process creates new and substantial barriers for those who either do not have access to a computer or lack the computer literacy necessary to navigate the online processes. Now, *before someone can even apply* for assistance, they must complete the following steps:

- Create an email address (if applicant does not have one, which is the case for many older and/or more vulnerable applicants);
- Create a My Self Serve account, and wait for an email confirmation link;
- Create a 4-digit PIN;
- Create a BCeID user ID and password to log into My Self Serve account;

Since its introduction in February, the latest version of the application process has prompted a flood of calls and emails to our office from advocates and individuals confounded by these new requirements. With permission from the authors, we share the following excerpts:

“The new application process simply doesn’t work for many that need to access income assistance. I recently met with a client who is homeless and does not have a computer – the Ministry told him he was ineligible for in-person intake because our organization

could assist him instead. This is despite the fact that our organization does not generally assist with the application process because we view it as the Ministry's job to assist, and because it is so cumbersome and time-consuming. My client nearly gave up applying for income assistance at multiple points, despite being eligible, and I know there are many people who, because they cannot navigate the bureaucratic and technological hurdles, simply give up on the meager support available. In-person assistance is the only method that actually works for the majority of people who need these services."

– Daniel Jackson, Legal Advocate, Together Against Poverty Society, Victoria

"...[I] had a horrible experience with the new on-line system. I was assisting a client a day or 2 after the new system was launched. Trying to register the client and set up her [My Self Serve] account was a nightmare. Her appointment ended up being a 2-part appointment b/c we had to wait for her registration number. The 2nd appointment we completed the on-line application which in my opinion was not 'streamlined', efficient or 'more user-friendly'. At that time we were unable to download the documents for the application and the client had to physically take them into the office."

– Christine Dunlop, Legal Advocate, Quesnel Tillicum Society, Native Friendship Centre, Quesnel

Our overarching message is that many applicants require in person assistance with the application process – and this help is simply not being provided. Despite repeated assurances that there is now a “supported application” whereby applicants unable to use the online application can contact the Ministry to request telephone intake, there is a complete disconnect between these assurances and the actual experiences of British Columbians attempting to access direct help from the Ministry. In person services are not being provided and wait times on the Ministry’s centralized phone line have averaged over 45 minutes over the past six months.

We ask that all candidates commit to speaking out in favour of making income assistance accessible to those that need it by:

- Providing timely in person individualized assistance to those that need it
- Providing computers and Ministry staff at every Ministry office for the purposes of helping applicants through the application process
- Modifying the online application to eliminate the requirement for an email address and BCeID

We are calling for action in the form of fully resourcing the Ministry to fulfill its duty to the citizens of British Columbia.

Sincerely,

BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre

Erin Pritchard & Michael Seaborn
Staff Lawyers

c. Jay Chalke, BC Ombudsperson

Signatories:

1. Abbotsford Community Services (Abbotsford)
2. Action Committee of People with Disabilities (Victoria)
3. Active Support Against Poverty (Prince George)
4. Africa Great Lakes Networking Foundation (Vancouver)
5. The Anglican Diocese of New Westminster Eco-Justice Unit (New Westminster)
6. Atira Women's Resource Society (Vancouver)
7. Battered Women's Support Services (Vancouver)
8. BC Government and Service Employees' Union
9. BC Health Coalition
10. BC Poverty Reduction Coalition
11. Burnaby Community Services (Burnaby)
12. Canadian Mental Health Association (Port Alberni)
13. Carnegie Community Action Project (Vancouver)
14. Chimo Community Services (Richmond)
15. Citizens for Accessible Neighbourhoods (Vancouver)
16. Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC
17. Community Legal Assistance Society (Vancouver)
18. Council of Senior Citizen Organizations in British Columbia
19. Dawson Creek Native Housing Society (Dawson Creek)
20. Disability Alliance BC
21. Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (Vancouver)
22. Downtown Eastside SRO Collaborative (Vancouver)

23. Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (Vancouver)
24. Family Tree Family Centre (Kamloops)
25. First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition
26. First United Church Community Ministry Society (Vancouver)
27. Fort St John Women's Resource Society (Fort St. John)
28. Golden Family Center (Golden)
29. Golden Women's Resource Centre (Golden)
30. Gordon Neighbourhood House (Vancouver)
31. Greater Vancouver Food Bank (Vancouver)
32. Interior Community Services (Kamloops)
33. Kamloops and District Elizabeth Fry Society (Kamloops)
34. Kamloops YMCA-YWCA, Violence Against Women Intervention and Support Services (Kamloops)
35. The Kettle Society Advocacy Service (Vancouver)
36. Megaphone Magazine (Vancouver)
37. MS Society of Canada, BC & Yukon Division (Burnaby)
38. Nelson CARES - The Advocacy Centre (Nelson)
39. The Nelson Committee on Homelessness (Nelson)
40. New Westminster & District Labour Council (New Westminster)
41. Nicola Valley Advocacy Centre (Merritt)
42. North Shore Community Resources (North Vancouver)
43. North Shore Homelessness Task Force (North Shore)
44. Okanagan Advocacy and Resource Society (Vernon)
45. Opportunities Advocacy Services (Campbell River)

46. Penticton and Area Access Society (Penticton)
47. Phoenix Centre (Kamloops)
48. Pivot Legal Society (Vancouver)
49. Prince Rupert Unemployed Action Centre (Prince Rupert)
50. Quesnel Tillicum Society, Native Friendship Centre (Quesnel)
51. Raise the Rates (Vancouver)
52. The Realistic Success Recovery Society (Surrey)
53. Sheila Nelson (Kamloops)
54. South Peace Community Resources Society (Dawson Creek)
55. STEPS Forward - Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Society (Vancouver)
56. St. Paul's Advocacy Office at St. Paul's Anglican Church (Vancouver)
57. Terrace and District Community Services Society (Terrace)
58. Together Against Poverty Society (Victoria)
59. Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter (Vancouver)
60. Vancouver South Presbytery Community Advocacy Programme (United Church of Canada) (Vancouver)
61. Wachiay Friendship Centre (Courtenay)
62. West Coast LEAF (Vancouver)
63. Vancouver District Labour Council (Vancouver)
64. Vancouver Island Human Rights Coalition (Victoria)
65. Victoria Disability Resource Centre (Victoria)