

BCA AFC Supports the 2024 B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy

July 24, 2024 – The BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCA AFC) welcomes and supports the new B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy.

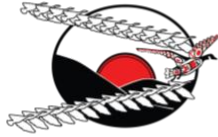
This new framework takes a comprehensive approach to help achieve its 10-year vision. It lists actions underway and new initiatives to facilitate greater social inclusion, provide pathways to employment, and make programs and services more accessible. These are goals that we share at BCA AFC and among our 25 Friendship Centres across B.C.

It is well documented that a disproportionate number of Indigenous people and families live in poverty in this province. At the same time, many of the ways out of poverty contain traps and barriers for Indigenous people. Urban Indigenous communities often experience higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, and unemployment, compounded by the loss of cultural connections. When it comes to poverty, across all demographics—women, men, children, youth, families—Indigenous people are faring worse.

“Urban Indigenous youth rarely get to be kids,” said Leslie Varley, Executive Director of BCA AFC. “They endure the effects of poverty and work to support their families, with jobs, as caretakers or both. They struggle to access loans that help others attend post-secondary. Beyond Friendship Centres, supports for urban Indigenous youth are minimal and hard to access. At the same time, Indigenous women and girls are often dealing with sexualized violence and have no culturally safe services to turn to. Our young people need clear measurable steps to ensure those most at risk can find ways out of poverty.”

We at BCA AFC are very glad that reconciliation is a guiding principle of B.C.’s 2024 poverty reduction. However, while there are 10-year poverty reduction targets for the child poverty rate, the seniors’ poverty rate, and the overall poverty rate, there is no Indigenous-specific poverty reduction target.

Much progress has been made since B.C.’s first poverty reduction strategy was created in 2019. A lot of good work that is complete or currently underway is included in the strategy, like supporting anti-violence projects through the Path Forward Community Fund and giving renters a specific tax credit. But there are no Indigenous-specific actions for



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Friendship Centres and our partners to support or assist or use to hold the government accountable among the things envisioned for the next 10 years.

“An increasing number of First Nations people are moving to towns and cities, seeking jobs, healthcare, anti-violence services, education, and housing, said Annette Morgan, Executive Director of the Dze L K’ant Friendship Centre Society. “As a result, we are seeing increased and more overt racism towards Indigenous people. Poverty and Indigenous-specific racism are closely linked and must be measured and addressed in any poverty reduction strategy.”

The strategy notes that close to 80% of Indigenous people in B.C. live in urban areas and confirms the need to promote, develop and deliver more programs and services for the growing number of Indigenous people living in those urban areas. We know that number is only going to keep growing. We know the province’s new distinctions-based approach is already redirecting Indigenous people from First Nations to Friendship Centres and urban areas for services and supports that don't yet exist. We know climate crises are going to make more and more people homeless and hungry.

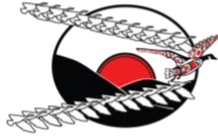
We appreciate that existing and historical measures do not accurately reflect Indigenous experiences of poverty and we look forward to working with the government to address gaps in data. But we would also like to see Indigenous-specific targets. Projects, partnering and planning aren't going to be enough to blunt the acute poverty, homelessness, and inequality that urban Indigenous people are experiencing. We need measurable goals, targeted interventions, and structural changes.

“A lot of good work is underway and a lot of that is detailed in the 2024 poverty reduction strategy,” said Leslie Varley, Executive Director of BCAAFC. “Developing specific targets and goals for Indigenous people within this poverty reduction strategy is going to be crucial for addressing the unique and long-standing barriers they face.”

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Quotes

"Urban Indigenous people can no longer afford even the worst of Vancouver's rental units. Our Friendship Centre staff have to commute for hours on public transit to get to work. They make wages that are notably less than in the mainstream social service sector. They help our community members experiencing the most profound poverty while struggling to get by themselves. Once the rent is paid, there is no money for food, utilities, and clothing. The number of urban Indigenous working poor has become a crisis. The poverty levels of those we serve are so severe. These are just two examples of systemic discrimination and structural racism that poverty reduction strategies need to address."

Susan Tatoosh, Executive Director
Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society

"The lack of basic, affordable housing has been an acute issue for urban and off-reserve Indigenous people for decades. Building affordable, stable, long-term housing should be everyone's top priority. Then we can address the other related factors creating high Indigenous poverty rates."

Rosanna McGregor, Executive Director
Cariboo Friendship Society

"Many of the reasons behind the disproportionately high levels of Indigenous poverty in B.C. are structural and systemic: over-policing, residential segregation, discriminatory lending practices, political disenfranchisement, inaccessible and racist healthcare systems, the effects of intergenerational trauma. That means we need structural and systemic changes. More housing won't make a difference if Indigenous people can't afford it or if they lose it because they can't get a loan and miss a payment or get arrested by a racist cop doing street checks. B.C.'s poverty reduction strategy needs Indigenous-specific targets and goals to truly address the specific barriers faced by Indigenous people and communities."

Cal Albright, Executive Director
Kamloops Aboriginal Friendship Society