



Dec 19, 2017

Dear Shane Simpson,

On behalf of the Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks (VNFNs), we are writing to you to first congratulate you on your new role as Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. We are excited at what is possible with a progressive government in office, and want to support the work you're doing to lift those living in poverty through important systems-level change. We are also writing to express our deep concern and frustration with the abysmal supports for those who are struggling financially and subsequent on-going levels of poverty and food insecurity experienced by many in our communities.

VNFNs include 15 neighbourhood food security organizations whose mandate is to support food access, education, skill building, and advocacy for community members who are experiencing food insecurity. As grassroots organizations, we are all well aware of the continuing high levels of food insecurity experienced in our communities. Current 2016 census data reveal poverty levels as high as 20% in some communities here in Vancouver and with the lack of affordable housing, many residents are under considerable financial stress.

Recently, some of the VNFNs participated in the Raise the Rates Welfare Food Challenge 2017, in which we experienced the unpleasant reality of eating as someone on Income Assistance with only \$19 a week for food. This food calculation is based on \$710 received monthly, minus the cost of an average SRO (\$548) and other life necessities (personal hygiene, transportation, phone, etc.) For more information on why \$19, please visit the Raise the Rates website: (<https://welfarefoodchallenge.org/2017challenge/why-19/>). Clearly, it is impossible to live on \$19/week for food. The most recent "Food Costing in BC 2015" (published 2016), pegs the average cost of a nutritious food basket for an individual male at \$61 - \$72 (depending on age) per week. Income assistance and disability benefits should reflect the realities of the costs for housing, food and other living expenses.

Those of us who took the challenge felt constant hunger, fatigue, moodiness and other negative symptoms. The "welfare food diet" has been described as a "starvation diet". Others have described it as morally reprehensible, leaving those on income assistance dependent on charity food and at a higher risk of poor health and illness. It is not uncommon to hear from people dependent on charity food reporting getting sicker on the food they are eating, most of which is poor quality carbohydrates. Studies have also shown that food insecure individuals and households have significantly higher utilization of health care services. Reducing or eliminating poverty (hence food insecurity) would have a significant benefit on reducing health care costs and improving health outcomes including birth outcomes and maternal health, reduction in chronic disease, child development outcomes (academic and social), and mental health and emotional well-being.

Empowering people with skills and knowledge, as we do through our community kitchens and gardening programs can support systems change, but we must also address the many root causes that contribute to food insecurity. As such, the VNFNs have lent their voice and food equity perspectives to the anti-poverty movement. In addition to participating in the Welfare Food Challenge, the VNFNs are members of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition who are advocating for a just poverty reduction strategy including increasing income assistance rates and disability benefits, affordable housing (specifically supportive and social housing) affordable childcare, living wages, affordable education, and reducing marginalization. In addition, we support the following measures as advocated by Raise the Rates.

- Increase in Income Assistance Rates to the Market Basket Measure. This is approximately \$1,500 a month in Vancouver, for a single person. Once welfare has been raised to the poverty line, rates are indexed to inflation.
- Raise the rate for people with disabilities to \$1,800 a month as they have extra living costs due to disability
- Remove arbitrary barriers that prevent people in need from receiving assistance. The 2-year independence test, the 5-week work search and restrictions based on citizenship status are unfair and prevent people from receiving the help they need.
- Increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour and index it to inflation.
- Build at least 10,000 units of affordable non-market housing per year in addition to increases in supportive housing, assistive living units and shelter beds.
- Provide affordable high quality public childcare.
- Increase the tax rate on people who earn more than \$250,000 per year and reverse the tax cuts to corporations and the richest 1%.

As community food organizations, we would also encourage the government to invest in projects that support income development and social innovation in the food and green economy sector where many jobs can be created. Funding food skills and capacity building initiatives, increasing access to land for farmers, increase youth employment and youth entrepreneurial capacity, and supporting dignified food access programming could go a long way to reducing poverty and providing new employment opportunities.

These measures will ensure that everyone in British Columbia is able to participate in our economies and communities. These measures will help to end poverty in our province.

By implementing the solutions brought forward by the Raise the Rates campaign and the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, this government can show the people they care about the wellbeing of British Columbians, will save money in the medium term, and are willing to fulfill their responsibilities to their constituents.

Sincerely,

Cedar Cottage Food Network
 Collingwood Renfrew Food Security Institute
 Downtown Eastside Kitchen Tables
 Downtown Eastside Right to Food Network
 Grandview Woodland Food Connection
 Gordon Neighbourhood House
 Hastings-Sunrise Community Food Network
 Little Mountain Riley Park Neighbourhood Food Network
 Marpole – Oakridge Neighbourhood Food Network
 Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood Food Network
 South Vancouver Food Network
 Strathcona Community Centre Food Security Program
 Village Vancouver
 West End Neighbourhood Food Network
 Westside Food Collaborative

CC:
 Raise the Rates
 BC Poverty Reduction Coalition
 Premier John Horgan