

Invest in Public Services to Build Stronger Communities

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SELECT STANDING
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND GOVERNMENT
SERVICES FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA'S 2023 BUDGET

SUBMITTED BY



CUPE BC represents more than 104,000 workers in British Columbia who deliver public services across a wide range of sectors including public and post-secondary education, childcare, community social services, community health, local government, transit, emergency services, and libraries.

We acknowledge that our province of British Columbia is located on the homelands of 203 distinct Indigenous nations and cultures; more than 30 different languages and close to 60 unique dialects are spoken in the province. We ask all participants to reflect, acknowledge and honour in their own way the First Nation land on which they live, work and play.



Canadian Union of Public Employees British Columbia
410 - 6222 Willingdon Ave. Burnaby, B.C. V5H 0G3

T: 604.291.9119

TOLL FREE: 1.877.263.8568

E: info@cupe.bc.ca



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INTRODUCTION

Moving British Columbia forward in uncertain times

The Canadian Union of Public Employees British Columbia (CUPE BC) appreciates the opportunity to submit its views on priorities for the 2023 budget to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

CUPE BC represents more than 104,000 workers in British Columbia who deliver public services across a wide range of sectors including public and post-secondary education, childcare, community social services, community health, local government, transportation, emergency services, and libraries. Our members' ability to deliver quality public services and goods is greatly determined by B.C.'s provincial budget; in turn, our members are an integral part of how the province translates the budget into the public services that are foundational to strong and healthy communities.

The 2022/23 Provincial Budget offered a response to British Columbia's significant challenges of health care and climate related emergencies, and overall, stayed the course to previously identified priorities of childcare, reconciliation, environment and taking care of people. Despite all the challenges B.C. has faced, our province remains in a strong financial position. Looking towards the year ahead, and with the worst of the pandemic hopefully now concluded, there is reason for optimism. There is also, however, reason for concern.

British Columbia, like most other jurisdictions, is struggling with inflation rates not seen for several generations. Consumer spending on necessities like fuel and food, as well as discretionary items,

continue to rise as central banks increase the cost of borrowing, further stressing average British Columbians who carry student loan, mortgage, vehicle and other forms of debt. The province's housing market has become more volatile, and even if prices adjust as predicted, the market will remain permanently out of reach for many British Columbians.

At times of economic uncertainty, public sector services are critical resources to avoid negative social and economic outcomes that devastate the lives of citizens and create a financial and social crisis. A budget for 2023/24 must recognize the realities in front of us, and invest in the services British Columbians will rely on to support them through times of economic instability. The proposals herein focus on high-level budget policy issues and specific pressing needs identified by our frontline members working across public services in every corner of the province. Investments in the public sector, like those suggested in the coming pages, are going to be one of the most effective strategies for economic stability and growth. Such investments support the services citizens require in challenging times, and importantly, the increased public spending helps support economic growth when the private sector falters. Moreover, investments in the public sector have "multiplier" effects on the private sector as jobs will be created in the industries that supply the necessary materials and services for the initial investment.

We urge the Committee to take an intersectional lens to understand the differential impacts of the pandemic, recovery and coming uncertainty on different communities. Gender minorities, Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, women, people with disabilities, and people belonging to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community disproportionately

experienced job and income loss and have suffered negative impacts to their mental health and wellbeing. For example, while much of the economic stimulus spending that occurred during the pandemic tended to favour male-dominated fields like construction, increased spending in female-dominated sectors like libraries, childcare, and education is vitally important to our communities and economies, and an important step toward a more equitable society. Budget 2023 should likewise take a progressive approach, looking for ways to correct historical inequities while moving all British Columbians forward collectively in uncertain times.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Continuing investments in public childcare to fulfill the vision of the \$10 a Day Plan

One of the key public services that addresses affordability for families is childcare. The B.C. government has demonstrated progressive leadership in the issue of childcare since 2017. With a record number of \$10 per day sites already in operation, and with the historic childcare agreement between the province and federal government, our province is poised to build a robust, province-wide social program that will help families for generations to come.

Among the B.C. government's stronger directions on childcare is the decision to move responsibility from the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the Ministry of Education. The creation of the Ministry of Education and Child Care in April of this year positions the province to make best use of our existing public education system by rolling out a public model for childcare that capitalizes on the existing efficiencies of our world-class public education system to deliver high quality, affordable childcare in communities across our vast province.

Expansion of childcare in the public education system will be a foundational element of building and maintaining a more equitable economy in this province. Not only will this investment create countless opportunities for parents, mostly women, to re-enter and expand their participation in the labour force, but will itself contribute to job creation. Investments in new public childcare spaces bring with them a contribution to the creation of stable, good paying jobs in the childcare sector. Further, this contributes particularly to the increased economic participation of women. An integrated model of

childcare within B.C.'s public education system will deliver high quality early care and learning while also solving a practical problem for parents and reducing transitions for kids.

Workforce development and retention is crucial if B.C. is to meet current and future demand for childcare. Childcare advocates have long identified poor compensation and burnout as significant impediments to the creation of the workforce necessary to deliver a universal system of childcare on a provincial scale. This same observation can be found in the analysis of the childcare action plans developed by local governments across B.C. with the assistance of the UBCM. B.C. cannot attract and retain the qualified workforce necessary to build a high-quality, universal system of early childhood education and care unless work in this sector is made into respected, rewarding, supported, family-sustaining careers. Public operation of childcare through school districts addresses the chronic shortage of workers directly by providing high quality career opportunities that are well compensated and offer access to benefits and a pension. This is almost unheard of within the existing patchwork market-based system of childcare delivered through private non-profit and for-profit organizations.

Another major barrier to building an integrated early childhood education and care system in B.C. is the current division between education and childcare. Implementing an integrated approach to childcare and education eliminates the 'split system' approach where childcare is viewed as a social service, and early education services as education. While the creation of the Ministry of Education and Child Care is an important step towards an integrated system, community level delivery by school districts is needed to create the

actual integration between childcare programs and the public education system that B.C. families and students require.

CHILDCARE RECOMMENDATION 1: Build a world class system of early childhood education and care by fully implementing the \$10 a Day Plan, including full funding for school districts to operate childcare across their jurisdictions.

Expanding in-house school-aged childcare delivered by school districts

The common school day is typically 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.; not what most workdays look like for parents. An integrated model of before- and after-school care provided in schools by school districts means parents have a reliable, accessible, and high-quality childcare solution in every corner of our province. Having this service provided in-house by district employees would mean that children get to begin and end their day at school with adults they know, and participate in programming connected to their school day and learning. This model is a highly regarded framework for childcare that makes best use of existing public investments in our school system by capitalizing on integration of these two key education services.

The standing labour force of educational assistants and other qualified staff within our school districts is a substantial asset in the expansion of childcare spaces. This workforce is highly skilled, able to provide the care and education required, and has been calling for increased access to full-time hours for some time. In fact, in-house delivery of integrated childcare by school districts is a win-win-win solution that provides the childcare families need, the additional hours K-12 workers have been seeking, and the fair wages, job security and positive working conditions lacking in much of the childcare sector.

Lack of school age care is a critical problem facing almost every community in B.C.. Investing in publicly delivered before- and after-school care leverages the advantages of the existing public education system—governance and public oversight, robust administrative structures, available physical spaces appropriate for this age cohort, and an available highly qualified workforce. The public education system represents an opportunity to provide thousands of desperately needed school age childcare spaces quickly and efficiently.

Building on the success of “Seamless Day” pilot projects in school districts across the province, government can pilot before- and after-school care programs operated directly by school districts for older age groups. This will create necessary before- and after-school childcare spaces, successfully demonstrating the strength of an integrated early childhood education and care model, and allow districts to gain valuable experience delivering highly integrated childcare programs.

CHILDCARE RECOMMENDATION 2: Invest in critically needed school age childcare spaces by funding pilot projects that provide seed funding to school districts to create licensed school age childcare spaces on school grounds operated publicly by school district employees.

Funding childcare infrastructure in public schools

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Starting Strong V Report confirms that the transition from early childhood education to public school is a big step for children.¹ Further investments in high quality early childhood education and care and smooth transitions between the various stages of early education are key for children’s long-term learning and development. For most children in B.C., school-based kindergarten is currently the

only place where early childhood education and care and education overlap.

As B.C. builds out a new universal system of childcare, it will be important to ensure that childcare services have proper accountability measures to keep workers and children safe, and that parents have confidence in those measures. Public childcare delivered by school districts has such measures built in as part of an existing robust public system with accountability and oversight infrastructure. The reality of public childcare in school districts means that parents have access to accountability through those at their child's school, through the district and the local school board, and through the B.C. government.

CHILDCARE RECOMMENDATION 3: Invest in such infrastructure as new facilities, extensions, retrofits, and modular options that enable expansion of childcare services in public schools, and the future delivery of early years learning (zero to five-year-old childcare options) integrated with the existing public education system.

Creating an equity-focused integration model

Childcare BC states the equity-focused goal of improving access to childcare by supporting British Columbians who need it most, including young parents, children with special needs, and Indigenous communities. Parents of children with diverse needs have greater difficulty securing before- and after-school care due to lack of spaces and a patchwork of funding programs that do not wrap around the needs of these children and their families. As B.C. creates a new universal childcare system, a similar equity focus, along with concrete funding commitments and

frameworks to evaluate success, should be stated upfront.

CHILDCARE RECOMMENDATION 4: Develop and fund an equity-focused integrated model of before- and after-school childcare to improve access to affordable (no more than \$10 a day), high quality childcare, and to improve children's learning outcomes throughout their school years.

PUBLIC (K-12) EDUCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that accessibility to public education, including building capacity for digital connectivity, is an issue of equity, diversity and inclusion, and that public education is a key factor in child and youth mental health. Public education is not only important for the growth and development of our children, but enables parents to participate in the labour market as their kids pursue an education during the day. Equitable and accessible public education is a way forward for providing opportunities to all future generations of children, but especially those of identities which have been historically marginalized. This will help balance the scales, whether in early childhood education, kindergarten to grade 12, or post-secondary education.

Increasing resources for underfunded school districts

The current inflationary pressures on the K-12 funding framework adds new stress to an already fragile system. The capacity of school districts to absorb new costs without proportional funding increases was heavily challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic and is even less today. A funding model is needed that looks past the pandemic and post-pandemic funding challenges, and prepares the system for continued growth and expansion, and to better serve communities by adding new responsibilities for integrated childcare. Further, as issues of equity and mental health were highlighted by the pandemic, it is crucial that government strengthen K-12 programs that support the well-being of B.C.'s youth—especially students with special and complex needs, gender diverse students, Indigenous, Black and racialized students, and students from families with low-incomes.

Lack of adequate public funding stresses all aspects of the education system, including staffing structures. Increased workloads caused by unfilled vacancies and absences not covered by temporary staff adds new volume to already challenging work. Funding shortfalls also led districts to expanding precarious work, relying too

heavily on casual, temporary and part-time work, rather than creating full-time, family-sustaining jobs. These factors, combined with already low wages and seasonal layoffs, places extreme pressure on all workers in the public school system that only an increase in overall funding can address.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 1:
Provide additional funding for school districts to address structural shortfalls in the existing K-12 funding model, and better address inflationary pressures faced by districts in all parts of B.C.

Better supporting education assistants

Education assistants (EAs) are a critical component of the K-12 system in B.C. EAs and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) are an essential resource that improves the learning experience, including social and emotional learning, for all children, provides instructional support, and provides additional assistance to children with diverse and complex needs. Considering the differential impacts of the pandemic that disproportionately affected Indigenous communities, AEAs in particular, play an especially important role in the K-12 system. The success of many students, and the

sustainability of existing class sizes, relies on EAs providing direct support to students who need additional support. Additionally, with more online learning, multi-modal learning, and other adaptations to our education system, instructional support is more important than ever.

EAs work under challenging conditions with the province's most vulnerable learners, and do so with limited resources, and an income that leaves them struggling to make ends meet. The nature of EA work has grown substantially in recent years, and this has added a far greater workload in the same limited hours. The current full-time workloads are not consistent with the part-time job structure, and consequently the work suffers due to lack of time for preparation, planning, reflection or professional development.

Low incomes, high workload, and less than full-time work, along with the seasonal nature of most EA jobs, creates tremendous pressure on workers, both at work and at home. Even though average hourly wages are above the living wage, EAs work on average only 852 hours each year. Accordingly, and based on gross annual incomes rather than just hourly wage rate alone, 46 percent of active K-12 education assistant positions pay below the poverty line, and 74 percent of K-12 support workers spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, with over 25 percent spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

Additional hours for EAs would provide a myriad of opportunities to improve student outcomes, and would provide for greater collaboration with teachers and more communication with parents. Increasing education assistant hours by 1 hour a day, for those not already working 6 or more hours each day is a guaranteed mechanism to ensure more effective student support in B.C., and this can be done by a targeted increase to the Learning Improvement Fund (LIF).

According to BC Public School Employers' Association's payroll data for 2020-2021, 10,686 EAs work less than 6 hours per day. With an average hourly wage of \$27.29 and 186 working days, increasing each of their hours by one hour each day would cost approximately \$55,216,000.

The LIF funding has remained at \$20 million for several years. This static funding fails to keep pace with rising student numbers among many districts and inflation among support staff wages, meaning that the relative value of the fund decreases each year. Increasing the fund to \$70 million would allow EAs to provide better service and support for students throughout the day, as well as reducing unpaid overtime by staff trying to provide this service, which is currently not funded. Increasing EA hours would also help improve recruitment and retention by making EA positions more attractive, thereby helping school districts maintain stable, experienced, and skilled staff.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 2:
Increase the Learning Improvement Fund (LIF) to \$70 million in order to increase education assistant hours by 1 hour per day, for those not already working more than 6 hours per day.

Addressing chronic staff shortages among education assistants

Currently, basic educational obligations are being met for youth with complex needs, however much more can be done to create a more equitable system for children with complex needs. AEs and EAs are a key resource for ensuring that every student has a chance at quality education. All learning spaces, both physical and virtual, need more education assistant support, and it must be ensured that there are enough workers to meet these needs.

Increasing the number of British Columbians serving as education assistants will not be achieved by a single tactic. Fair wages and access to full-time hours will improve staff retention and likely also recruitment but should not be the sole strategy to addressing staffing shortages. Another critical issue is labour force supply. Improving access to education and training is thus another key tactic in expanding the EA and AEA workforce, and this can be done by reducing or eliminating financial and other barriers to EA and AEA education.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 3:
Fund more training spaces, reduce cost barriers and provide financial assistance for education assistant and aboriginal education assistant programs to ensure B.C. has enough trained staff to support student success through the coming years.

Restoring daytime custodial services

The disruption caused to the K-12 workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause staff shortages and even “functional closures” of schools due to understaffing. Over the last two decades, CUPE custodial workers across the province have raised concerns over the limited dayshifts and daytime hours, which is threatening their ability to perform the work that they know is vital to maintaining a safe and healthy learning environment for students.

The work of daytime custodians stops the spread of disease in schools and in communities, protecting our most vulnerable citizens, reducing the amount of time staff and students miss due to illness, and protecting the overall health of communities. Students, staff, parents and the community have a high standard for custodial work, and examples of poor standards can become a public issue. Expectations for custodial work increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and though additional custodial hours have now

been eliminated, higher expectations continue. The resulting increased workloads among custodians produce a higher risk of physical and mental injury, and ultimately a greater attrition among this workforce.

Custodial workers must be provided the fair wages, adequate hours, and necessary protections to safely carry out their essential work. COVID-19 highlighted how socio-economic inequities and race intersect with health outcomes, and racialized people are disproportionately represented in fields of essential work such as custodial work. Accordingly, the underfunding of this work, its design as precarious work is an equity issue.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 4:
Allocate sufficient funding to the K-12 budget to provide for the adequate working hours and equitable wages for all K-12 custodial staff, and restore daytime custodial hours across all school districts.

Improving the safety and accountability of school bus transportation

An important and often overlooked element of the public school system is the provision of transportation services for students. School buses relieve parents of the need to transport kids to school, and take pressure from local public transportation systems that would otherwise be responsible for school aged kids as well as the many other citizens that rely on transit every day.

Unlike other systems of mass transit, school buses do not enjoy dedicated lanes, marked bus stops or other traffic controls. Instead, school buses must share roads with other vehicles and often travel rural and suburban routes not designed for large vehicles. These conditions make safety an issue, especially when dropping off and picking up kids from the roadside. Vehicles that interact negatively with school buses, while stopped or

while on the road, are putting the lives of kids at risk, and there is very little accountability for those who do not respect school buses and their passengers.

The introduction of dash cameras provides a new opportunity to make travel safer and more accountable by creating a record of interactions between vehicles. The Insurance Corporation of BC, among others, uses dash camera footage to assess fault in accidents and hold drivers responsible for their actions on the road. The installation of forward-facing dash cameras to school buses would create a useable record of vehicles interacting with buses, and provide a venue to hold drivers accountable for negative, unsafe and life-threatening interactions. The main barrier to the use of this technology is funding, and the benefits to safety far outweigh the costs of this accessible technology.

Another key piece of technology that would make school bus transportation safer in rural and remote areas is satellite communication devices. School buses serving rural routes travel through areas where radio and cellular service is not accessible, and which means that should an incident occur while in an area without service, no communication would be possible. This constitutes a safety issue for both the children on such buses and their drivers, and has a very simple and cost-effective solution in the installation of satellite communication devices on those buses that travel through areas with no cell or radio service.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 5:
Ensure funding is provided to install and maintain forward-facing dash cameras in all school buses, and satellite communication devices in buses serving rural and remote routes.

Preserving Indigenous languages

The provincial government has made positive progress on truth and reconciliation in schools as exemplified by the Indigenous-focused graduation requirement being introduced for B.C. secondary students in the 2023/24 school year. Substantial work has been done in B.C. to address the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action 62, 63 and 64, which pertain to education at the provincial level, and it is critical that work on these continues, evolves, and grows.

B.C.'s 2019 adoption of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into provincial legislation is also commendable. UNDRIP Article 14, Right to Education, affirms the right of Indigenous people to all levels and forms of education of the state without discrimination, and that the state shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, to access an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.² B.C. has much more to do in furtherance of this article of the Declaration, especially as it pertains to Indigenous language education in public schools.

In 2021, the Vancouver School Board voted to develop a plan for a new Indigenous language program in their District. However, no funding was attached, and this means that any plans that have been made have not yet moved into implementation in the District. Obstacles such as this illustrate why Indigenous language learning should not be a responsibility downloaded to the district level. French language programming is administered on a provincial level by the Ministry of Education and Child Care, and Indigenous language programming should be no different.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 6:
Provide funding to implement UNDRIP Article 14 by expanding and adding Indigenous language learning opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Ending public subsidies for elite private schools

The B.C. government currently provides public funds to elite private schools in support of kids whose parents choose private education, and have the resources to pay the substantial tuition fees. This allocation of public funds to private education is contrary the principles of a universal public system. A strong public education system is the best way to ensure that education is inclusive, equitable, and accessible, and the direction of public funding to private education undermines such a system. A progressive reduction and elimination of public funding to elite private schools should not simply return funds to the treasury, but should redirect savings to the public system.

PUBLIC EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 7:
Eliminate public funding to elite private schools.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Restoring public funding to colleges and universities

The largest challenge facing post-secondary in B.C. is underfunding. Several generations of governments have contributed to a reversal of the funding model for colleges and universities, moving from majority public funding to a system of mostly private funding at many colleges, institutes and universities. This has left our institutions short on resources, competing with each other for student numbers, and focused on hiking fees, fundraising, revenue generation and the sale of education to international students. At the same time, institutions are less focused on preparing B.C. for the challenges ahead, developing solutions to current and future labour market challenges, and supporting student success.

The inversion of public funding is a result of direct cuts to institutions, and a stagnant funding model that has not accounted for system growth. Limited capital infusions have come primarily as infrastructure spending, constructing new buildings that institutions cannot afford to operate and maintain. Deferred maintenance issues, growing numbers of precarious workers, lack of funds to support research and innovation, services that cannot meet demand, and waning enrolment among our most vulnerable students are all symptomatic of a system in crisis.

Not only do we need a vibrant, well-resourced and accessible system to provide the education that creates jobs, founds careers, and supports families for individuals, the education system is the foundation from which our collective future grows. We face tremendous challenges, not least of which is the need to shift our economy and

prepare our communities to face a climate crisis. The post-secondary system is one of our best and most successful tools to fight inequity, address affordability, resource social issues, avert crime, advance innovation, and build a sustainable, inclusive economy. An investment in post-secondary funding, and a return to majority public funding, will more than pay for itself over time in consideration of these contributions to a shared and prosperous future.

The announcement of a comprehensive public post-secondary funding review is welcome news. Only funding increases, not re-allocations of existing funding, can truly remedy the problems cause by years of cuts to post-secondary education by past governments. Increased funding to support research capacity will help to attract world-class scholars and continue to ensure that British Columbia's post-secondary education is globally competitive. Public funding for research will help to ensure that research is done for the public good, rather than being funded by and benefitting the private sector. It is vital that targeted funding also be dedicated to research that supports Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation. Sustained and reliable funding is necessary for Indigenous and ally educators to put this important work into action.

ADVANCED EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 1:
Increase funding of post-secondary institutions to restore majority public funding of base budgets with a progressive increase to 75% base public funding, including increased research funding and capacity.

Supporting the services that support student success

Chronic underfunding has put immense pressure on all parts of our post-secondary system, but the cuts have disproportionately been applied to campus services and facilities. As a result, staff workloads increased while pay did not keep up with inflation, and work became more precarious. For non-academic workers, as full-time regular staff retire, institutions are not hiring replacement full-time regular staff. Instead, post-secondary institutions are increasingly relying on part-time and casual staff who often have limited access to benefits. In some areas, institutions are simply contracting work out to low-wage, for-profit companies whose return on investment is enhanced by shorting our campus communities of the services they rely on.

Precarious work and the negative effects of contracting out in the post-secondary sector is most strongly felt by those who work in food, custodial, and facilities services as work is outsourced to large corporations such as Compass, Sodexo, Chartwells, Best Service Pro, and a whole host of firms providing trades and maintenance services. These corporations pay low wages and use pending contract bids as an excuse not to improve poor working conditions. This has ramifications for the state of maintenance and upkeep on B.C.'s post-secondary campuses and for the overall quality of employment provided by B.C.'s tax dollars.

Post-secondary funding should include dedicated funding to be utilized for deferred maintenance. Safe and clean infrastructure is best and safest for all workers and students on our post-secondary campuses, and those working to provide these services on campuses deserve fair working conditions. All too often, the focus is on new builds rather than ensuring that current infrastructure is in good condition. Ignoring deferred maintenance multiplies the effects of

neglect, and creates more expensive problems that shorten the life of necessary infrastructure.

Finally, this government has supported the repatriation of public sector work in health care, and it is logical to expand that support to post-secondary institutions with the development of a framework to bring work back in house. This is an important issue as universities and colleges are major employers and privatization weakens campus communities, and the surrounding communities in which our institutions are located. Privatization is also an equity issue, as women and racialized people are primarily impacted by contracted out work at post-secondary campuses.

ADVANCED EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 2:
Increase funding for campus services, bring outsourced campus services back in-house, and provide additional resources to address deferred maintenance.

Reducing financial barriers to post-secondary education

The B.C. government has made enormous advancements in post-secondary education affordability, providing new means for those from low- and middle-income families to get the education they need to build a better life. Cornerstones of this work have included the BC grants program, the elimination of interest on student loans, and the removal of tuition fees for students from the foster care system. While these measures address some of the most challenging barriers, they are limited by other factors that must be addressed to make education in B.C. more affordable.

The upfront barrier of high tuition fees and the burden of student debt prevent some of the province's most historically marginalized from accessing post-secondary education. While the cap on fee increases, a longstanding public policy, provides some relief to annual tuition

fee rate hikes, it was applied after several years of deregulated fees locks in high fees that are beyond reach for many potential students. Further, B.C. commonly assesses fee levels based on a provincial comparison, and this only weights our province's tuition fee levels against that of other provinces with similarly poor affordability records.

Lower tuition fees and lower student debt opens the door to public post-secondary education for those from low- and middle-incomes, who sometimes fail to even consider this option due to the sticker shock of fees and charges on the most basic programs. Further, graduates without the burden of high student debt participate in British Columbia's economy more significantly, and repay the investment in education through noticeably higher contributions to provincial tax revenue. Accordingly, a tuition fee freeze and reduction will support students, and the economy, but must be implemented in conjunction with increased government funding to support a loss in revenue for institutions.

ADVANCED EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 3: Immediately freeze and progressively reduce tuition fees, replacing lost user fee revenue with increased government funding.

Advancing women in the trades

Women represent an average of just four percent of the skilled trades workforce in B.C., and that number has barely moved in decades. Isolation, discrimination and poor workplace cultures have long been barriers for women entering and staying in the trades. Significantly increasing the number of women and other underrepresented groups in trades careers is crucial to building diversity in the trades and increasing overall trades participation, particularly given the current skilled trades labour shortage.

Economic recovery plans tend to favour male-dominated sectors. While CUPE BC is advocating for major investments in the care economy which tends to be more female dominated, it is important that we also make room for women and gender minorities in male-dominated sectors. Permanent funding for the BC Centre for Women in Trades will help ensure that investments in work in the trades are more equitable.

ADVANCED EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 4: Implement permanent funding for the BC Centre for Women in Trades.

Increasing support for summer work programs, with a focus on trades experience

Educational programs, such as the Ministry of Education/Industry Training Authority Youth Work in Trades (WRK) program, are key entry points for young people entering careers in the trades. As B.C. struggles with shortages in the skilled trades and labour force, increasing promotion and paid learning opportunities would raise the profiles of trades work and opportunities among young people as they decide on a future career path.

Furthermore, a system to credit hours worked during youth work programs such as the WRK program to count towards apprenticeship completion hours would be an additional positive policy. Such a system would further encourage uptake of trades, and reduce the time to complete a trades program for those entering the workforce.

ADVANCED EDUCATION RECOMMENDATION 5: Increase funding for, and promotion of, such youth and summer work programs as the Youth Work in Trades program, especially within the K-12 sector.

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Repairing the funding shortfall in community social services

The Community Social Services sector has experienced significant underfunding resulting in recruitment and retention issues that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inadequate funding means that staff are forced to work alone, placing them in often untenable situations, and managing challenging workplace situations in isolation.

Social services staff across the province can share stories of more frequent and severe workplace violence, including sexual and physical assaults. Clients take their frustrations, including those relating to inadequate social service supports, out on staff, and these experiences coupled with unsustainable workload lead to escalating burnout and mental health issues for those working with some of our provinces most vulnerable populations.

The dramatic rise in opioid overdoses only makes the workplace realities of social services staff more untenable. Many in this sector are first responders on the front lines of this epidemic. Working alone, and without others to consult, they attempt to save lives of clients while staffing dynamic and complex workplaces. Increased and full funding of the Community Social Services sector are necessary to successfully address issues and maintain an adequate workforce.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION 1: Increase funding to the community social services sector organizations to fully fund the sector to respond to ongoing challenges, and better support those staff who support our communities' most vulnerable.

Providing paid sick and mental health leave to community social services workers

Community social services workers are reporting increased rates of burnout and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of deepening recruitment and retention issues and increasingly challenging workloads. While workers in this sector go to work every day to support those most in need across our communities, their own needs are not being addressed. The nature of community social services work means that workers routinely contend with the outcomes of the opioid pandemic, witnessing overdose deaths at increasing, and sometimes daily rates. Their experiences in the pandemic were even more challenging, often working without adequate access to personal protective equipment and dealing with the accompanying anxiety of contracting COVID-19.

The ongoing recruitment and retention challenges in this sector are occurring because workers cannot find relief from the cumulative effects of the workplace challenges they face. One possible source of relief is sick leave and mental health leave, yet community social services workers lack full access to these important health provisions. Sick leave across the community social services sector is only provided at 80 percent, meaning workers have to choose between losing 20 percent of their paycheque and going to work sick. There is currently no provision to recognize mental health days so workers can take time off to repair and restore their mental health. As a result of these two factors, workers continue

to serve while unwell, and this hastens their burnout producing a permanent loss of otherwise qualified, capable, trained and dedicated staff.

Recognizing that social services are an essential support to our most vulnerable populations in B.C., sick leave for these workers must be an option rather than a punishment. The provision of five, 100 percent paid mental health days in addition to 100 percent paid sick leave provisions, is needed to successfully address recruitment and retention in the Community Social Services sector. The B.C. government must be a leader in providing fair sick pay, and this measure in the Community Social Services sector will ensure healthy and safe workplaces for those whose job is to support others.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION 2: Implement five 100 percent paid mental health days, in addition to 100 percent paid sick leave, for Community social services workers.

Limiting the spread of infectious disease among community social services workers and clients

Community social services workers are at ongoing risk of contracting a variety of communicable diseases including COVID-19 and influenza. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and at other times, workers in this sector have experienced severe shortages of proper personal protective equipment (PPE), resulting in them being placed at increased risk of, and contracting, COVID-19 in the workplace. Community social services staff work closely with some of the most vulnerable members of the community, and preventing the spread of disease into and among this community should be a high priority for public health.

Community social services workers were deemed essential throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by the British Columbia government. Accordingly, maintaining a healthy and active workforce that minimizes absences due to illness should be a high priority for government, especially in consideration of the existing workloads and staffing challenges across the sector. To meet this goal, resources should be allocated to community social services employer agencies to develop a plan to deal with outbreaks and pandemics, and to ensure that adequate PPE is always available to workers. It is by being prepared in advance that social service agencies can best protect their workers and the community being served.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION 3: Provide funding to community social services agencies to develop plans and policies to better manage infection disease and pandemic response, and provide long-term funding across the sector for the supply and storage of medical grade personal protective equipment, including N-95 masks.

Addressing chronic low and inequitable wages for community social services workers

The low-wage redress and the elimination of contract flipping have been a huge step forward in closing the wage gap that has persisted between those doing similar work for different employers. The province's efforts have helped in protecting those jobs and wages, thereby increasing worker retention, worker safety, and quality of care and support.

The gap between social services workers and other workers doing similar work in the healthcare sector is also illustrated by the fewer number, and lesser value of job protections often received by social service workers. One prime example of this

trend, one outlined above, is that social service workers have their pay reduced by 20 percent on sick days. This and other such provisions constitute an unfair and inequitable system in which the same work is devalued based on the venue in which that work is conducted.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION 4: Continue efforts to address low wages for those doing care work should continue, and wage parity amongst those doing equivalent work across sectors should be funded.

Supporting recruitment and retention of community health workers

Diverse CUPE members can be found in multiple health authorities and non-governmental organizations like the PHS Community Services Society where they work under both the Health Sciences Professionals Bargaining Association (HSPBA) collective agreement, and under the Community Bargaining Association (CBA) contract. These workers represent a large variety of professions including clerical support clerks, environmental health officers, mental health workers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, and many more. In the community health sector, the majority of workers identify as women.

Understaffing continues to be a significant issue for community health. A workload survey of members in community health in the spring of 2021 illuminated this issue, with 60 percent of respondents indicating that in the last year there have been positions vacated and not filled. Citing a shortage of staff and reluctance to approve overtime, 73 percent of members surveyed reported regularly working unpaid time (once or more per week on average), including skipping breaks, staying late, and beginning their shifts early. Workers feel like they are doing more with less while the needs of clients are becoming more complex.

Workload issues are not just about those experiencing them directly – the quality of public services is suffering as a result of employee shortages. Less than half of respondents to the survey referenced above reported being satisfied with the level of service the conditions of employment allow them to provide, and 80 percent reported that workload impacts quality of service provided to the public. Furthermore, when workers in this sector are regularly confronting situations where there is simply not enough time to do it all, worker and public health and safety is put at risk.

There is now a unique opportunity to retrain British Columbians who are changing careers. Supporting recruitment efforts will help secure adequate staffing levels, which in turn improve service wait times for the public, and strengthens staff retention by averting burnout due to excess workload.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION 5: Issue specific funding to increase staffing levels and support the recruitment and retention of community health and health science professionals, including administrative staff, with a focus on full-time permanent work.

MENTAL HEALTH & HARM REDUCTION

Improving support for frontline staff to protect mental health and improve staff retention

Supporting people in distress takes a heavy toll on the mental health of frontline staff and the experience of workers who confront trauma as a common element of their jobs is made even more acute. A recent survey among CUPE's community health sector indicated that workers have suffered mental health impacts due to workload alone. A similar survey of workers at EComm 9-1-1 produced similar results, with a majority of respondents reporting deterioration in their mental health in the six months prior to the survey January 2022 survey. Without new and additional ongoing supports focusing on mental health and wellness, this workforce is at risk of serious and ongoing mental health injuries.

The experience of workers indicates that employer-provided mental health programs are not meeting the needs of workers, and not aligned to provide ongoing supports to those confronting trauma daily as part of their work. Mental health supports should be provided by the provincial government to ensure a comprehensive, equally accessible system tailored to frontline workers that includes a variety of delivery models, and culturally appropriate components. A provincial system would be more effective and higher quality due to the larger economy of scale, and would support workers and employers alike. Further, a comprehensive provincial system of mental health supports for frontline workers is the very sort of structure that could make a positive contribution to staff retention, and help address attrition in key frontline professions.

MENTAL HEALTH & HARM REDUCTION

RECOMMENDATION 1: Expand and strengthen mental health supports for frontline workers in community health and emergency services.

Creating dedicated addiction treatment facilities to better serve marginalized communities

B.C.'s ongoing opioid crisis calls on government to create more solutions dedicated to addressing addiction as a mental health issue. A multitude of groups experience barriers of racism and discrimination in accessing traditional health care, including women, especially Black, Indigenous and racialized women, trans and non-binary populations, and people with disabilities. Conventional health service facilities and providers often fail to defend and support these groups against discrimination; even worse, institutions may perpetuate stigma, rejection and violence through policies, programs and attitudes.³

It is incumbent on our provincial government to ensure that health care facilities and services do not discriminate. For example, with gender-based anti-stigma policies and programs, stand-alone facilities dedicated to trans women and non-binary persons can increase the chances of successful addiction treatment by ensuring the safety of their clients. Similarly, facilities that consider cultural needs and spiritual practice can have a strong impact on Indigenous and racialized clients; facilities that are physically accessible include those who live with disabilities.

Dedicated facilities for marginalized groups are bound to improve healthcare outcomes for these populations. Additionally, the spaces will create greater system capacity overall, thereby also relieving pressure from other, overburdened facilities less equipped to deal with the unique needs of these populations given existing patient volumes.

MENTAL HEALTH & HARM REDUCTION

RECOMMENDATION 2: Create more stand-alone addiction treatment facilities for women, including Black, Indigenous and racialized women, trans women, non-binary persons, and people with disabilities.

Providing more resources to address the overdose and addictions crisis

B.C. has led the country supporting and implementing innovative approaches to stopping drug toxicity injury and death, including the provision of safer prescription alternatives to the poisoned illicit drug supply, and the recent decision on decriminalization. Despite this, and immense efforts from community organizations, care providers and drug user groups since the overdose crisis was declared a Public Health Emergency on April 14, 2016, six British Columbians die every day because of poisoned drug supply. In the past six years more than 9,400 British Columbians have died due to the toxic drug supply. The situation is so dire that overall life expectancy has decreased in B.C. because of the lives lost in the overdose emergency.

Every community in B.C. is impacted by this crisis, with a disproportionate impact on people living in poverty and those struggling with chronic pain and mental health issues. The effects of the overdose emergency particularly impact Indigenous people at a rate of up to six times greater than non-Indigenous people in the province.

Illicit drug toxicity injuries and deaths are most closely influenced by the rapidly changing composition of local illicit drug supplies, and simply expanding treatment for opioid users will be insufficient to eliminate the fatal risk. Accordingly, funding must be focus on stopping the harm of the poisoned drug supply, and previous investments by the B.C. government have been successful. A great example is the Safer Alternative for Emergency Response (SAFER) clinic, that saves lives with an annual budget of \$1.5 million. The 2023 Budget must include appropriate funding so every community in B.C. has access to similar facilities to prevent drug toxicity injuries and deaths across the province.

MENTAL HEALTH & HARM REDUCTION

RECOMMENDATION 3: Provide \$100 million in new funding for critical emergency response to the overdose crisis, including support to expand clinics and programs in urban and rural locations.

Mobilizing the 9-1-1 system to provide mental health support

Providing responsive and accessible mental health support through the 9-1-1 system E-Comm 9-1-1, which answers 99 percent of 9-1-1 calls across the province, is the first point of contact for British Columbians in crisis. For those seeking paramedic services, their calls are transferred to Emergency Health Services British Columbia. For those from local jurisdictions with in-house dispatching, those calls are routed back to their community. But for those whose communities use E-Comm 9-1-1's dispatching services, which includes much of the Lower Mainland and South Vancouver Island, E-Comm 9-1-1 staff are with callers throughout their emergency.

Many callers, while experiencing their emergency, are also in a state of mental health crisis. In some cases, this crisis is the cause of their emergency, and in other cases the mental health effects of

a caller's situation are a compounding factor to acuteness of their situation. E-Comm 9-1-1 is not equipped to properly support callers with mental health issues, or even equipped to address the mental health aspects of each call, which is present in virtually every call. This gap in capacity is a large oversight for an entity devoted to providing aid to citizens in distress.

This matter was considered by the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act. In their April 2022 report, the Committee called on government to “appropriately fund a continuum of response to mental health, addictions and other complex social issues with a focus on prevention and community-led responses and ensuring appropriate first response.”⁴ This specifically included “Increasing coordination and integration across police, health, mental health, and social services” and “Integrating mental health within 911 call options.”⁵ This recommendation, if fulfilled with necessary resources, would make a substantial difference to the level of service provided to society's most vulnerable.

MENTAL HEALTH RECOMMENDATION 3:
Implement dedicated and direct funding for E-Comm 9-1-1 to expand its scope to include providing mental health supports to British Columbians in crisis.

IMPROVING HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR WORKERS AND THE PUBLIC

Continuing funding increases to British Columbia Emergency Health Services

Over the past number of years paramedics and dispatchers represented by the Ambulance Paramedics of British Columbia, CUPE 873, have raised concerns regarding staffing levels at B.C. Emergency Health Services (BCEHS). Workers advocated for the recruitment of new paramedics and dispatchers to meet the public's needs due to rising call volumes. More recently the opioid crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted ongoing recruitment and retention problems, and in 2021 the situation reach a crisis level with demands placed on paramedics and dispatchers during the heat dome event.

The overall lack of paramedics and emergency medical dispatchers, when coupled with a public health emergency or an extreme weather event limits the ability of BCEHS to answer and respond to emergency 911 calls. Not only does this system failure affect the responsiveness to citizens in crisis, but the mounting call volumes coupled with a shortage of staff have led to a record number of WorkSafeBC claims and health issues for workers. In 2021, the B.C. government invested in additional staffing for BCEHS to address worker shortages, but the needs outweigh the investment, and a staffing shortage continues to exist.

Continued investment in the recruitment of new paramedics and emergency medical dispatchers and a focus on the retention of existing workers will ease the burden faced by paramedics and dispatchers and better serve British Columbians. Such an investment will improve the level of service delivery to the public, better prepare BCEHS to resource public health emergencies,

extreme weather events and other crises, and ensure that staff feel supported to stay in their jobs long-term.

HEALTH AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATION 1:
Increase funding to BC Emergency Health Services to address critical ongoing staff shortages and improve call response times.

Addressing the chronic underfunding and associated risks of the 9-1-1 system

E-Comm 9-1-1 is a publicly owned corporation that provides 9-1-1 call answering services for 99 percent of British Columbia's emergency calls. Additionally, E-Comm 9-1-1 provides dispatch services for multiple police and fire agencies, and supports a multi-jurisdictional, tri-service wide-area radio network used by police, fire and paramedic services throughout B.C.'s largest communities.⁶ EComm 9-1-1 is facing a serious financial and staffing crisis that began before the COVID-19 pandemic. A report commissioned by E-CommBC from the firm PriceWaterhouseCooper outlines the scale of the problem, and what is required to repair the situation.⁷ E-Comm 9-1-1 needs a sizable increase to its annual operating budget to hire more call takers, provide better mental health supports for staff, adjust wages and working conditions to better match industry standards, undertake a more strategic recruitment and training process, and prepare for the introduction of NextGen9-1-1, a federally mandated upgrade to the entire 9-1-1 platform across Canada.⁸

In addition to right-sizing the organization, ongoing funding issues require reform. Mechanisms for regular inflationary increases to reflect the rising costs of unique entities like

E-Comm 9-1-1, as well as funding for capital infrastructure, training and regular technological advancements are all in need of evolution. Further, the current funding model E-Comm 9-1-1 does not provide for excess resources to be crisis-ready in anticipation of call surges, large-scale events and unforeseen disasters. Nor does the current funding environment provide a platform for innovation as new ideas, platforms and technology emerge. In this sector, funding challenges can have life or death implications because underfunding and staffing shortages directly impact the public in the form of responsiveness to emergency and non-emergency calls.

As the BC government undertakes its conversations with the province’s municipalities about how resources are shared, the increasing costs of the 9-1-1 system, and its potential to better serve the community, should be considered. Though E-Comm 9-1-1 is owned by local government, its creation and mandate are evidence that emergencies such as extreme weather events do not respect local boundaries, and intersect with regional and provincial systems, and the provision of funding is consistent with the the recommendations of the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act’s calls for greater financial support for municipal services.⁹

HEALTH AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATION 2:
Provide increased financial support to local governments to offset the growing costs of the 9-1-1 system.

Improving worker health and safety through upgraded equipment and vehicles

British Columbia’s local governments are struggling with aging, carbon-powered vehicles and equipment. Evergreening fleets and equipment is already a challenge for school districts, post-secondary institutions and local governments, and the need to move to carbon

neutral technologies adds additional cost and complexity. The move away from carbon-based fuels is a key strategy to address climate change, and all available science indicates that action is needed immediately. Without financial assistance from the provincial government, these local governments and institutions will not have the resources to move away from their carbon-dependent vehicles and equipment quickly enough to contribute to the province’s emissions targets.

The positive benefits of converting to zero emission technology goes beyond the environment, it also impacts the health and safety of workers and the community. Exposure to these fuels and their exhaust represents a health risk to workers, and anyone else in the immediate vicinity of their use. These risks have, to date, been tolerated because there were few or no alternatives. However, this is rapidly changing with the emergence of clean powered vehicles and equipment.

Workers know all too well that all public entities need support to replace aging equipment and vehicles, and too many have directly experienced the negative consequences of aging equipment failure—consequences that can be fatal. Examples from the City of Vancouver and elsewhere show that vehicles and equipment operated beyond recommended working lives can be a causational or contributory factor to workplace accidents. By supporting the replacement of aging equipment and vehicles with clean powered alternatives, the province can help meet climate change targets, while also enhancing worker and community health and safety.

HEALTH AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATION 3:
Provide funding to local governments, post-secondary institutions, and school districts to fund the replacement of unsafe, aging equipment with clean energy equipment and vehicles.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Improving public transit access to create more sustainable communities

The largest source of greenhouse gas emissions is the transportation sector, where single occupancy vehicles are a substantial contributor. Increasing transit service provides a lower cost, higher quality alternative to vehicle transportation, which makes a substantial contribution to addressing climate change. Additionally, expanding existing transit systems provides affordable and universal mobility to all citizens equally, and helps reduce cost of living for workers, students, seniors, and other transit users alike.

Provincial support for public transit commonly comes as capital funding. Operationally, local governments struggle to find the resources necessary to build the transit capacity required to create sustainable communities for our future. The current funding model for TransLink, which is reliant on gas taxation and fare box revenue, is not sustainable. As gas tax revenue inevitably declines with the expansion of electric vehicles, pressure will build on fares—making the system less accessible. Additional operational funding is needed to reduce fare costs, support expanded transit operation, and create more sustainable and affordable communities that are less car-reliant and provide equal mobility for everyone.

For communities served by BC Transit, the operation funding situation is similar to that which challenges those served by TransLink. The funding model for transit is reactive, and not proactive. Transit routes must demonstrate existing demand before investments are made, and that existing demand comes after neighbourhoods are already designed to suit vehicle transportation. Transit funding creates accessibility while addressing affordability, and should be provided proactively to create transit-friendly communities that allow

citizens to live car-free while still having equal access to community and regional mobility.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATION 1:
Increase public funding for B.C.'s transit systems to facilitate growth in service, reduce reliance on fare revenues and move towards free, universal public transit in all communities.

Connecting rural British Columbians to key services through improved transit options

In most rural parts of British Columbia, citizens must travel between communities to access such key elements of life as health care, employment and education, elements that are all present in single, larger, central communities. Access to essential services has long been an issue of concern to rural residents, one which was highlighted during the pandemic when the Northern B.C. transportation system was reduced. With the skyrocketing cost of fuel, plus the other costs of maintaining a vehicle, personal vehicle trips between communities and even local trips are becoming too expensive for many to sustain. The alternative, public transportation, is far too limited in rural and remote communities, particularly services between communities, and runs too infrequently to be a reliable replacement for vehicle ownership or use.

If B.C. is going to make the shift away from private vehicles and make more efficient use of our transportation networks, public transit must be safe, reliable and convenient for everyone, including those who live in smaller and rural communities. BC Bus North currently provides intercity service between Prince Rupert, Prince George, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Fort Nelson, Valemount and the many communities in between. However, there are many more

communities still lacking this mobility access, and infrequent bus schedules on this route make the existing system unusable for those whose communities are connected by this service.

Greater investment of public resources from the province is required to provide a critical mass of public transportation accessibility in and between communities as small communities do not have the financial capacity to provide such services without support. Further, profit-driven private companies are simply not able to provide the rural bus services our communities need when the main aim is the generation of profit and economies of scale are poor. Additional investments in public transit by the province will make sure that people across British Columbia have safe and reliable access to services, closing an unfortunate gap that currently exists in service accessibility between rural and urban residents.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATION 2:
Provide increased funding to rural public transportation systems and increase frequency of intercommunity public transit options between rural and remote communities.

Fulfilling the recommendation of the Highway of Tears Symposium Report on BC Bus North

Funding BC Bus North is a key recommendation of the Highway of Tears Symposium Report. Victim Prevention Recommendation 1 reads: the implementation of an affordable shuttle bus transportation system along the entirety of Highway 16. While the existence of the service speaks to the recommendation, the system must be properly funded to see the recommendation actually fulfilled. Accordingly, while government made an important investment in creating the service, the next step is to permanently fund and expand this life-saving public transportation system.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATION 3:
Permanently fund BC Bus North with increased funding to improve service frequency on all four BC Bus North routes.

SUSTAINABLE AND AFFORDABLE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Improving local government financial capacity, sustainability and resiliency

Now, more than ever, B.C.'s local governments are facing unprecedented pressures and yet lack the necessary funds to meet growing needs. For decades, senior levels of government have downloaded more responsibilities to local governments, often without the necessary funds to pay for them. Local governments are unable to generate revenue fairly and equitably, relying primarily on property taxes and user fees to cover their expenses. These revenues were not designed and are not adequate to support the service delivery and infrastructure needs of our cities and towns.

CUPE members compose the primary workforce for local governments in B.C. and have seen first-hand the financial challenges experienced by this level of government. As local governments struggle with limited financial options as well as growing environmental, social and economic pressures, workers and the public feel the effects. Increased numbers of precarious workers with no job security, limited benefits and limited hours have become the backbone of the municipal workforce. Services that should be high-quality, publicly-delivered programs are contracted out to private companies that profit through poor service levels and unlivable wages. While these issues are devastating to workers, the effects on citizens are worse.

The public services provided by municipalities are some of the most important to communities and citizens, particularly our most vulnerable. Underfunding of libraries, recreation, public safety, community health, parks, planning and development, public works and so many more have direct impact on the citizens in every community in B.C. As communities struggle

with extreme weather and other climate change effects, plus the many other social and health issues we confront collectively as a society, citizens need public services to be robust, responsive and high-quality. Municipalities and regional districts should not be asked to bear these responsibilities alone with limited means of raising funds.

In 2021, the Union of British Columbia Municipalities presented a policy paper on municipal finance, "Ensuring Local Government Financial Resiliency; Today's Recovery and Tomorrow's New Economy".¹⁰ This paper presents a number of sound recommendations to improve funding for local government, both by providing increased provincial support and by providing more flexibility to local governments in raising their own revenue. This document provides a roadmap for future conversations between key stakeholders about how to improve funding for local governments to strengthen communities and better support citizens.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATION 1:
Work with local government, workers and community stakeholders to reform local government financing to include progressive models for fair taxation, increased levels of provincial funding, and other such supports to increase financial sustainability and resiliency of local governments.

Scaling up non-market housing development to better address housing affordability

Everyone deserves a decent, stable and affordable place to live. Yet people who rent their homes are living in precarious positions. Waiting to

become unhoused before qualifying for services is unacceptable. The uncontrolled, skyrocketing cost of purchasing housing in B.C. has placed extreme pressure on rents province-wide, which will continue to inflate at a greater rate than local wages can address unless immediate government controls are put in place. Without such controls, working people will continue being pushed out of their existing, often inadequate, housing.

For over a decade, various levels of government have attempted to intercede in the housing market in efforts to address the lack of affordable housing. It is time to realize that there is no market-based solution to the housing crisis gripping this province. This government must take bold action to reimagine the future of housing for the growing number of citizens who are unlikely to ever own their homes. A more clear focus on housing, rather than home ownership, opens the door to practical solutions that the province can afford, chiefly building non-market housing that is self-financed through the rents of occupants.

Respected organizations such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives¹¹ and the B.C. Rental Housing Coalition¹² have articulated and advocated for such models for decades. Yet to date there are less than 16,000 co-operative housing units in the entire province of B.C. In previous years the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has called for 10,000 new non-market rental units per year to be built in Metro Vancouver alone to keep up with population growth and alleviate imbalances in the rental housing market.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATION 2:
Substantially expand the non-profit development and delivery of non-market housing in B.C. through BC Housing or similar entity with a mandate and resources required to address the scale of British Columbia's housing crisis.

Funding local government climate change resiliency

Not only are local governments struggling to maintain the infrastructures and services necessary to provide their residents with a decent quality of life, but they are feeling the biggest brunt of climate change in significant ways. Whether it be from the effects of storm damage, severe heatwaves, drought, wildfires, flooding, economic uncertainty, in-migration, urban growth, or other connected factors, our local governments are needing to invest more in infrastructure, service delivery, public health and safety, and economic stabilization than previous generations.

On infrastructure in particular, the situation has become dire as much of our existing local structures fail to meet current demands, and are not designed to withstand the sorts of climate change impacts that have already taken place, let alone the scale of impacts to come. Additional infrastructure funding is needed not only to address current deficits, but to integrate climate resiliency asset management practices to address climate change hazards with the expedience and urgency necessary to protect our communities and their residents.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATION 3:
Increase funding to address infrastructure deficits and allow municipalities to integrate climate resiliency within their infrastructure builds, upgrades, and replacements.

Delivering a just transition for workers

The planet is warming at a dangerous pace, and this threatens our environment and the health and safety of our communities. Stabilizing the climate requires decarbonizing our way of working and living, meaning we must abandon fossil fuels in favour of renewable public sources of energy. As we make this transition, there will be a profound effect on our economy, and particularly for

rural, resource-dependent communities where economies and jobs are reliant on unsustainable industries. Transition towards a sustainable economy should not be at the cost of decent, meaningful work and jobs, and there must be just transition for workers and communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of having transition strategies for workers—where these were not in place, there was tremendous community upheaval as jobs were lost and industries collapsed. Just transition is an internationally recognized priority, which has been enshrined as a principle in the United Nations Framework Agreement on Climate Change negotiated in 2015, and known as COP21, or the Paris Agreement.¹³ The Government of Canada identifies central components of a just transition, including “repairing the workforce to fully participate in the low-carbon economy while minimizing the impacts of labour market transitions; identifying and supporting inclusive economic opportunities for workers in their communities; and putting workers and their communities front and centre in discussions that affect their livelihoods.”¹⁴

Strong investment in a just transition can mitigate the negative impacts of economic restructuring, and has the ability to generate support for swifter climate action among communities whose existence currently relies on unsustainable fossil fuels; however, care must be taken to make such processes community and worker focused. Just transition plans should include education, training, apprenticeships, up-skilling, and the opening of regional transition centres to provide community-based support for workers. The aim of just transition must also be to replace good paying jobs with ones with no less than equivalent compensation.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATION 4:
Expand the CleanBC Labour Readiness Plan to deliver a just transition for workers across British Columbia that is based on open communication and collaborative planning with communities and workers.

Ensuring connectivity for rural and remote residents

There is a growing connectivity gap between rural and remote communities and urban centers. The gap has been widened further by the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated online operations of many required public services. Numerous educational, health, employment, social, economic and other opportunities now have a strong, or even primary, presence online. For some communities, this movement online has increased access to services, but for others access has been reduced. Much of online access to services and resources relies on high-speed internet, and in fact, access to necessary services can be impossible without this critical connectivity infrastructure.

Provision of high-speed internet and reliable cell service in remote communities is an equity issue for rural and remote Indigenous communities who deserve equal access to online services and the benefits they provide. Lack of internet and cell phone connectivity is also a key safety issue for Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirited people, especially for those who are travelling in isolated parts of the province. This is especially true during winter months.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATION 5:
Continue funding expansion of rural and remote internet and cellular service to ensure access to services for all citizens, and particularly those in remote Indigenous communities.

BETTER RESOURCED LIBRARIES

Helping libraries respond to increased service demands

Libraries are one of our most vital community services, and act as community hubs, employment centres, and points of access for health, wellness, and economic services and benefits. They provide a safe, welcoming space at no cost for everyone in our communities, particularly families, newcomers, those with special and unique needs, people looking for work, those without homes or amenities. Libraries are the main access point for online resources and technology for those who cannot afford high-speed internet or do not have a computer at home, and ensure all British Columbians can access free internet and technology services to apply for government services and programs, access the labour market and undertake other functions requiring access to the online world.

Libraries are one of the few remaining public institutions that are truly equitable in providing accessible services for all community members. They have an important social and equity role in our communities and are places of cultural and socio-economic diversity, where community members may gather, learn, and improve their skills, regardless of income. They provide safe places for people of all ages, from all demographics, to learn and access supports. Libraries and the workers who keep them running fulfill vital roles in their communities.

Low funding levels by the provincial government and the heavy reliance on local and regional funding leave libraries subject to funding challenges. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our libraries operated below capacity, with less than full pre-pandemic programming and staffing levels. This left thousands of British Columbians without access to the important services that libraries provide,

and added pressure to other social services and agencies. Failure to return to full operations at libraries was a function of local government financial challenges, rather than pandemic-related factors, and this example underscores the vulnerability of library budgets when local governments experience financial pressure.

Regardless of the clear positive social impacts of libraries and the services they offer, provincial government funding has been on the decline for many years. In 2002, provincial operating grants accounted for 5.9 percent of the total revenue of B.C.'s libraries; this number fell to 4.4 percent in 2012, and 3.9 percent in 2020. This trend is more alarming in respect of the growing costs of library operations and the changing community needs, particularly the need to invest in, and evergreen, technology and supporting infrastructure. Further, the declining provincial support has occurred while library visits (combined in-person and virtual) have increased. In 2002, total annual visits were 30,423,285; this increased to 55,721,339 in 2012, and to 62,530,938 immediately prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

More significant investment in B.C.'s libraries would help meet increased demands for a broader array of services, better support increased library use, create more financial stability for libraries and their corresponding local governments, and allow for the expansion of programming and staffing to improve service to citizens. Additional funding will also help libraries continue to bridge the digital divide in communities large and small across the province so all citizens have access to the services and resources they need.

LIBRARIES RECOMMENDATION 1: Increase funding for public libraries in B.C. to \$22 million per year and ensure immediate adequate funding to deliver and expand services and programming, and to address the systemic problem of the reliance on part-time and precarious workers in libraries across B.C.

Overcoming the unique challenges of rural libraries

Rural libraries across B.C. are especially important hubs for community service and internet access given the limited connectivity in rural and remote parts of our province. Small rural libraries, funded by local municipalities alone, are disproportionately impacted by poor economies of scale and the cyclical nature of rural, resource-based economies, and have fewer resources to fund needed library services. It is during these times of economic slowdown in rural communities that services are often needed most.

Though the province is working to extend rural high-speed internet and cellular services, many rural and Indigenous communities in B.C. still have little or limited online access, and many also have no access to library services either. Direct provincial funding is needed to support all libraries, but especially those in B.C.'s small and remote communities and those serving nearby reserve communities. The B.C. government should invest in the staffing, training, and infrastructure necessary to ensure that all these communities have access to borrowing print materials, high-speed internet, and other digital and technological resources provided by libraries.

LIBRARY RECOMMENDATION 2: Create a program directing provincial funding to support small, rural, and remote libraries and library systems as well as increasing funding specifically for Indigenous communities to access reliable library and technology services.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION

An improved system of progressive taxation can help provide the resources necessary to enact the types of social spending essential to a fair and just society. The growing gap between the wealthy and remainder of society expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and early signs show continued growth due to rising inflation. Progressive taxation, with a fair share of resources drawn from wealthy individuals and corporations, creates a more just society and an economy in which all British Columbians can participate equitably.

Extending progressive taxation to fairly reflect income growth

British Columbia has been hit hard by a crisis of unaffordability, both highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Progressive taxation has historically been one of the great forces for stability during times of crisis¹⁵ and studies show that progressive taxation can have positive effects on the unemployment rate.¹⁶ A better system of progressive taxation can help provide the resources necessary to enact the types of social spending that are essential to the economic and social recovery of our communities and ensure fair contributions from those benefiting most from a rebounding economy.

The pandemic had differential effects by income group. Those with high incomes generally did well, while those with lower incomes or unstable or temporary work situations did poorly, often losing employment altogether and relying on government assistance. Further, lower income workers were disproportionately on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher income workers more likely able to work from home. Those working from home realized savings that further boosted the income disparity between these two groups.

B.C.'s income tax brackets for 2022 feature a maximum rate of 20.5% applied to all income over \$227,091, meaning that all income after this point is taxed equally. This represents a flat tax structure upon reaching this final threshold.

Though this terminal number has been adjusted slightly overtime, it has not been adjusted with respect to the manner in which top incomes have expanded. The growing gap between those with very high incomes and even those who may be considered at the higher end of the middle-income earning cohorts calls for an extension of progressive taxation to higher income levels.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION RECOMMENDATION 1:
Extend progressive taxation to higher income levels by creating additional tax brackets for incomes above \$227,091.

Ensuring the tax exemption and credit system meets policy objectives

In 2018, British Columbia's Auditor General recommended more transparency on tax expenditure reporting, which totals approximately \$7 billion per year. This recommendation represents important work to ensure our tax system is fair and equitable for all. The policy objectives of the tax system's rules, definitions, allowances and exceptions serve important purposes to encourage and discourage certain fiscal actions. When these are abused, not only are the desired policy outcomes not achieved, but the system begins to create undesired outcomes that are then unregulated.

Misuse of tax system rules denies resources to all of the important functions of government, and in times of crisis, adds to the provincial debt. A

process is needed to analyze the current structure of tax deductions to ensure they function as intended and meet the policy objectives of the province in the coming decade. Such an analysis need not only focus on closing loopholes, but could also seek new, amended or more creative ways to use the tax system to meet new and emerging policy goals.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION RECOMMENDATION 2:
Review the structure of tax exemptions and credits, including their definitions, allowances, exceptions and rules, to ensure progressive tax policy outcomes align with current and future fiscal goals.

Restructuring Infrastructure BC to better support public projects at all levels of government

All of us benefit when investments are made in public infrastructure; however, not all infrastructure funding models are created equal. The secrecy and lack of transparency around so-called “public private partnerships” can hide a range of issues that emerge during or after a project is completed. A prime example of this trend is the North Shore Wastewater Treatment Plant. In what has now become a public story,¹⁷ Metro Vancouver entered a design-build contract with a private firm, and after delays and cost overruns that doubled the projected cost, Metro was forced to cancel its contract and suspended construction.

Metro is now facing an estimated \$1.6 billion total price tag for a project that began with a \$500 million construction estimate, and is being sued by the terminated firm for an additional \$250 million. As Metro Vancouver now looks towards its largest project yet, the \$9.9 billion Iona Island Wastewater Treatment Plant, it is clear that more support is needed to ensure public bodies can build sustainable infrastructure without falling

prey to profit-driven corporate structures that do not align with public values and goals.

The B.C. government should be doing more to ensure publicly funded projects by government bodies and local government receive more support. Harnessing its own borrowing power to build and operate public infrastructure, instead of utilizing models where too much authority, control and decision-making are rested with private interests. Not only would direct oversight of projects by this public body produce more accountability, it would save taxpayers from hiring expensive, private firms whose ultimate priorities are the needs of owners and shareholders, not the public who pays for the projects being managed.

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION RECOMMENDATION 3:
Restructure and empower Infrastructure BC to provide more direct assistance and expertise to develop public infrastructure that is publicly financed, maintained and operated, including local government projects.

CONCLUSION

Investing in public services and expanding progressive taxation

The recommendations in this submission speak to a broad range of topics, but cover some key themes. Economic uncertainty has been created by the extreme cycles of the pandemic and recovery, and the year ahead may contain challenging times for many communities. Public services are a key stabilizing element in such times because they prevent global economic cycles from becoming local economic and social crises.

Increased financial support for the public services communities rely on is a recurring recommendation of this document, as is the need to address staff recruitment and retention across our public services. The extremes of the past two years have added to an already critical shortage of staff and resources, and this has produced a sharp decline in mental wellness among public service staff—a decline that accelerates the existing retention issues and creates a positive feedback loop that is challenging to break.

An examination of the overlapping and causal factors of issues identified in the preceding pages shows some common areas of origin. These include a multi-year, multi-government undermining of public services and the provincial treasury, a generation-long attack on wages that reduces the purchasing power of low- and middle-income earners and grows the gap between the wealthiest decile of income earners and everyone else, and an entire economy and social structure built on a patriarchal and colonial framework of discrimination. The affordability crisis, the opioid public health emergency, the climate crisis, historic and ongoing oppression of Indigenous Peoples, and many other issues we identify as our greatest challenges are symptoms of larger trends that shape the economy and society of today.

Public services support communities and residents, are democratic and accountable, and are key vehicles for upholding and advancing sustainability, inclusivity, diversity and equity. Progressive taxation is our most valuable tool to ensure the extremes of wealth and poverty are fairly limited. Expanding progressive taxation and increasing funding for public services are British Columbia's best strategies to build a more inclusive economy that works for everyone, a society that is fair and equal, an environment that is sustainable, and better British Columbia where all can enjoy prosperity into the future.

ENDNOTES

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