

# Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in B.C.

The story of the dramatic welfare caseload reduction in B.C. is far from the ‘feel good’ tale the Ministry likes to tell, writes researcher **Bruce Wallace**.

DO WE REALLY KNOW if helping far fewer people is helping in B.C.? Since the introduction of significant policy changes in 2002, B.C. has seen unparalleled reductions in the number of people receiving welfare. However, the government has no idea what happens to the thousands of people no longer accessing benefits. It has no measures in place to monitor or evaluate the impacts of its policies and practices.

As the caseload dropped the government’s narrative was that “this is good news” and “our approach is working”. They claimed that the welfare caseload was being reduced because more people were being moved from welfare to work—or in their words, from “dependency” to “employment and self sufficiency”.

This year VIPIRG and the CCPA contested this claim in their research report *Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC*. Caseload information was accessed through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, which revealed the role welfare entry and exits played in the overall caseload dynamics. This statistical evidence was combined with 42 in-depth interviews conducted in Vancouver and Victoria with individuals seeking welfare, community workers and advocates as well as Ministry workers.

This research found that the substantial case-

load reduction in B.C. is primarily a “front-door” story and not due to more people exiting welfare as the government claims. The report demonstrates how British Columbia’s welfare application system is not working—it discourages, delays, and denies people who need help. Among the study’s key findings:

- B.C.’s welfare eligibility rules and the application process have become so onerous and complicated to navigate that they are systematically excluding some of the very people most in need of help. Many of them are not employable. Too often, the more vulnerable the person is—such as those with mental health issues or addictions—the more difficulty they have accessing the system.
- Some people are being “diverted to employment” (as the government presumes). But too many are instead being diverted to homelessness, charities, survival sex, and desperation. Some live on virtually no income. The truth of this is evident on the streets to anyone with eyes to see, and is supported by other studies into rising homelessness.
- People in need who are eligible for welfare are frequently unable to get it without the help of a knowledgeable advocate (and funding cuts mean there are fewer of such people, just as

the need has grown).

The response to the study from Minister Claude Richmond has been dismissive or inappropriate. In fact, since the sweeping changes to welfare were introduced five years ago, the Ministry has consistently ignored external evidence pointing to systematic harm.

The Ministry repeats its “good news” rhetoric despite the alarms raised by groups such as, VIPIRG, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC), the BC Association of Social Workers, the Dieticians of Canada, First Call, Victoria’s Community Social Planning Council, and Faith in Action Coalition. Concerns have also been raised through two separate investigations into the Ministry’s actions; one by the provincial Ombudsman’s office and another by the Auditor General’s office.

At the same time, the Ministry still has not fulfilled its accountability reporting obligations, or intentions, to measure client outcomes. The government makes the repeated claim of success—that they are fulfilling the mandate of moving people from welfare dependency to employment and increased self-sufficiency—however the Ministry does not actually collect the evidence to be able to make this critical claim.

Caseload reduction cannot be the primary measure of success for the welfare system in B.C. We do not need to end welfare, we need to end poverty. It is obviously time for the public

engage in envisioning an effective safety net in B.C. The public is increasingly concerned about the elevated visibility of homelessness and poverty resulting in a lack of public support for the current system.

Now, five years after the last politician-driven welfare reforms, it is time for the public to get

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involved in the debate. Although research such as *Denied Assistance* is important in challenging government lies, minor reforms to prop up an archaic and punitive welfare system will neither significantly reduce poverty and inequality, nor promote social inclusion and healthy communities. It is time for the public to get engaged in substantive and radical change that creates programs that work in the best interest of those who need it and which have public confidence and support. ■

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*Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC* was written by Bruce Wallace, Seth Klein, and Marge Reitsma-Street. The report is a collaboration between the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. For more information visit <[www.vipirg.ca](http://www.vipirg.ca)> or download the report at <[www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)>.