



Nelson Committee on Homelessness

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NCOH joins province-wide opposition today to Disability and Transportation Assistance Rate Changes

Nelson's Committee on Homelessness (NCOH) joined organizations from across the province Wednesday to voice their opposition to the BC provincial government's meagre increase to benefits received by people with disabilities after 10 years and to the Province's changes to the BC Bus Pass Program and Special Transportation Subsidy.

An Open Letter was sent to media across the province today with signatory organizations from around B.C. challenging the changes.

"The issue is a bit complicated to explain," says Ann Harvey, Community Coordinator of NCOH. "The Province says they are increasing the disability benefits by \$77 a month, but for a person on a disability benefit needing bus transportation, the actual rate increase is only \$11 or \$25 a month – after almost 10 years. The provincial government has given with one hand and taken with another with their changes to provincial transportation program funding."

The Province's assistance rates have stood stagnant at \$610/month for an individual without disabilities and \$906/month for a person with a disability since 2007 – to cover housing, utility, food, health, and clothing costs. Disability assistance rates in BC are among the lowest in Canada. BC is also the only province to have no poverty-reduction plan.

"With the increased cost of housing in Nelson and the continual low vacancy rate, more and more people of low and modest income have to find housing options outside of town," said Harvey. "This makes affordable transportation services essential."

The current BC Bus Pass Program offers an annual bus pass at a reduced cost of \$45 per year for disability assistance recipients using BC Transit. The Province has introduced changes, opposed by anti-poverty organizations that will charge \$52 a month for a bus pass, or \$66 a month for the Special Transportation Subsidy.

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Member Organizations: Nelson CARES (Ward St. Place, Stepping Stones, Transitional Housing, Affordable Housing, Advocacy Centre), Nelson Community Services Centre (Cicada Place, Youth Outreach Worker, Homeless Prevention and Homeless Outreach, Women's Outreach), Salvation Army, Kootenay Christian Fellowship (Our Daily Bread), Nelson Women's Centre, ANKORS, City of Nelson representatives (2 Councillors), Anderson Gardens, Nelson Youth Centre, Kootenay Career Development Services, Kootenay Kids, Nelson Food Cupboard, St. Saviour's Food Pantry

“Previously, people on disability assistance could count on their bus transportation for a year with one payment for an annual bus pass,” said Harvey. “Now every month this at-risk population may face a decision of “Can I afford it this month?” Given such a stagnant low rate of assistance, many people with disabilities may choose rent or food over a bus pass. These changes will leave them more vulnerable to isolation, to complications arising from missed health and support service appointments, and potentially to compromised health.”

“Access to income assistance is already difficult,” added Becky Quirk of Nelson’s Advocacy Centre, a member of NCOH. “The Province has centralized access to income assistance services through a computerized application process and phone services for any queries. Wait times on the phone are long and many people lack a reliable phone, computer access or the capacity to navigate the new systems. Adding transportation challenges are another hurdle in people’s way.”

Today NCOH joins organizations from around the province to urge the provincial government to:

- Bring back the \$45 per year bus pass for people with disabilities;
- Eliminate the new \$52/month bus pass fee
- Allow everyone receiving disability (PWD) benefits to keep the \$77/month increase
- Bring back the Special Transportation Subsidy, and introduce a rural transportation system for those living outside the area where the Bus Pass Program and Special Transportation Subsidy operate; and
- Raise income and disability assistance significantly by October 1, 2016 to reflect the cost of living, and then index to inflation.

The letter published province-wide today can be found at <http://nelsoncares.ca/category/get-informed/> and at <http://bcpovertyreduction.ca/campaigns/disability-campaign/> .

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