

{ HUMAN SERVICES AND POVERTY }

The Current Situation

The 2015 election saw dramatic political transformation in Alberta. The current provincial government has been taking significant action to assist those living in poverty. The government has also resisted immense pressure from conservative parties and organizations to make cuts to frontline services in response to the current shortage of tax revenue.

Since May 2015, the government has made some significant positive steps to alleviate poverty, including funding increases to Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) and women's shelters, including increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, creating a Status of Women Ministry, funding a new Early Learning and Care Centre program, and implementing an ambitious Alberta Child Benefit focused on supporting families with the lowest incomes.

Despite these actions, Alberta's women and children are still affected the most by income disparity. The rate of children living in poverty in Alberta has remained virtually unchanged for 25 years. Helping children and their parents who continue to live in poverty must remain a priority. Many families continue to struggle to afford quality and accessible child care. Women are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to child care because it hinders their ability to fully participate in the economy, while children in poverty do not have access to quality care and early interventions.

Action must be taken to help all Albertans, including those without children. The gap between Alberta's richest and poorest citizens has widened to unprecedented levels over the last 30 years. Further, economic instability has resulted in many full-time jobs being lost, and youth and Indigenous peoples have been hit hardest.

In addition to affordable childcare, many Albertans lack access to affordable housing, despite the increasing rental vacancies. Steps have been taken by the current government to create more accessible housing. However, the provincial government must continue to fund, support, and build more affordable housing options in communities where it is needed. Safe, appropriate, and stable housing is a key determining factor in the health and wellness of Albertans. This includes seniors, Albertans living with physical and mental disabilities, and low-income families.

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, Alberta has much to do, in partnership with the federal government, to ensure principles of justice and fairness include Indigenous communities.



Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Create a comprehensive framework to prevent, reduce, and ultimately eliminate poverty. This framework should align with the local poverty reduction initiatives that are happening in municipalities across the province to effectively meet local community needs.

The Government of Alberta should implement the following priorities to support vulnerable Albertans and eliminate poverty:

- 1. Work in partnership with Indigenous communities to ensure access to culturally relevant and appropriate services and programs**
 - Provide more targeted support and training for Indigenous peoples and communities
 - Develop new Indigenous cultural centres in major cities, specifically targeted at meeting the needs of Indigenous peoples living in urban areas
 - In cooperation with Indigenous leaders, the federal government must take appropriate steps to strengthen services on reserves, such as schools and health care centres
 - Undertake an evaluation of the relationship between Indigenous communities and Child Protective Services
 - Further incorporate Indigenous worldviews and histories into the elementary and high school curriculums in a culturally appropriate and relevant manner
- 2. Build a comprehensive, quality, affordable child care and early learning system**
 - Provide greater access to affordable, quality child care spaces to develop the full potential of every child and to ensure that those wanting to participate in the work force or to increase their earning power through training or education can do so, particularly for women and single parents
- 3. Provide better supports for all Albertans with low incomes**
 - Orders of government should adopt living wage policies for their employees and contracted services
 - Provide additional support for language and employment training for Albertans who need to upgrade their skills and literacy or be re-skilled
 - Increase social assistance rates, which are currently the lowest in Canada, and index income support programs like Alberta Works and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped to inflation
 - Increase earnings exemptions and asset limits to make income support programs more fair and effective at lifting Albertans out of poverty
- 4. Substantially increase investment in affordable housing initiatives**
 - Increase direct to tenant rent subsidies to enhance affordability for low-income families and individuals
 - Remove the budget cap on rent supplements, which currently leaves eligible Albertans without that support after the government's budgeted amount has been spent each year
 - Ensure affordable housing units are available within all neighbourhoods and municipalities
 - Significantly increase asset limits for eligibility to social housing and lengthen the transition time for Albertans moving out of social housing
 - Extend the Health Benefit to low-income working Albertans
 - Extend the Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit to all low-income Albertans, including those without children