



Community Council

**THE CARING COMMUNITY:
Accounting for the Impacts of
Provincial Government Changes**

Community Reconstruction Project - Final Report

based on research findings from July 2002 to January 2005

The Community Council is a respected community-based society serving the people in British Columbia's Capital Region. The Community Council is supported by its members and by the United Way of Greater Victoria, contracted services and the municipalities of Esquimalt, Oak Bay, Saanich and Victoria.

*Its vision - a sustainable quality of life for everyone in BC's Capital Region.
Its mission – providing leadership to bring the community together.*

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information

The current government of British Columbia restructured social legislation and policies in the last few years. The Community Reconstruction Project is a three-year community-based response to the impacts that the government's restructuring have had on people who need social services in BC's Capital Region. The project is an initiative of the Community Social Planning Council and is funded by the United Way of Greater Victoria.

This report documents the Community Reconstruction Project's research findings from between July 2002 and January 2005. These findings relate to impacts of provincial government policy and funding changes on vulnerable citizens and on community-based social services in the Capital Regional District. During that period, 28 non-profit agencies in the region shared information, discussed findings, explored strategies and made recommendations for change.

Goals of the Community Reconstruction Project:

1. *Increase community knowledge by tracking the impacts of provincial government changes on individuals and families in the Capital Region,*
2. *Build stronger relationships among non-profit agencies and other community sectors by coming together to discuss information and explore strategies,*
3. *Mobilize new resources in our community (government, non-government, and private sector) for meeting the needs of the people most impacted, by widely publicizing project findings and their implications for the region, and by encouraging the community to work together on effective strategies.*

The Community Social Planning Council organized a Steering Committee to develop and monitor the project, made up of individuals from the Community Council, United Way of Greater Victoria, University of Victoria History Department and School of Social Work, Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group, BC Government Employees Union, and community agencies: Association of Family Serving Agencies, Burnside Gorge Community Association, Victoria CoolAid Society, and the Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training.

The findings from the study showed extensive evidence of harmful impacts on the clients and, subsequently, on the capacity of all of the participating agencies. The study also showed some evidence of helpful impacts that affected discrete populations. The boards, staff and volunteers of the participating agencies are concerned about the negative outcomes of many of the provincial government's changes. They identified the key government changes made since 2002 that most impacted vulnerable individuals, families, agency services and the community as a whole. Then the agencies made recommendations for redressing the most damaging impacts.

The provincial government frequently changed policies and funding in recent years, and the complexity of these changes presented a challenge when interpreting the data. Rarely could just one provincial change be linked to just one impact. More often a combination of several changes resulted in multiple impacts.

1.2 Project Methodology, Participation and Limitations

Agencies from the region were invited to participate through umbrella organizations and networks, including the United Way of Greater Victoria, the Association of Family Serving Agencies, the Coalition of Neighbourhood Houses and the Association of Service Providers of Employability and Career Training. The agencies involved in this study were drawn from urban and rural settings across BC's Capital Regional District. The agencies serve a range of vulnerable populations: families, single parents, women, children and youth, people with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, First Nations peoples and people living in poverty.

Participating agencies completed four survey forms between 2002 and 2004 and one telephone interview in early 2005. Survey and interview questions prompted agencies to provide qualitative and quantitative information about the impacts they had observed on the lives of their clients, on their organization and on the community. The surveys also asked agencies to describe strategies and actions developed in response to the provincial changes.¹ During the first year of the project, clients and staff of agencies were invited to provide stories of the impacts of provincial changes on their lives. The February 2004 project report includes experiences taken from those personal accounts.

The agencies met four times to discuss project research findings, to share strategies and information with each other, and to give advice on the key messages of this report and the three earlier public reports: *The Tip of the Iceberg: New-Era Conditions for Our Community* (June 2003), *Warning for the New Era: Citizens Are At Risk* (February 2004), and *Thin Ice: New-Era Conditions for Our Community* (June 2004).²

Ethical guidelines were put in place to ensure that project research methodology and reporting preserved individual and agency confidentiality and did not exploit vulnerable situations of individuals, families or agencies.

Agency participation remained high during the full span of the project. Of the 28 agencies, 18 contributed to all five rounds of data collection, and 21 contributed to at least four rounds. Agencies maintained their involvement throughout what has been a difficult and volatile period. Table 1 shows agency participation by data collection round.

Certain constraints placed limitations on this study. Given the modest resources at the project's disposal, agencies could not be randomly selected. The project had the capacity to invite only a limited number of agencies to participate. However, every attempt was made through umbrella agencies and networking to involve a range of agencies that served diverse populations across the region. The focus of the report was limited to legislative and policy restructuring and funding changes related to community social services and the impacts of that restructuring on vulnerable populations, non-profit organizations and the local community.

Table 1. Agency participation rates per data collection round

Data collection round	Number of agencies providing data
Round 1 data (July 1-December 31, 2002)	23
Round 2 data (January 1-June 30, 2003)	23
Round 3 data (July 1-December 31, 2003)	25
Round 4 data (January 1-June 30, 2004)	23
Round 5 data (July 1, 2004-January 31, 2005)	25

Agency participation in the study was limited in the following ways. A few participating agencies could not participate in all data collection rounds (see Table 1). Five agencies came on board after the first round of data collection. A few agencies withdrew temporarily from one or more rounds. Agencies occasionally gave incomplete responses to specific questions. The arbitrary biannual data reporting periods presented challenges to agencies when at variance with their fiscal years, funding contracts, service schedules and client participation patterns.

As the project proceeded, some survey questions were refined in order to collect more detailed data. Data for July 2004 to January 2005 was collected in a November 2004 agency meeting and also in January telephone interviews. Modifications to methodology and fluctuations in agency participation impeded reliable comparison of some data. These limitations account for variations in the tables and other presentations of quantitative data.

Any changes that the government announced and initiated between the end of research in January 2005 and the release of this report in March 30, 2005, are not included in this report.

2 PROVINCIAL CHANGES WITH MOST EXTENSIVE PERSONAL IMPACTS

The BC Liberal government, in their *New Era Document*³ and subsequent communications, set goals to improve the welfare system and to better serve individuals, children and families through restructuring. They stated that some of the changes they made were “intended to promote self-reliance and employment.”⁴ Another of the government’s stated priorities was cost reduction. Their restructuring and the cuts to the budgets of several ministries – particularly in the Ministries of Human Resources, Children and Family Development, Attorney General, and Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services – have affected the lives of individuals and families.

Community Reconstruction Project findings indicated that some government changes had extensive negative impacts on vulnerable citizens of this community. In each data collection period, most agencies saw no improvements to their clients’ lives as a result of the provincial government changes; in fact, they reported, their lives had become worse (See Table 2). Throughout the surveyed periods, the agencies often questioned whether the government policies would be effective in achieving the goals of supporting those most in need and of moving people off government assistance and into jobs.

Table 2. Agency reports of negative impacts of provincial changes on lives of their clients

Survey period	Percent of Agencies Reporting Clients’ Lives Worsened
January 1-June 30, 2003	95% of 23 agencies
July 1-December 31, 2003	83% of 25 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2004	78% of 23 agencies
July 1, 2004-January 31, 2005	72% of 25 agencies

2.1 Changes to Income Assistance Benefits and Policies⁵

‘There is anxiety around cuts to welfare. People are coming in to access services not having their basic needs met, or people can’t come in because they have no way to get there or no child care to allow them to come. People are staying in situations because they have nowhere to go.’

– agency representative, November 2004

Beginning in 2002, the Ministry of Human Resources introduced key modifications to income assistance benefits and policies. These changes included reductions to benefit rates for several classes of recipients, introduction of more restrictive eligibility criteria and removal or restriction of specific supplementary supports.

- Basic support rates were cut for many employable single people and couples.
- Shelter rates were cut for families with more than one child.
- Eligibility requirements were changed. For example, after applying for benefits, most people had to wait three weeks and conduct a job search. To be eligible for assistance, childless employable applicants were required to prove they had two years of consecutive work experience in which they had earned at least \$7,000 or worked 840 hours a year.
- Supplementary assistance benefits were cut entirely or had new restrictions. Affected supplements included transitional allowances for people looking for work (unless they were in a training program), crisis grants and homemaker services.

- Unless they were classified as persons with disabilities, welfare recipients who were working were no longer allowed an earnings exemption, making it harder for many to progress from welfare to work. Transitional extended health benefits and other assistance such as work clothing allowances were also cut.
- A two-years-in-five limit to being on welfare was introduced, a restriction without precedent anywhere in Canada. The scope of this time limit was later modified to include a list of 25 exemption criteria.⁶ However, the limit has remained in place.

2.2 Changes to Personal Support Services⁷

'What have been withdrawn are all the preventative things. Crisis management is in place, but all the things that prevent crises have been taken away.'

– agency representative, November 2004

- Child care services funding and child care subsidies were cut. Access to child care was reduced for lower-income families, particularly single-parent families.
- Changes were made to eligibility for home care support, long-term care and Pharmacare that particularly affected the frail elderly and people with disabilities.
- Changes were made to legal aid eligibility that particularly affected cases involving abuse. It became harder for women fleeing abuse to get legal aid if there was no evidence of physical abuse.
- People receiving disability benefits were reassessed in 2003. The long and complex form intimidated people, and the review raised fears of losing the financial support needed to survive and take care of their special needs.
- Ministry budgets were reduced, which meant that staff began carrying heavier caseloads. When applying for or inquiring about benefits, individuals and families were expected to find the information they needed through web-based and voicemail government information systems.
- Policies that have redirected people in need did not always work. For example, the BC government focused resources on a province-wide helpline for victims and cut funding to local providers of victim services. Local support services have not been receiving the referrals that they expected from the provincial helpline, so sexual assault victims and others are not getting connected to the community services that could help them.
- New eligibility rules for employment programs such as Training for Jobs and Community Assistance programs reduced the choices for people needing to take many steps to self-sufficiency. Many of those clients expected to enter job-finding and job-training programs were not ready for the work world, according to agency reports.
- Funding cuts to community-based services decreased the range of resources available to poor and disadvantaged populations to meet their needs and to become more self-sufficient. New and more complex needs of many clients were sometimes outside of the agency's mandate, but shrinking community services mean that staff had nowhere to send them.

3 SPECIFIC IMPACTS ON VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Many individuals and families who need support to become self-sufficient or just to survive are suffering because of new gaps in the social safety net brought about by government cuts. Those in the most severe crises still get some help. Others have taken some steps toward self-sufficiency but still need support to succeed. They no longer have access to such resources, and they are failing to overcome their barriers. The reduction of support for those in our community who are most vulnerable has future implications in terms of human, social and financial costs.

3.1 Personal Finances and Survival

Harmful Impacts

Changes in income assistance levels increased poverty levels and prevented vulnerable individuals and families from getting their basic needs met, according to agencies.

Reduced client income was consistently reported as a major hardship for the people already at the lowest end of the income scale.

'The current processes around income assistance undermine self-esteem and the individual's ability to move out of poverty.'

– agency representative, November 2004

Though many of the income assistance reductions occurred in 2002, agencies continued to report throughout the study about clients whose incomes were dropping and who were losing eligibility for government benefits. For example, between January and June 2003, 87% of agencies reported seeing clients whose income had decreased during that period; between January and June 2004, 35% of agencies reported seeing clients that had lost eligibility for benefits during that period.

Poverty Facts: Survival in Victoria for a Single Parent Family

In 2004, 3,940 single parent families in BC's Capital Regional District – almost one-third of all single-parent families in the region – had incomes below the Canadian Council on Social Development's Low Income Cut Off (LICO).

A single parent with one child receives \$555 for shelter expenses, \$325.50 for food and other expenses and a BC Family Bonus of \$123.50 on welfare – a total of \$1,004. If she is able to collect the Canada Child Tax Benefit, a GST credit, and a few other tax credits, then her after-tax income could possibly reach \$1,139.24 per month. If she works full-time at a minimum-wage job, her after-tax monthly income may be \$1,618.93 or less.

The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Victoria is \$789, the cost of a nutritious food basket is \$248, and the average child care cost for a two-year-old is \$556, for a total of \$1,592 in basic monthly expenses.

Other expenses that this family might have include: phone, laundry, dental care, MSP premiums, medicine, transportation, clothing, and entertainment.⁸

Throughout the study, agencies reported increases in the number of people with unmet survival needs – food, shelter, clothing, health and medical support.

‘Increased poverty and struggles moving from welfare to work leave families more impoverished and vulnerable than they were before.’

– agency serving families, January-June 2004 data

Table 3 shows that in each survey round, a majority of agencies reported they were seeing more people who were struggling to meet their basic requirements for daily life. Agencies also reported they were serving more clients. In order to deal with the increased numbers and the increased needs, agencies often needed to shift to triage mode, in which only the most desperate and difficult clients got help – but only enough help to survive another day, not to thrive. Others who needed help to become self-sufficient often did not even get in the door.

Table 3. Agencies reporting an increase in clients with unmet survival needs

Survey period	Percentage of agencies reporting more clients with basic needs unmet
July 1-December 31, 2002	61% of 23 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2003	78% of 23 agencies
July 1-December 31, 2003	79% of 25 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2004	61% of 23 agencies

- **Hunger.** People were hungry and did not have enough food for themselves and their families. In each reporting period, additional agencies reported that they had started providing food and other essentials to needy clients. They set up food cupboards and emergency loan funds. They began to provide nutritious snacks, bus tickets and free second-hand clothing. This new agency role of supplying basic needs is fast becoming an established service in social service agencies, following a similar pattern to the growth of food banks from temporary measures to community fixtures several years ago.

‘We have started buying can openers to give away with our emergency food, because people are so hungry that they sometimes open up the cans right away, or they have no kitchens or places of their own.’

– community agency, January-June 2003 data

‘Women are hungry and do without food to do other necessary things.’

– agency representative, November 2004

‘People can’t attend or succeed in programs, counseling or training without more resources invested in food and shelter.’

– agency representative, November 2004

- **Homelessness.** More and more homeless individuals and families have been coming to the agencies. There were reports throughout the study that more working poor people and immigrants were showing up at shelters. Agencies expressed concerns about growing numbers of ‘hard-to-house’ people – such as those with addictions or mental illnesses or prostitutes. Increasingly, poor families were unable to get affordable, appropriate housing. Throughout this survey, agencies reported seeing more and more people who had been either declared ineligible for or cut off from income assistance. Agencies suggested that in some cases, small investments could prevent immediate costs in personal misery and reduce long-term

costs to the community that are incurred by homelessness. For instance, a slight increase in employment assistance benefits or a small shift in the regulations could keep people from becoming homeless.

'Number of turnaways for shelter beds and meals is steadily increasing.' 'Our numbers of homeless families have more than doubled in the last few months. Our housing advocates have been told that crisis and moving allowances through the Ministry of Human Resources have been cut even further.'

– agencies serving people in crisis, January-June 2004 data

'We refer two or three homeless families a day to motels. They can stay at motels in winter but get kicked out in summer when the motels can charge higher rates. People end up camping out.'

– agency representative, November 2004

'There are more people on the streets.'

– agency representative, November 2004

'Our agency has dealt with five recent cases where pregnant women were refused income assistance increases that would have allowed them to move into better housing before their babies were born. The babies were apprehended after birth because of inadequate housing.'

– agency assisting with housing, January 2005

- **Inadequate clothing and transportation.** Requests for clothing and transit tickets increased at agencies because people were spending the money they had on food and shelter. According to one agency, although the Ministry of Human Resources has policies in place on eligibility for such supplementary support as crisis grants and moving expenses, they are rarely given out.

'People use our clothing exchange because they cannot afford to buy clothes even in a second-hand store.'

– agency serving families, July-December 2003 data

'Women who come in for counseling about sexualized violence are so preoccupied with their survival needs – housing and transportation – that they can't deal with the issue they came for help with.'

– agency serving women, November 2004

- **Unmet health needs.** Because of new restrictions to income assistance benefits, agencies reported that some clients have been unable to get supplementary allowances they need for medical supplies or special diets. Agencies also reported seeing clients who have not been able to get their teeth fixed or get eyeglasses since the cuts to those income assistance subsidies.

People were putting themselves in danger in order to get enough money to survive.

'People are getting more desperate.'

– family-serving agency, January 2005 data

Increasingly, agencies were seeing clients turning to prostitution, to theft or to working under the table, or clients were staying in or returning to abusive relationships for financial reasons.

Stress levels of agency clients were climbing.

Financial concerns were reported to be clients' main stress triggers. Lower assistance rates meant people were struggling to get basic needs met. Some feared losing income support in the future. There were other strains as well – less help for family problems or the disappearance of supportive programs.

In each of the three survey rounds between July 2002 and December 2003, approximately 90% of agencies reported that their clients were under more stress. Reports of high client stress dropped to 65% of agencies in the January to June 2004 survey, when the government announced new cutoff exemption criteria for the for the two-years-in-five limit and the first cutoff date passed.

- **More violence.** Agencies were alarmed about the increased violence they were seeing. On occasion, agencies reported adding security elements to their facilities to protect the safety of their staff and their clients. In the 2004 and 2005 surveys, agencies reported seeing dangerously angry reactions from clients when they could not get services.

'We are seeing highly barriered clients explode/implode in violence directed at our staff in unprecedented levels. In two recent incidents, clients were asked to leave the program due to inappropriate verbal and physical violence directed towards staff and clients...and the police had to be called to intervene.'

– agency providing training, January-June 2004 data

- **Increased addictions and mental illness.** Many agencies reported seeing more people with mental health problems or who turned to drugs and alcohol because they could not cope with increasing poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate housing and the fear of losing needed financial support. According to the agencies, some of these clients felt pressured to take part in training programs that they were not ready for; others, due to their welfare classification, have not been eligible for programs that could help them.

'This past summer, we were struck by the increase in severity of issues of the youth we serve. We have had to put locks on the bathroom doors, set up containers for used needles and other drug paraphernalia because many kids are using crystal meth and other drugs. Staff are exercising more caution as they encounter more unpredictable behaviour when clients are using. This has not happened before.'

– agency serving youth, January 2005

'Youth services are being requested for alcohol and drug services. We lost this service in June (2003).'

– rural service agency, July-December 2003 data

- **Uncertainty about government changes to income assistance.** Clients often did not understand how the complex changes to income assistance rates and eligibility would affect them. They needed information in order to understand the changes, support to deal with their fears, and advocacy to ensure they received entitled support. Agencies needed to spend more time gathering, organizing and providing information and support.

Helpful Impacts

Agencies noted a few positive impacts of provincial government changes. One agency noted in the fourth survey round that it might be too soon to identify positive outcomes and that more time may be required for them to emerge.

Some clients were motivated to find work.

Two or three agencies in each round of the survey noted that some of their clients had improved job search skills or found employment as a result of government policies geared to employment.

'A couple of parents who were "forced" into training programs and had been on income assistance are now independent of the system.'

– agency serving families, January-June 2004 data

'Volunteers affected by funding cuts continue to network with each other, set goals, actively seek employment.'

– agency serving people with disabilities, January-June 2004 data

Clients' stress and uncertainty were reduced when their income support remained intact.

Agencies reported that after the provincial review of people with disability, several of their clients were relieved that they had been assessed as eligible for disability assistance. In the January to June 2004 survey, 9% of agencies reported reduced stress levels among their clients. During that period, the provincial government published an expanded the list of exemptions to the welfare two-years-in-five limit, and the first cutoff deadline passed with few people losing provincial assistance.

The recent provincial announcement of an increase in disability benefits has been good news for people with disabilities.

In January 2005 telephone interviews, two agencies reported they were pleased that support benefits for people with disabilities would be increased. Their clients with disabilities were also happy and relieved when they heard the announcement.

3.2 Personal Supports and Resources

Harmful Impacts

Agencies reported that individuals and families had a more difficult time getting help to become more self-sufficient as a result of provincial changes.

Supports for many preventative programs for children and families were withdrawn.

'We've seen an increase in poverty, homelessness, and people returning to violent situations because of lack of resources for kids or parents. More hunger leads to lack of ability to learn and to poor behaviours at school. Less funding to the Ministry of Children and Family Development means less support for families to stay together and parents putting kids in care because they can't afford them.'

– neighbourhood service agency, July-December 2004 data

The provincial government wants to keep families together, as do family-serving agencies. The most recent service plan for the Ministry of Children and Families includes this value: “We believe in the right and primary responsibility of families to protect and support the growth and development of children and youth.”⁹

At the November 2004 meeting, agencies discussed their concerns that some government changes had been implemented without putting in place the requisite services for at-risk children and their families. Agencies were seeing fewer apprehensions of children at risk, but there was also less government support for their families. Lack of support in such situations can lead to crises for the overstressed parents and children. “It’s the worst of both worlds,” said one agency representative.

Clients had reduced access to child care and to legal services.

‘Single parents forced into low-paying jobs can’t afford child care or get their basic needs met. This is not working for families.’

– agency representative, November 2004

‘Women (survivors of abuse) are caught in a trap. All avenues of release are blocked by poverty and no legal representation.’

– agency serving women, July-December 2003 data

In each survey round in the first two years, 35% or more of the agencies reported reduced child care access, and 39% or more reported reduced access to legal services. Women and single parents were hit hardest by these policy and funding changes.

Funding cuts to child care services and subsidies left many low-income families unable to afford quality child care and created significant difficulties for programs serving these lower-income families. After these cuts, many child care centres raised their fees. Low-income parents – particularly single parents or families with more than one young child – faced new financial barriers to accessing child care. A parent who has no access to affordable child care faces a barrier to employment.

A woman who has no access to legal services has difficulty disentangling from an abusive partner. According to a September 2004 report on the impact of cuts to legal services, “One of the criteria is that legal aid will only be provided for someone who is fearful for her safety and needs a restraining order.... Women who choose not to disclose violence because of their fear of repercussions by their abusers on them or their children...will not have access to legal aid.”¹⁰

People were not able to get in touch with personnel in government ministries and thus had a harder time getting information or help.

‘Many government services are (now) not accessible for newcomer immigrants who are not equipped with the communication or computer skills to deal with call centres.’

– immigrant-serving agency, July-December 2002 data

‘One client had six different financial assistance workers in the last year.... Clients who reach the Ministry of Human Resources call centre receive a worker number instead of a name.’

– agency representative, November 2004

‘Communications from the Ministry of Human Resources to clients are not written in plain language, and agencies spend time interpreting for people who don’t read well.’

– agency representative, November 2004

As a result of ministry cuts, caseloads for social workers and financial assistance workers have grown larger. Restructuring has also meant that more government communication is channeled through call centres and

websites. The shift to automated messaging and web-based information has occurred throughout bureaucracies and businesses, but such communication modes create particular barriers when one is poor, has limited literacy, lacks computer skills, or has limited access to a telephone or computer.

An agency representative at the November 2004 meeting said that it can be very hard for clients to access personnel in the income assistance offices. Workers want to phone clients back after contact, but often their clients cannot afford a phone. Agencies with employment training programs reported that sometimes program applicants had difficulty accessing their workers when they needed to in order to get through the ministry referral process.

Vulnerable people seeking help felt more isolated, invisible, and unworthy.

‘People struggling with challenges feel guilty or at fault.’

– agency representative, November 2004

Cuts to community services and programs and barriers to communication with ministries meant that vulnerable people were less able to access resources for help. As a result of uncertain or reduced funding, community service agencies could not promise to be there for clients in the future.

For many people, the disability review generated fear that they would lose the money they needed to survive and to cope with their specialized needs. Although only a small number of people were ultimately assessed as ineligible for benefits,¹¹ the review process created uncertainty and confusion. An agency noted in a January 2005 interview that some people with disabilities have become anxious again about possible future eligibility reviews. Agency staff spent time reassuring them that if nothing has changed for them, they will remain eligible.

In the November 2004 meeting and the January 2005 interviews, agencies expressed concern that some of their clients had made improvements but were not yet job-ready. Further support that they needed to become self-sufficient was not available. Clients who still had major employment barriers felt pressured to go into job-finding programs or to get work. For these individuals, the results were increased frustration and failure. Agencies have suggested that their clients’ time may have been better spent getting other types of support that prepared them for employment programs.

‘We have had more people reporting that they are not “allowed” to go back to school because they are supposed to be looking for work. Several people have had difficulty getting in to see social workers because the offices have moved.’

– agency providing educational support, January-June 2004 data

Supports for individuals with disabilities and their families were reduced.

Eligibility changes for home care and long-term care and Pharmacare cut off access to those supports for many frail seniors and people with disabilities. Volunteer programs for people with disabilities were cut.

People with disabilities became more socially isolated because they lost their access to activity and volunteer programs. Disabled people and their families were reported to be using up their resources trying to provide all the care and support themselves, but they were ‘quietly burning out.’ Agencies for people with specific disabilities observed that requests for their small emergency funds had ballooned to new levels as people ran out of money – particularly clients who were not eligible for disability assistance.

Support was reduced for youth over 14, particularly those in situations of family breakdown.

Agencies working with youth expressed concern that the reduction in the range of youth programs in the community was resulting in more youth and their families moving into the high-risk category, with the attendant criminal justice and mental health implications. Volunteer opportunities for youth – key avenues for developing life and job skills – were reduced through program cuts.

'The government needs to recognize problems with high-risk youth and pre-employment strategies. The leap from high-risk/high-need to pre-employment programs is too big... Their social competency is not there and they are exited from pre-employment programs very quickly. It's like taking them out of a wheelchair and expecting them to get up and walk out of the building.'

– agency serving youth, November 2004

Helpful Impacts

Government support for specific populations had a positive impact on those groups of people, as reported by agencies working with those populations.

Families of children diagnosed with autism received financial assistance for therapeutic programs.

In a January 2005 telephone interview, an agency was pleased to report that the provincial government had confirmed in writing that they would continue to provide this assistance, even though a recent Supreme Court decision ruled that provinces were not required to pay.

Increased access to medical equipment for people with physical disabilities was the result of a provincial funding change.

A new subsidy was put in place in 2003 for residential installation of medical equipment. The agency could offer this service to low-income clients, which improved the lives of individuals and their families by decreasing financial stress when they were dealing with illness or death.

The designation of a financial assistance worker to one specific agency received praise.

A Ministry of Human Resources worker comes to the agency once a month to assist clients with applications and information. As a result, clients there feel that their unique needs are more likely to be addressed.

4 IMPACTS ON THE COMMUNITY'S CAPACITY TO CARE

Social service agencies in the non-profit sector care for the most vulnerable people in our community. They deal with people who often depend on government assistance in some form and who are vulnerable because of poverty, abuse, mental or physical illness, disability, addiction, racism, or other life situations. By the nature of their work, the agencies who took part in this project are strongly affected by any changes to government social policies and practices. Many of these agencies – though not all of them – rely on provincial funding to run programs and services.

Most agencies made key changes in their organizations as a result of provincial government changes. Significant internal changes related to provincial changes were reported by 89% of all participating agencies in at least one survey period, and 26% of all the agencies reported such related changes in all four survey periods. Agency reports indicated that overall, clients and services were negatively impacted in many ways by government changes. Few positive impacts were reported.

4.1 Harmful Impacts

'We are witnessing the deepening, cumulative negative impact of three main forces: restrictive legislation changes, the Ministry of Human Resources personnel's lack of adherence to administrative justice and procedural fairness in administering the legislation, and the lack of provincial funding to the organization.'

– crisis service agency, July-December 2003 data

Reductions to provincial supports for vulnerable populations had an extensive impact on community social services.

Agencies reported seeing higher numbers of clients. Their clients were presenting new needs and more complex issues. Agencies had to revamp services and programs for their changing clientele. To deal with increased demands, agencies sometimes added new programs or services. When resources decreased, agency staff sometimes began seeing clients in groups rather than one-on-one.

Underfunding undermined the effectiveness of community social services sector to meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

'We have seen a significant increase in service delivery as needs expand due to the cuts (agencies) are facing – increased needs for volunteers, for resources and information to support their volunteer programs, requests for assistance in coordinating training and support in connecting agencies who wish to share space or other resources.'

– umbrella agency, July-December 2002 data

Community social and health services funding by the provincial government decreased significantly during the course of this research (See Section 5.1). Organizations made changes in response to provincial funding cuts, such as cutting staff or facilities costs. For example, from January to June 2003, 37% of agencies relocated or shared facilities; between July and December 2003, another 25% downsized their facilities. Smaller or shared facilities often meant cramped rooms and less privacy for clients.

Funding losses to agencies affected their provision of services for vulnerable populations in this community. Even agencies with no provincial funding reductions during this study made key organizational changes. Provincial policy changes that affected their clients and volunteers led to program and service adjustments, and agencies were unable to do long-term planning because they were uncertain about future funding.

Table 4. Agencies that offered fewer programs and services due to provincial cuts

Survey period	Percentage of agencies that reported offering fewer programs and services
July 1-December 31, 2002	26% of 23 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2003	15% of 23 agencies
July 1-December 31, 2003	13% of 25 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2004	13% of 23 agencies

Agencies most frequently reported the following impacts of social services underfunding:

- **Growing gaps in the range of services and programs that support people to make a successful transition to self-sufficiency and away from dependence on government assistance.** Throughout this study, agencies noted the shrinking or disappearance of services and programs that had provided support to vulnerable populations. As Table 4 indicates, there were fewer community programs or services in each survey round to which agencies could refer their clients for help.
- **Increased pressures on agencies to work outside their mandates.** Referrals to agencies increased throughout the study. During July to December 2003, 60% of the agencies reported receiving more referrals, and 26% received more referrals during January to June 2004. Agencies experienced higher levels of demand for services. Agencies reported that their clients, other agencies, police, hospitals, and even provincial government ministries began asking individual organizations to provide services that used to be available elsewhere in the community. Many agencies could not meet these new pressures to expand their services because of liability risks for exceeding their mandates. When more and more clients were coming with increasing survival needs such as hunger and homelessness, agency staff became traumatized when unable to provide adequate solutions for the crises they were seeing.

‘We get calls from women who don’t know where to turn and hope we can help. Unfortunately, most are unsuitable for our program because their situation is so dire.’ ‘Staff are burnt out and demoralized.’

– agencies serving women and rural areas, July-December 2003 data

- **Agencies stretched beyond their capacities.** Agencies had fewer resources of all kinds – money, staff, volunteers, facilities, programs, energy and time – to meet the growing needs of vulnerable populations. The quality of their services were affected. Table 5 shows that wait lists for services and programs grew as agencies struggled to keep up with the demand.

‘Provincial changes in April of 2002 continue to affect our client base, resulting in a higher volume of client contacts.’

– family-serving agency, January-June 2003 data

Table 5. Impact on agency wait lists

Survey period	Percentage of agencies that reported longer wait lists due to government changes
January 1-June 30, 2003	45% of 23 agencies
July 1-December 31, 2003	55% of 25 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2004	35% of 23 agencies

Changes in provincial ministry contracting processes impeded service delivery.

'The province moved to Requests for Proposals, they are realigning how they deal with requests for changes to contracts. We asked for more money as our services have been overwhelmed, but instead of responding to our request, they invited other providers to submit requests... The result? No one received extra funding, and client wait lists are not reduced.'

– immigrant-serving agency, July-December 2003 data

Some changes were implemented without sufficient planning and time to effect an orderly transition, resulting in confusion, uncertainty and inefficiency. Some disorganization is to be expected with big bureaucratic changes, but even in later data collection rounds, agencies expressed frustration about time wasted dealing with persistent problems in contracting processes. Impacts reported during the study included:

- **Repeated short-term extensions of ministry funding.** Agency services were disrupted when the funding ministry did not notify about contract approvals until the last minute. Agencies reported receiving multiple contract extensions for three or six months because new contracts were not ready.
- **Long, complex, repetitive and confusing funding application guidelines.** Current provincial requests for proposals for community services and programs required equally long, complex proposals. Some agencies questioned the efficiency of the government's shift to such costly and time-consuming competitions. They noted that their expertise and record of successful service provision should receive more consideration. The new proposal formats require days to prepare, without compensation for that time. Small organizations do not have the funds to hire professional proposal writers, so they are at higher risk of losing to larger, more resourced organizations or businesses.
- **Performance-based payment schedules and contract requirements.** These kinds of contracts gave an advantage to institutions or businesses with large capacity over small, community-based non-profit agencies. Contract payment systems shifted from upfront advances with a percentage held back until outcomes were confirmed. Small organizations do not have the cash flow to be able to operate at a deficit while they wait for the outcomes funds to be released.

'This is a performance-based contract, and if the Ministry does not refer clients or the clients don't follow through, we don't get paid. We received only 32% of the clients we contracted for, and in turn, only 32% of the revenues anticipated.'

– umbrella agency, July-December 2003 data

Government communication with agencies deteriorated.

As the provincial government reshaped its role and those of its community partners in delivering public services, community social service agencies reported that they were rarely consulted. When there were problems, services were disrupted for agency clients.

Restructuring changes and their impacts on agencies included the following:

- **Reduced consultation with government.** Agencies reported that provincial ministries did not provide enough information about changes in procedures and did not adequately discuss new expectations around contracting for service delivery before, during, or after changes were imposed.
- **Problems with web-based communication.** Ministries issued standard recommendations to ‘check their websites’ rather than discuss new initiatives. This practice sometimes resulted in communication gaps. For example, in January 2005, one agency noted that key information for a funding application was not up-to-date on the ministry website. By chance, they learned that a requirement had changed – after they had already submitted their information and the deadline had passed.
- **Crucial communication lags.** Agencies reported that calls or emails were often not returned in a timely manner by staff of various ministries, even on key issues such as impending deadlines for funding renewal.
- **Inflexible, narrow ministry client referral and approval.** Provincially funded community programs for income assistance recipients required that applicants receive ministry referral and approval. One agency cited situations in which the responsibility for a contract shifted to another ministry during the transition, and the client referral system broke down. Agencies wanted the ministries to respond to their concerns and work with them to develop more effective referral processes and relationships.

4.2 Helpful Impacts

Agencies reported the following positive impacts of provincial changes on the community social services sector.

New partnerships and alliances were formed among agencies and with businesses.

“The non-profit sector is working together much more cooperatively and sharing resources far better these days.”

– family-serving agency, January-June 2003 data

Throughout this study, agencies reported growth in partnerships with other groups in the community in response to government changes. Agencies connected with other organizations to apply for funding, share resources, or provide new services and programs. They united around common issues to better meet the needs of their clients. New partnerships were reported by 48% of agencies during January to June 2003, 42% in the July to December 2003 and 17% in January to June 2004.

Table 6. Formation of new partnerships

Survey period	Percentage of agencies that reported forming new partnerships
January 1-June 30, 2003	48% of 23 agencies
July 1-December 31, 2003	42% of 25 agencies
January 1-June 30, 2004	17% of 23 agencies

A few agencies entered into longer-term provincial funding contracts.

For example, in the July to December 2002 survey, one agency reported signing a three-year provincially funded contract for their work with families. A longer funding cycle is a more efficient and less costly way to deploy resources, say the agencies. It provides the stability of more secure core funding and frees agencies to

concentrate on service provision. In contrast, other agencies reported that their contracts had become more short-term and project-focused during this government's term.

Uncertainty decreased somewhat for agencies funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

During the first year of the survey, family-serving agencies reported that they were not getting clear information from the Ministry of Children and Family Development about funding or policy changes and their implications. The uncertainty put strains on service delivery to children and their families. In late 2003, that ministry communicated plans for future funding of community services – what would be funded and how much funding would be cut. With this information, agencies serving children and families could develop more accurate service plans.

New programs and services were developed.

New client needs and changing funding parameters compelled some agencies to create new programs or modify old ones. However, these positive initiatives came with a cost, as staff were often stretched to the breaking point in developing and implementing these changes.

A few agencies saw promise in provincial shifts toward more on-line access.

One agency indicated that staff could assist clients more easily with on-line application forms. However, other agencies were concerned about additional staff time required for such assistance. A few agencies anticipated that on-line information and post-secondary courses would provide better access and more independence to their clients with disabilities. Other agencies, however, expressed concerns about the barriers to access that required computer availability and computer literacy as well as high-level English and literacy skills.

5 SPECIFIC IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES

5.1 Funding

The majority of participating agencies reported provincial cuts to their funding.

Agencies reported numerous changes in their provincial funding:

- Almost two-thirds of agencies—63%—reported at least one funding reduction.
- Almost one-third—30%—reported more than one funding reduction.
- One agency lost all its provincial funding.
- Two-fifths of agencies reported funding increases (but more than half of these same agencies also had funding cuts.)

Most funding increases were short-term, one-time-only contracts and did not meet long-term funding requirements. Less than half the agencies reported that they kept or returned to similar levels of provincial funding. Agencies described the key impacts of provincial funding cuts on their operations as inability to engage in long-term planning, canceling or downsizing of programs and services and downsizing of staff.

The agencies received also received funding from other sources. Findings from this study indicate that a significant proportion of the agencies received less funding for their total operational budget and thus had less money for providing services to vulnerable people in the community. In the four surveys covering July 2002 to June 2004, 63% (17/27) of the agencies participating during that time reported at least one period in which their total funding decreased. One-third (9/27) of the agencies reported at least one period in which their total funding decreased but no periods in which their total funding increased.

As provincial sources of money disappeared or seemed uncertain, agencies stepped up their efforts to secure other funding.

It is risky to rely on only one funding source. However, small agencies rarely have the capacity to seek and secure sustainable diversified funding sources. Moreover, some of their services are not as likely to appeal to individual donors or fit funders' criteria. Donors often want their money go directly to clients, not to core agency costs such as salary, rent or supplies.

A few agencies reported that extra fund-generating efforts paid off. They were able to maintain funding levels through successful fundraising campaigns or grants from other funders. The United Way of Greater Victoria readjusted their Funding Distribution Plan in response to new community needs after government cuts to agencies. One of United Way's 2004 reports notes, "As much as we would like to report that health and social issues are being adequately addressed, the non-profit sector and the people utilizing the services of the sector are still feeling the effects of the cutbacks, eligibility shifts and downsizing."¹²

Stepped-up appeals for donations mean that agencies are steadily increasing their competition with other agencies and causes in the community. They are afraid that 'compassion fatigue' will set in and people will reach their giving limit. When other funding sources made cuts, some agencies found themselves in even greater funding crisis.

Agencies frequently reported that too much staff energy and time was being diverted from work with agency clients to fundraising. Agency staff job descriptions were not aligned with increased fundraising activities. Staff were more stressed because they were torn between serving the people most in need and raising money so that they could continue to do the work.

5.2 Personnel

Agencies often downsized their staff in response to actual or expected funding cuts.

'A key agency change was reduction in staff hours because core funding was reduced and/or because of concerns regarding core funding.'

– agency serving people with disabilities, January-June 2003 data

'We started a Ministry of Human Resources funded Training for Jobs program and had to lay off staff in December, then bring them back slowly as the program referrals picked up. Training for Jobs is a performance-based contract, with no advance of funds, which means staffing can only be undertaken as clients are referred and accepted... In May and June, we had to warn these same staff that they might have to take layoffs as the clients completed their programs... Our agency decided not to submit a proposal (for another performance-based contract) because the cash-flow issues would be unmanageable.'

– employment training agency, January-June 2003 data

Most agencies reported heavier workloads for staff. Staff were taking on more roles and volunteering more time in order to get the work done. Agencies with performance-based provincial funding contracts found it particularly difficult to keep staff.

Provincial changes affected the levels of staff stress, uncertainty and morale.

'The cutting of core funding has meant staff stretching to cover the yawning chasms that were opening up around service provision... People are tired, burned out, starting to get sick and stressed.'

– agency serving women, January-June 2004 data

Stress and uncertainty remained high in most agencies (See Table 7). An agency reported in January 2005 that morale had just dropped sharply at the news of another provincial funding cut. Agencies consistently reported that the cumulative negative impacts of overload since 2002 were resulting in increases in stress-related illness and burnout.

- More clients were coming to many agencies, meaning staff were faced with stretching to respond to them or turning them away.
- As people became more frustrated and desperate, staff had to deal with new violence and safety issues for themselves and other clients.
- Staff reductions meant that the frontline work of helping their clients was hindered by having to take on new duties, including fundraising and the work of staff who had left.

Table 7. Change in work climate factors

Factor	Percentage of Agencies Reporting the Change in Work Climate		
	Jan-Jun03	Jul-Dec03	Jan-June04
Staff uncertainty increased	61%	58%	48%
Staff stress increased	74%	46%	44%
Staff morale decreased	43%	29%	26%

When agencies had more information and certainty about future funding, the work climate usually improved. For the January to June 2004 reporting period, agencies funded by Ministry of Children and Family Development reported that uncertainty decreased and morale went up.

5.3 Volunteers and Students

‘Although the government said that they wanted volunteers to take up the slack in the social service sector, cuts to volunteer services made this impossible. It assumed that volunteers didn’t need infrastructure/management. The agenda...meant a return to volunteers with no training. This creates huge safety and risk factors.’

– agency representative, November 2004

Agency support from agency volunteers, practicum students and co-op students was impacted in several ways.

- Fewer and busier staff meant less capacity to supervise or train volunteers or students.
- Higher levels of independence, skills and capabilities required of volunteers and students meant a narrower range of people that could be involved.
- Funding cuts to specific volunteer programs or subsidies blocked agencies from providing youth and people with disabilities with pre-employment experience and community involvement.
- Volunteers from vulnerable populations (low income, people with disabilities, women, single parents, students) were themselves affected by cuts and no longer had the resources or energy to volunteer or were required to find paid work rather than volunteer.

6 REBUILDING THE COMMUNITY'S CAPACITY TO CARE

Participating agencies identified key steps necessary to repair the impacts of government changes. The provincial government can become accountable for the impacts of changes by acting on the following recommendations.

6.1 Increase Personal Income for Vulnerable Populations

Increase income assistance benefit rates and remove restrictions to eligibility that prevent individuals and families from meeting their basic needs and achieving sustainable self-sufficiency. This could include:

- Raise benefits and supplements, such as shelter and support benefits, and improve supplements, such as dental and eye exam coverage, homemaker services and crisis grants, to a level of support that ensures people's survival needs are met and that children and adults are not hungry, homeless, or without basic medical care.
- Remove eligibility criteria that cause undue hardship to people at risk, such as rigid program eligibility criteria, the three-week wait and the requirement of two years' consecutive work experience for first-time income assistance applicants.
- Provide a greater range of support to assist individuals in attaining long-term self-sufficiency and making the transition from welfare to employment. This could include one year of additional transition-to-work supports – particularly for single parents – such as earnings exemptions, allowing part-time work on assistance, paying MSP premiums and ensuring access to affordable child care.

6.2 Provide Adequate and Appropriate Support for Vulnerable Populations

Build a provincial strategy for meeting the needs of hard-to-serve clients and those who are falling through gaps in the social safety net. This could include:

- Revise assistance classifications to include individuals who need supportive programs and services but who are presently excluded. Some people with significant barriers to attaining self-sufficiency are currently ineligible for classification as Persons With Disabilities or Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers. For example, they may have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder or an erratic mental health condition but are not eligible for disability; they may still be recovering from an addiction; they may be trying to leave prostitution. 'Quick-fix' programs are not sufficient in such cases. Some individuals are not even eligible for current programs. Others do qualify but cannot achieve the program outcomes because they need more long-term support.
- Remove access barriers to legal aid that have prevented women and children from extricating themselves from abusive situations.
- Provide more counseling, rehabilitation, housing, living skills training and other such support for people with mental health and addictions problems, more and more of whom are hungry, homeless, and without treatment or help.

6.3 Strengthen the Community's Capacity to Care

Work cooperatively with the community social services sector to develop practical strategies for rebuilding community capacity to meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. This could include:

- Assess the impacts of policy and funding changes, both short and long-term, on citizens and on the whole community.
- Work with community agencies and the people most directly affected to plan policy changes and determine projected impacts before implementing changes.
- Provide more stability for agencies to plan and implement services, such as establishing longer term funding contract cycles and rationalized funding processes. This would allow service providers to more effectively balance the use of their limited resources between serving their clients, administrative requirements and fundraising.

7 CONCLUSION

The findings of the Community Reconstruction Project show that boards, volunteers and staff of community agencies are deeply committed to providing effective support to the people whom they are mandated to serve. The past three years have been very difficult. The demand for services has increased and become more complex. The capacity of the agencies to fulfill their mandates has been reduced.

In order to move forward, community agencies look forward to working more collaboratively with government to rebuild the community's capacity to care.

8 ENDNOTES

¹ Survey questionnaires for this project available in Community Reconstruction Resource Manual at the Community Council Office, 1144 Fort St., Victoria, BC V8V 3K8.

² Full reports and report summaries available at <http://www.communitycouncil.ca>

³ BC Liberal Party. (2001). “A New Era for British Columbia: A Vision for Hope and Prosperity for the Next Decade and Beyond.”

⁴ Government of B.C. Ministry of Human Resources. (2003). *BC Employment and Assistance Manual 2003*. Section 7.13.

⁵ Employment and Assistance Act, Chapter 40
 Employment and Assistance Regulation
 Section 27 Time Limits for Income Assistance
 BC Employment and Assistance Manual
 7.9 Eligibility - Other Income
 7.13 Eligibility – Requirement for Two-Year Financial Independence Test
 14.1 Disability Assistance & Health Supplements

Deputy Minister’s September 30, 2002 Manual Amendment Letter No. 7 2002/2003

Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act, Chapter 41

Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Regulation

Ministry of Human Resources, BC Employment and Assistance Rate Tables –

www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/mhr/rates.htm

Copies of current provincial legislation and the legislation in place when the current government took office may be found in the Community Reconstruction Resource Manual at the Community Council office, 1144 Fort St., Victoria B.C. V8V 3K8

⁶ The list of exemptions to the welfare time limit may be found in the Community Reconstruction Resource Manual at the Community Council office, 1144 Fort St., Victoria B.C. V8V 3K8

⁷ Child Care Subsidy Act, Chapter 26
 Child Care Subsidy Regulation

Provincial funding for child care decreased by \$42 million between 2001/02 and 2004/05 (Child Care Advocacy Forum) and introduced greater restrictions on eligibility for child care subsidies for low-income families. In recent months, the Province has announced its intention to put \$33 million back into child care funding, primarily through the subsidy program.

Cuts were also made to services for people with disabilities, such as medical supplies and transportation assistance early in this government’s mandate; recently the Province has announced an increase in monthly benefits for persons with Disabilities

Ministry of Human Resources Fact Sheet November 8, 2004 – Rate Increase – Persons with Disabilities

Child Care Subsidy Act Chapter 26

Child Care Subsidy Regulation

Ministry of Children and Family Development, News Release October 26, 2004

Legal Services Society Act Chapter 30

Office of the Auditor General. *Audit of the government’s review of eligibility for disability assistance. 2003/2004 Report 6*

⁸ Community Council of Greater Victoria and Quality of Life CHALLENGE, *The Indicator*, January 2005, p. 6. Attached.

⁹ Government of BC. (February 2005). “Vision, Mission and Values,” from *Ministry of Children and Family Development Service Plan 2005/06-2007/08*.

¹⁰ Brewin, A. & Stephens, L. (September 2004). *Legal Aid Denied: Women and the Cuts to Legal Services in BC*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, p. 12.

¹¹ Office of the Auditor General. *Audit of the Government's Review of Eligibility for Disability Assistance 2003/2004: Report 6*, p. 36. A copy of this report may be found in the Community Reconstruction Resource Manual at the Community Council office, 1144 Fort St., Victoria B.C. V8V 3K8

¹² United Way of Greater Victoria, *United Way Funding Agencies Base/Core Funding Report 2004*, p. 1.