



# Playing the Waiting Game

## Fighting the MSD's Volunteer Supplement Waitlist

By Candace Witkowskyj, *Income Assistance Advocate*

Volunteering is indeed a great experience. You have an opportunity to give back to your community, build your resume, socialize and build supports. Volunteers benefit in numerous ways and so does the community. Volunteers often fill the cracks so that people in the community can receive essential services that agencies might not be able to provide without the extra help of volunteers. Here at TAPS our

front desk is staffed entirely by volunteers, and so many more people can access Persons with Disability assistance because of our Volunteer Disability Advocacy Project. TAPS would not be TAPS without our incredible volunteers.



Yet people living on low incomes and living with disabilities sometimes need help to be able to volunteer. The Community Volunteer Supplement (CVS) was created to help cover additional costs like transportation, clothing, or food associated with volunteering. This benefit of \$100 per month is available through the Ministry of Social Development (MSD, or “welfare”) to those who are considered unemployable—either

classified as unemployable for medical reasons, or on Person With Disabilities (PWD) or Person with Persistent Multiple Barriers (PPMB)—and who volunteer for 10 hours per month (or less if their doctor says so). The costs associated with volunteering may not seem like a lot to someone who has a comfortable income, or someone who doesn’t have to deal with exceptional transportation costs

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# Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria

The following is adapted from the executive summary of the report *Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria: Fitting the Pieces Together* released in July 2011 by the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and the Centre for Addictions Research of BC at the University of Victoria.

Homelessness is a complex issue, with many factors at play. There is no one profile of a person who is homeless, just as there is no one path that leads there. The

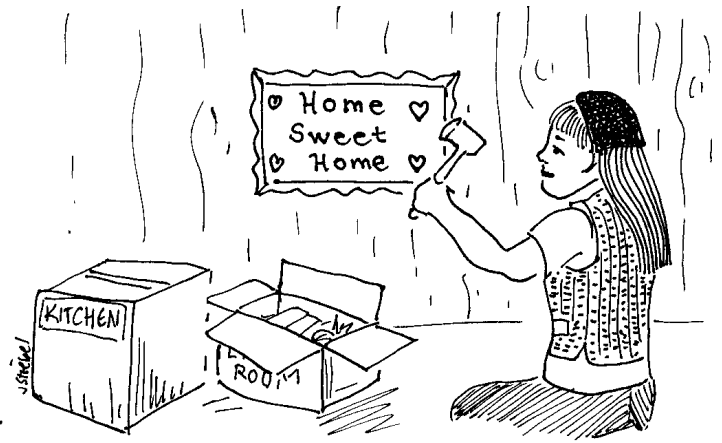
objective of *Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria: Fitting the Pieces Together*

is to illustrate some of the factors that come into play.

The report explores six key areas: affordable housing, income, food security, emergency shelters, temporary accommodation, and housing and outreach programs.

Progress is definitely being made. In 2010/11, 258 new units of subsidized housing opened for seniors, people with disabilities or those who were homeless; 177 rent supplements were added for low-income families and seniors. Through the collective efforts of partners in the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, 535 people moved from homeless to housed in a mix of market housing, single room occupancy (SROs) and subsidized units.

The disparity between income and the costs of housing, food and other necessities is too great for many people. People staying in temporary accommodations—such as emergency shelters, motels or transitional housing—highlight the housing insecurity of many Greater Victoria residents. They are temporarily sheltered and have roofs, but continue to lack safe, affordable permanent

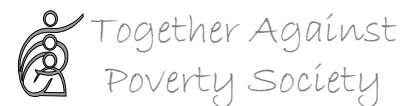


housing.

In 2010/11, five of Greater Victoria's six shelters provided beds to 1,958 unique individuals, an increase of 7.4% in two years. Some are employed. This is not a transient population; 51% of shelter users have lived in Greater Victoria for at least three years.

Finding and keeping housing can be a daunting task, especially when faced with factors like illness, unstable or inadequate income, and a challenging housing market. For some people, an outreach program can provide a hand up to accomplish the transition from homeless to housed. These programs are making a difference in the lives of Greater Victorians.

*Hungry and Homeless in Greater Victoria: Fitting the Pieces Together* shows that while we have made progress, the need is still great and there is still much work to be done. You can read the full report at the TAPS office or online at [www.solvehomelessness.ca](http://www.solvehomelessness.ca). ■



## Silent Witness Program

Many of our clients find that appointments with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) can be stressful. Some find that having another person at their appointment lessens their stress and helps the appointment proceed smoothly. At TAPS, we have Silent Witness volunteers who can accompany individuals to Ministry appointments. These volunteers provide a supportive presence during the meetings, and afterward they write a short report to give to the income assistant advocate at TAPS. If you would like to have a Silent Witness accompany you to your appointment with the MSD, please call TAPS at 250-361-3521.

# The Cost of Poverty in BC

The following is adapted from the executive summary of *The Cost of Poverty in BC*, by Igluka Ivanova, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in July 2011.

Living in Poverty is Hard. Poverty means hunger and inadequate nutrition. It means substandard and unsafe housing, or no housing at all. It means impossible choices, like whether to pay the rent or feed the kids. It means stress and social isolation. And it takes an enormous toll on the people who experience it.

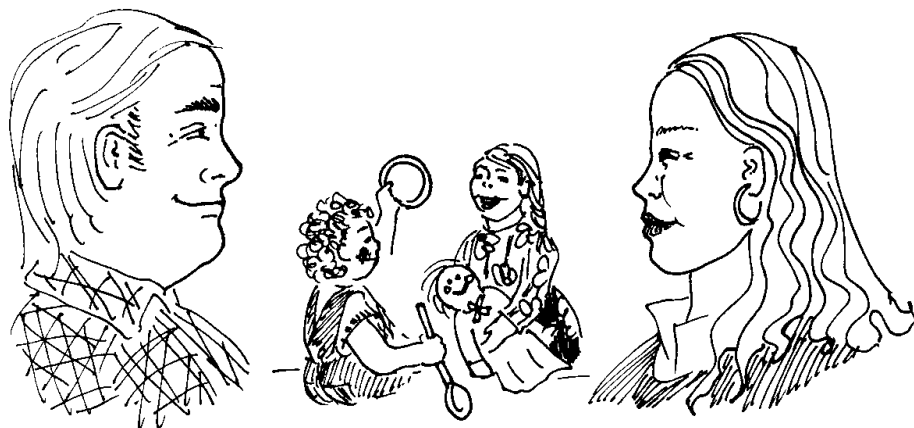
On this basis alone, most British Columbians believe that our provincial government should take action to dramatically reduce and eventually eliminate poverty. And they are right. But governments often balk at the price tag associated with poverty reduction policies like investing in new social housing, increasing welfare, or implementing universal access to child care. What governments often fail to consider, however, is the large

amount of resources that we spend, year after year, paying for the consequences of poverty.

*The Cost of Poverty in BC* finds that the costs of inaction are so large that they far exceed the costs of poverty reduction. Poverty is consistently linked to poor health, lower literacy, poor school performance for children, more crime, and greater stress for family members. It is society as a whole that bears the costs of poverty, through higher public health care costs, increased policing and crime costs, lost productivity, and foregone economic activity. The study quantifies these economic costs.

The bottom line is that poverty in BC represents a direct cost to government alone of \$2.2 to \$2.3 billion annually, or close to 6 per cent of the provincial budget. The cost to society overall is considerably higher—\$8.1 to \$9.2 billion, or between 4.1 per cent and 4.7 per cent of BC's GDP (Gross Domestic Product, or the

*(See Cost of Poverty, page 5)*



Together Against Poverty Society

# TAPROOT

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# A Mutual Poverty

By G.R. Tomblin

It was cold in the tiny room of Bob Nobuks that lovely evening. He and his new friend, Penelope—“Penny”—Less, were sitting at Bob's shaky little table, each spooning up a piping hot bowl of thick green lentil soup with potatoes and carrots. (Bob's treat). “Bob,” said Penny, “Is this what you eat *all the time*?”

Bob looked confused. “What? Of course not! I eat *lots* of other things...like—you know—um...”

Penny was very pretty, Bob thought. And even prettier the way she raised one eyebrow slightly and with her big green eyes looked at him somewhat askance. Placing down her spoon and delicately dabbing her lips with an actual dinner napkin—and not with the clumsily folded hunk of toilet paper which Bob had so thoughtfully provided—she said: “Like what?”

Desperately trying to think, Bob plunked down his own

spoon. “Well—um—you know...macaroni and tomato sauce! Sometimes rice and—um—stuff...” And he had to trail off—to offer a goofy grin and a shrug. “Hey Penny, you're poor just like me. What did you expect—sirloin steak and chef salad?”

Penny glanced at the cracked ceiling, around Bob's crappy little room, at the ancient half-size fridge in the corner—now growling like an empty stomach—and gave Bob a mock-pitying look.

“Bob,” she said, “you need a course in cooking poor!”

Penelope Less—or Penny, as everyone called her, although she didn't particularly like it—worked at the same place as Bob Nobuks: Monster Mart Plaza. She happened to have the exalted position of Manager of the Kitchenware Department at Bottom Dollar. Bottom Dollar of course was the largest dollar

## Advocates at TAPS

### Income Assistance Advocates

Candace Witkowskyj  
Jonathan Blair  
Julia Hincks

### Volunteer Disability Advocacy Coordinator

Stephen Portman

### Tenant Advocates

John Cooke  
Tasha Johnson

store in the city. (Their motto: Down To Your Bottom Dollar? Hey—We'll Take It!). It had three storeys of all sorts of cheap stuff. Everything from cheap pots and pans, cheap socks and underwear, cheap shampoo, detergent and soap; cheap greeting cards and reading glasses; cheap candles, pens and cigarette lighters and key chains. And, of course, most importantly to most of those who shopped there: cheap food. The cheap food consisted mainly of candy and snacks, but also of staples like pasta, tomato sauce, canned fruit, and cheap spices. The operative word: CHEAP!

Unfortunately for Penny, this same operative word also applied to her salary.

And so, there she was, living in the same dump as Bob Nobuks, in a cold and crummy little room with cracked walls, cracked windows, a hotplate. And in the corner a slow-draining little sink, above which was a horrible mirror that made her look like the ugly stepmother in a Grimm's Brothers fairy tale. Oh yes—there was the

(See *Mutual Poverty*, page 5)



*(From Mutual Poverty, page 4)*

convenience of a toilet and shower down the hall, shared with nine other people.

“Cooking poor?” Bob stared at this magical woman, this green-eyed vision before him. “I’m already doing that!”

In answer, Penny rose and made the short rounds of Bob’s growling fridge and rickety cupboards, taking out what things there were and arranging them on the tiny counter. “No, you’re not,” she said. “Let me show you how...how to do it good—and CHEAP!”

Bob sighed and sat back. “All right, Penelope. I place myself in your hands.”

She smiled and replied: “Thank you for calling me Penelope.” ■

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*(From Cost of Poverty, page 3)*

size of our economy). That is as much as \$2,100 for every man, woman and child in BC, or \$8,400 for a family of four, every year. In contrast, the estimated cost of a comprehensive poverty reduction plan in BC is \$3 to \$4 billion per year.

### **Health Care**

#### **\$1.2 Billion (0.6 % of GDP)**

Research shows that poverty is a fundamental determinant of both physical and mental health. This is not surprising, given that living in poverty means you are more likely to live in cold, damp or unsafe housing. You are more likely to have a chronic health condition, struggle with addiction, have poor nutrition, and experience high levels of stress.

You are more likely to be exposed to health hazards in your physical environment at home or at work, such as higher levels of pollution, dangerous manual labour, or living in a higher-crime neighbourhood.

People with low incomes also struggle with the private costs of health care, and most do not have access to supplementary insurance plans through work. Yet services like dental and vision care, prescription drugs, and rehabilitation therapies (such as physiotherapy) can play a vital role in preventative health care, and help people with chronic conditions (who are more likely to be poor) to avoid expensive hospitalizations.

### **Crime**

#### **\$745 Million (0.4% of GDP)**

It is very important not to overstate the connection between poverty and crime, and assume that all poor people are criminals. However, extreme poverty and financial stress can lead to crimes of desperation and/or living in unsafe situations. Research by the CCPA and Raise the Rates Coalition found that extremely low welfare rates lead people to make harmful “choices.” These include staying with abusive partners, resorting to survival sex (trading sex for shelter, for example), panhandling, and stealing.

Growing up poor is also closely linked to low school achievement and lower literacy rates.

Programs offering high quality parenting supports and early

*(See Cost of Poverty, page 7)*

## **Good-bye, Candace**

Candace “the Great Witkowskyj” is leaving TAPS and flying away to Calgary in August. We are extremely sad to see her go. Candace’s contribution to TAPS cannot be underestimated. Her seemingly unlimited capacity to assist clients has inspired us all—wow! can she ever take on a ton of clients and still approach each new case with enthusiasm and an overarching commitment to justice. Candace’s ability to manage this challenging advocacy job, work on her master’s degree, and still devote herself to her two young girls has impressed us all. Candace, we wish you, your partner and your children all the best in Calgary.

*All of Us at TAPS*

## **Maternity Leave**

Our tenant advocate Thea McDonagh is away on maternity leave.

Congratulations on the baby boy, Thea, Brian and Eva! Taking over for Thea for the next year is Tasha Johnson. Tasha comes to TAPS with extensive experience in residential tenancy law. We look forward to working with you over the next year, Tasha, and hope you enjoy your time at TAPS.

## **TAPS' Annual General Meeting will be on Monday, November 14th, 2011.**

Time and place will be announced in the next Taproot.

Please note: Only those members who are in good standing 30 days before the Annual General Meeting will be eligible to vote for Directors of the Society. Nominations to the Board of Directors must be forwarded to the President of the Society no later than 30 days before the AGM. No nominations will be accepted at the AGM.

### **Persons With Disabilities**

TAPS has advocates who can help you apply for Person With Disability status (PWD) through the Ministry of Social Development. TAPS can also help you with an appeal if you have applied and been denied. Call TAPS at 250-361-3521 for more information. If you are at the appeal stage, be sure to get in touch with us as soon as possible after receiving your letter of denial and tell the receptionist you are calling about a disability appeal.

*(From Waiting Game, page 1)*

like the HandyDart or having to pay a friend to drive them. For someone who has barriers, the \$100 per month extra makes the difference between whether they can afford to volunteer or not. This is really a matter of accommodation. According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, the duty to

accommodate refers to:

“the obligation of an employer or service provider to take measures to eliminate disadvantages to employees, prospective employees or clients that result from a rule, practice or physical barrier that has or may have an adverse impact on individuals or groups protected under the *Canadian Human Rights Act* or identified as a designated group under the *Employment Equity Act*.”

People living on low incomes with health issues have barriers to participating in the community, so the CVS helps offset some of these barriers. Sounds great!

Well, as long as you can manage to survive the waitlist. Now here comes the challenge. The *legislation* (the laws that govern how the Ministry is supposed to give out money, essentially) states that all you have to do to receive the CVS is be over age 15, be in receipt of benefits and be unemployable, as I've described, and need the funds to participate in a volunteer placement. Sounds so simple! Yet,

the Ministry states they do not have the funds for everyone who has applied. According to Minister of Social Development Harry Bloy, 5000 people in the province receive the CVS while 7000 people are on the waitlist. Now, \$100 per month times 7000 people is \$700,000 per month that people in poverty are going without. And in order to stay on the waitlist you have to keep volunteering. Some people have been on the waitlist for years.

Now here comes the interesting part. When policy (the practice of waitlisting) and legislation conflict, legislation reigns supreme. Think of it as legislation being the laws and policy being the different ways a ministry or department decides how to understand these laws. A ministry cannot make up its own laws. By creating a policy that directly conflicts with the legislation, the Ministry of Social Development is actually denying people something they are legally entitled to. This would be as if suddenly the policy of the police department was that traffic laws don't apply and you don't *really* have to follow traffic signs when driving. In this sense, it is not really up to the police department to decide the laws, just like it's not up to the Ministry of Social Development to decide what you are legally entitled to.

Two years ago I worked on an appeal with a brave client who had been put on the CVS waitlist and who wanted to fight what she knew was an injustice. The appeal was successful and this case set a precedent (essentially an

*(See Waiting Game, page 7)*

*(From Waiting Game, page 6)*

example). After that, we at TAPS were able to appeal and win every single case of CVS waitlisting we came across—a 100 percent success rate in the past two years.

Now, it seems silly to spend the time of clients, advocates, and Ministry workers appealing each case one by one when we know that the practice of waitlisting clients is wrong in the first place. So TAPS wrote to Minister of Social Development Harry Bloy and asked him to fully fund the CVS program. We were told they are looking at ways to more “effectively administrate the program.” Hmmmm. We didn’t think this was an adequate response, given that 7000 people living on low incomes are, in the meantime, doing without \$100 per month they should be getting. So TAPS went to the media to try to raise awareness of this program and the injustice of waitlisting people for a benefit they are entitled to.

We are still worried about what might happen to this amazing program and, more specifically, to all the amazing people who need support to volunteer. If you are on the waitlist, please come see us at TAPS. If you are not, please spread the word about this issue, and let people know why you think people should be supported in their right to volunteer just like anyone else. ■



*(From Cost of Poverty, page 5)*

childhood learning for families living in poverty have successfully helped the children who participate to stay out of trouble.

### **Lost Economic Activity \$6.2 to \$7.3 Billion (3.2% to 3.7 GDP)**

The largest cost of poverty comes in the form of lost productivity and foregone earnings. Most people living in poverty could have much higher incomes if they weren’t dealing with unemployment (not able to find work), underemployment (not able to find enough work), or low wages (not able to find work that pays a decent wage). As a society, we are underutilizing the productive potential of a large portion of the labour force.

The income that the unemployed poor could earn from working, or that the working poor could earn from full-time jobs with decent wages, can be thought of as a loss to the total value of the economy, or the collective wealth of our society. We all stand to benefit from increasing the wages of lower income British Columbians, which would increase economic activity and provide a boost to local economies (where lower income earners are most likely to spend). Wage increases would also generate increased tax revenues for the provincial and federal governments. Reduced unemployment would mean lower costs to government for income supports and other transfers.

## **Write for the Taproot**

Taproot welcomes articles from readers. Share your ideas, experiences, opinions or outrage with Taproot's vast readership. Articles should be 600 words or less. Please include your name and a way we can reach you (phone, e-mail, or mailing address). The next submission deadline is September 15th, 2011. Send submissions to TAPS (Attn: Heidi) at #302 -895 Fort Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1H7, or by e-mail to [volunteers@tapsbc.ca](mailto:volunteers@tapsbc.ca).

### **Inaction vs. Poverty Reduction**

The bottom line is that poverty is not just a hardship for those who experience it; it is costly to British Columbians as a whole. We all pay for the negative consequences of poverty.

Our findings suggest that BC is spending between \$8.1 and \$9.2 billion per year to maintain the status quo of poverty. That’s more than double the \$3 to \$4 billion needed to implement a comprehensive poverty reduction plan.

Purely on economic grounds, it makes more sense to tackle poverty directly than to continue to pay out year after year for its long-term consequences. The real question is not “Can we afford to reduce poverty?” but “Can we afford not to?” ■

## **Together Against Poverty Society**

TAPS was established and registered as a society in 1989 and serves the Greater Victoria area. We provide legal information and representation on issues relating to income assistance, provincial disability benefits, and residential tenancy. We also provide public education in these areas and on broader poverty issues.

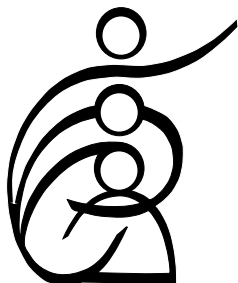
You can reach us between 9:30 am and 4:30 pm, Monday to Friday, by phone at 250-361-3521 or in person at #302 - 895 Fort Street. The office is closed daily for lunch between 12:00 and 1:00 and is closed to walk-in clients on Monday and Friday mornings.

## **Volunteer at TAPS**

### **Front Desk Receptionist**

TAPS is looking for a few people to volunteer on our busy front desk. One half-day shift per week. No experience necessary. Training is provided.

Call TAPS at 250-361-3521, contact us by e-mail at [volunteers@tapsbc.ca](mailto:volunteers@tapsbc.ca), or drop by the office at #302 - 895 Fort Street.



## **Together Against Poverty Society**

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*The Law Foundation of British Columbia*

*The Provincial Employees Community Services Fund*

*United Way of Greater Victoria*

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*We also appreciate the support that our members give.*

## **Become a Member of TAPS!**

**\$5.00 unwaged (may be waived)**

**\$20.00 waged**

**\$80.00 organization**

**Donations are appreciated.**

**Charitable tax receipts provided.**

**Taproot is mailed to members.**

TAPS mugs for sale

White coffee mugs with the TAPS crest on one side and a quote from Mary Wollstonecraft on the other: "It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world. (1792)" \$9, or two for \$15.