

BC's Community Living crisis: public inquiry urgently needed to restore public confidence and accountability

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Community Living BC (CLBC), the provincial agency responsible for delivering services to adults with developmental disabilities and their families, remains in a state of crisis.

The crisis was initially powered by repeated denials at administrative and political levels regarding program cuts, group home closures, and out-of-control waitlists. More recently, questionable financial and administrative practices at CLBC have surfaced. There are also disturbing allegations of conflict of interest abuses involving CLBC employees and individuals in care. And while CLBC promotes the cost-effective benefits of home-sharing, where adults with developmental disabilities live with their support providers, this residential option desperately requires regulation and standards of practice given current inconsistent (and sometimes non-existent) oversight.

In reaction to the continued stream of public condemnation, the Christy Clark government announced \$40M in funding to the sector; launched a new client support team at CLBC; and initiated an internal review and audit of the Crown agency. Based on a 12-step plan arising out of these reviews, changes are being implemented which over time may yield positive results.

While these steps may deal with certain immediate problems, they fail to address the systemic issues of family trust and support or public accountability plaguing CLBC. The sector has experienced a repetitive cycle of doublespeak, denials, and disconnect from the everyday challenges facing families in this province. Parents are leaving the labour force to care full-time for their adult children with disabilities due to chronic underfunding of essential services for employment, recreation, respite care, speech therapy, and day programs.

Even if Premier Clark was to suddenly announce a major restructuring of CLBC with, for example, a new division of responsibilities between CLBC, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, there remains fundamental questions about public policy values, family expectations, the adequacy of public funding, and CLBC's culture of service delivery. Serious concerns also remain about outstanding requests for services, and the short and long-term safety and well-being of adults with developmental disabilities.

The fact is, there is a fundamental loss of public confidence. Shock and outrage over cancelled bonuses paid out and then rolled over into base salaries for senior managers at CLBC is but the latest sign of core problems. Community trust has been badly, if not

irreparably damaged. CLBC's original vision – to support people with disabilities' right to independence, choice, and support – has been lost. There is a distressing climate of fear among service providers, individuals with developmental disabilities, their families and support staff.

These are serious and pressing matters of public interest that can only be dealt with through an independent review, possibly a commission of public inquiry into CLBC under the *Public Inquiry Act*.

In consultation with stakeholder groups in the community living sector, the BC government should act quickly, by appointing an independent commissioner, and begin developing the commission's terms of reference. Such a public review must have the resources needed to consult broadly and transparently, and to enlist appropriate expertise and evidence-based research. Both critics and proponents of CLBC should be involved in order to explore issues and make recommendations.

Establishing a public inquiry into BC's community living system would enable participation by adults with developmental disabilities and their families as well as service providers, other stakeholders, and the general public. An independent inquiry can raise public awareness, understanding, and support for community living and the vision of inclusive communities where all citizens are valued.

Such an independent review should report to the public and the BC Legislature rather than the minister or cabinet. To allow time for public consideration and political commitments prior to the May 2013 provincial election, the independent reviewer's report should be finalized and made public by February 2013.

By making forward-looking and workable recommendations, a public inquiry can focus on the systemic change that is so badly needed to improve the safety and quality of life for tens of thousands of British Columbians. A commitment from the Clark government to immediately initiate a public inquiry, according to these guidelines, would seem an obvious extension of its "families first" agenda. This is a consultative process that is designed to achieve the level of systems change, transparency, and accountability required to deal with the devastating upheaval affecting adults with developmental disabilities and their families in our province.

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More info: CommunityLivingAction.org