

All Candidates Meeting: Poverty & Homelessness

April 20, 2013

Location: University of Victoria, Fraser Building, doors at 2pm

Hosted by UVIC's Poverty Law Club and the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness

Invited Candidates:

- Ida Chong, Liberal
- Jessica van der Veen, NDP
- Andrew Weaver, Green
- Greg Kazakoff, Conservative

In advance of the Meeting, the sponsoring organizations developed a list of the most important questions on these issues – here are the questions and their responses:

Question 1

British Columbia is one of only two provinces in Canada that has not yet adopted a poverty reduction plan, despite having the highest poverty rate in the country and the highest child-poverty rate for 8 years running.

Such a plan would be part of a comprehensive, long-term solution to the crisis of poverty we are facing in this province by setting out legislated targets, timelines, and policy actions. Do you think BC should adopt a Poverty Reduction Plan? If so, what would it include?

Ida Chong, Liberal:

Today's BC Liberals believe the best way to lift children out of poverty is to ensure their parents have a job. We do not believe that we can legislate away poverty. There isn't a one size fits all approach to this complex issue – that is why we have regional poverty plans to take into account the needs of communities across the province.

Our government has taken major steps to reduce child poverty, including efforts to strengthen the economy and create jobs and targeting investments to better support low income families and those at risk of poverty. Our plan is working: we have seen a dramatic, consistent decline in the poverty rate since 2003, which has seen B.C.'s child poverty rate drop by almost 45 per cent. Approximately 75,000 children have been lifted out of poverty. B.C.'s child poverty rate is at its second-lowest point in the past 20 years (only 2008 –before the recession – had a better result).

We realize we are not there yet but our efforts to strengthen the economy and create jobs while providing targeted supports to low income families are working.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

Adrian Dix and BC NDP are committed to implementing a province-wide poverty reduction plan and reducing inequality, one practical step at a time, New Democrats introduced the Poverty Reduction Act in to the legislature in response to the high percentage of children and individuals living in poverty and the lack of action by government to address the issue. The

Poverty Reduction Plan will have hard targets and timelines. More information on this issue will be released in the coming days. Please go to www.bcndp.ca for more information.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

If we are not reducing poverty, we are not fully doing our job as a society. An 8-year track record as a national leader in child poverty rates is a clear sign that we as a province are not succeeding.

The achievements of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness stand as a testament of what can be achieved through an effective, community-owned poverty reduction strategy. Yet, if we take a moment to listen to the experts—to those who are working on the front lines in the fight to end poverty every day—and if we look at the evidence that exists, it is clear that British Columbia needs to do more.

We need a provincial Poverty Reduction Plan. That plan cannot be top down—it must be the result of a community-owned, province-wide consultative process. It must address fundamental issues that not only reduce existing poverty, but prevent it from occurring in the first place. Examples include: Investing in affordable housing and social support programs, improving access to quality education and health care, and ensuring that parents can access necessary child support. To be successful, we must also measure our progress, through clear legislated targets and reliable metrics that reflect best practices in the field.

Yet plans are meaningless unless we support them with the resources they require to succeed. Research shows the clear net financial gain we as a society receive by tackling poverty. It's time now to see poverty reduction as both a social and fiscal investment. And it is time we have the audacity to end it.

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

BC Conservatives support the adoption of a provincial poverty reduction plan. It is sad commentary on our current government that such a plan is not already in place and for a province blessed with an abundance of resources, to have the highest poverty rate in the country and the highest child-poverty rate for 8 years running is a disgrace.

Poverty is a complex issue related to a wide variety of socio-economic factors. These include employment (or the lack thereof), basic nutritional requirements, adequate health care (both physical and mental), education, abuse and addictions to name a few. It is not a standalone issue but is impacted by numerous and diverse drivers. A poverty reduction plan needs the flexibility to be able to address these underlying causes to be effective.

BC Conservatives recognize the complex nature poverty and would work towards addressing the underlying causes.

Question 2

Last year there was a spike in the number of homeless people who died in Victoria during the summer and fall months. According to records kept by Our Place Society, three times as many homeless people died during that period as compared to previous years. In response to this drastic increase in deaths, the Poverty Law Club has asked the regional coroner to conduct an inquest or death review panel, looking into the reasons behind this sudden spike. Such a process of investigation and review could lead to recommendations aimed at improving public health and safety, and preventing similar deaths from occurring in the future. How would you respond to this rise in deaths among the homeless community? Would you support an inquest or death review panel moving forward in relation to these deaths?

Ida Chong, Liberal:

Homelessness is a tragic issue – one this party takes very seriously – and certainly the death of any homeless individual deepens that tragedy. As the Coroners Service is an independent agency, it would be inappropriate for any politician to direct their operations. An inquest is held if the coroner determines that it would be beneficial addressing community concern about a death, assisting in finding information about the deceased or circumstances around a death or drawing attention to a cause of death if such awareness can prevent future deaths. Were the Coroners Service to determine an inquest or death review panel necessary in this instance, a BC Liberal government would review any recommendations.

Over \$22.5 million was provided last year to support more than 870 year-round emergency shelter spaces, subsidized housing units, and rent supplements for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Greater Victoria.

We have also created outreach teams help connect people who are homeless with housing and community services. Workers address the immediate physical and safety needs for people living on the street, helping them find food, warm clothing and a safe place to stay. They also help connect the homeless with housing, income support, and supports, such as life skills training and health services. Since 2008, more than 800 people in Greater Victoria have been helped to move off the streets and into permanent housing as a result of provincial outreach programs.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

The BC NDP goal is that there be no preventable deaths to people who are currently homeless. We would work with other public agencies and the community to investigate any public safety concerns resulting from inequalities in access to safe housing and shelter. We need to be looking toward solutions that prevent unnecessary hardship for those without access to housing. The first step would be identifying the root problems and developing some immediate responses. The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness is good example of the diverse groups that need to be involved in the solution.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

We cannot allow people to die on our streets. 10 deaths in 4 months is unacceptable. 3 times that amount, like we saw in Victoria this winter, is appalling.

Evidence shows there is a significantly higher death rate among homeless people, compared to other sectors of the population. To accept such statistics as static is to ignore our duty to support the most vulnerable sectors of our society.

I commend the members of the UVic Poverty Law Club who have shown leadership in calling for a death review panel. This panel is an important and necessary first step in responding to

the needs of one of our most vulnerable populations and I fully support their efforts. We need to know what is behind the spike in deaths if we are to prevent them in the future.

Yet we also need to look at this issue more broadly. Homelessness has found a home in Victoria—and that's a problem.

Our social support programs have not kept up with the costs of living and far too often our emergency shelters are forced to turn people away for the night because they do not have the resources they need to meet the demand placed upon them. Solving these issues requires evidence-based solutions, real cooperation and governmental accountability. As deputy leader of the Green Party, I will work with you to ensure our government lives up to its word, one practical step at a time.

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

BC Conservatives would support an examination of these deaths to try and determine, if possible, the underlying causes of such incidents with the view in mind of improving public health and safety.

Question 3

Would you support more programs like INSITE? Please explain your reasons.

Ida Chong, Liberal:

BC Liberals believe in a continuum of supports and programs to address challenges people with addiction issues face. Harm reduction is one of the approaches supported.

We have funded and continue to fund a number of harm reduction initiatives, including education and outreach programs, health and social service supports for individuals with active addiction challenges and needle exchange services.

Supervised injection sites have shown benefit through scientific pilot initiatives.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

The BC NDP believe that we have a responsibility to look into all options for harm reduction for those suffering from addiction and mental health issues.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

I fully support INSITE and would like to see similar program options explored for Greater Victoria.

Those who struggle with addictions are not criminals. To treat them as such is to fundamentally misconstrue what addiction is in its essence: A health issue. Harm reduction programs, like INSITE, support a vulnerable sector of our population that otherwise falls through the cracks of our traditional support systems. The city of Vancouver took the lead on a bold and risky initiative when launching INSITE and we need to build on that success. As I've said since announcing my run, I support evidenced-based policy, and with this issue it is no different.

Extensive, independent third party research has clearly demonstrated the value INSITE offers to Vancouver's Downtown East Side and its effectiveness in promoting a more holistic approach to harm reduction and addiction treatment.

Fiscally, INSITE has been shown to provide significant net financial benefits to our health care system by cutting down on overall expenses – it is the definition of proactive, preventative care.

While it has been controversial to some, we cannot deny what the health professionals in the field are telling us – this is working. We must not wait to implement innovative solutions that

have proven their worth. We need to be brave and follow the path that has been blazed for us. Scaling up should be our prime concern to help those in need.

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

People who suffer from addictions put a greater strain on the health care system than that of the average citizen. In principle, BC Conservatives would support programs that assist people in coping with these illnesses. The reasons are obvious, a few of which are:

- Reduced health care costs
- Improved quality of life
- Reduced criminal activity
- Reduced risk to the general public

Question 4

The Canadian Federation of Students says the average debt for university graduates is almost \$27,000. How would you address the poverty experienced by many students?

Ida Chong, Liberal:

Today's BC Liberals are working to build an increasingly skilled and highly educated workforce, one that is ready to meet current and future labour market demands. That is why we have made tuition rates competitive with the rest of Canada, while at the same time making record investments to grow our institutions and ensure students have the courses they need.

Tuition fees at B.C.'s publicly-funded universities were fourth lowest in Canada in 2012/13 and we have limited tuition increases at public institutions to two per cent since 2005 to ensure post-secondary education in B.C. is affordable for students, their families and taxpayers. Since 2001, over \$3.2 billion has been spent on student financial assistance, including \$321 million in 2012/13. We have also introduced targeted investments such as the *BC Student Loan Forgiveness Program*, which forgives 100 per cent of a student's loan over three years for working in underserved rural and northern B.C. communities. Because of our funding commitments, students in B.C. pay less than one-third of the actual cost of their post-secondary education.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

The BC NDP's promise of \$100 million in new needs-based student grants which will increase accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and skills training, reduce student debt, and help to address the growing skills shortage.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

Education is meant to lift people into opportunity, not rope them down in debt.

I have spent my life educating young people because I believe in the fundamental importance of an educated society. But, to achieve an educated society, education itself must be accessible.

As the cost of education rises, more and more students look elsewhere for their future. This is a problem.

We need to strike a balance between quality and cost that keeps education accessible for young people. Achieving this balance requires a comprehensive approach that starts by asking both students and educators what they need to succeed and finding innovative ways to make the outcome accessible. Here are a few thoughts from my experience:

Making education accessible requires us to level the playing field so students can afford it in the first place. Let's start by further developing our grant and loan programs and explore how we can provide further tuition refunds for graduates who work, live and pay taxes in the province for 5 years after receiving their degree.

Once students can afford their education, accessibility then becomes, in part, about offering a clear return on investment. Education should propel students into the careers they are looking for. We therefore need to develop our economy to ensure there are good jobs available for graduates, when they graduate. We can do this by investing in up-and-coming areas like the clean tech sector and then take it a step further by expanding programs that encourage companies to hire recent graduates. There are creative solutions to these challenges--let's find them!

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

When I graduated from university in 1972 I had \$18,000 in student loans. It took me a long time to pay that off. BC Conservatives would increase scholarship opportunities in BC, but, even more importantly, adopt policies and legislation that increase employment opportunities for graduates.

Question 5

In 2011 the average rent for a bachelor suite in Greater Victoria was \$676. The shelter allowance for someone on a disability pension or social assistance is \$375. This discrepancy is a primary contributor to homelessness in Greater Victoria. How do you plan to address it?

Ida Chong, Liberal:

The BC Liberals recognize the critical importance of affordable housing and the investments our government has made reflect this. Since 2001, the BC Liberal government has added close to 21,000 new units of affordable housing across the province. More than 18,000 are complete. The remainder are in development or under construction. In 2012 alone, our Government invested more than \$30 million to support subsidized housing and rent supplements for more than 4,900 low-income individuals, seniors and families in Victoria. We have also created and expanded a number of programs to bridge the affordability gap for families and seniors renting in the private market. In 2006, we established the Rental Assistance Program, which helps low-income working families with the cost of private market rental housing. Families earning up to \$35,000 a year can receive rent subsidies of up to \$765 a month. There are currently over 200 families across in Victoria receiving assistance through this program.

To provide further assistance to seniors, we expanded the Shelter Aid For Elderly Renters program in 2006 by increasing subsidy levels and expanding eligibility, including seniors who pay pad rentals for manufactured homes; and increasing the heat allowance to offset utility costs. More than 780 seniors' households in the region receive SAFER benefits and the average monthly subsidy is \$158.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

The BC NDP recognizes the importance of access to safe, secure affordable housing for those with low and moderate income. The BC NDP will address homelessness through affordable housing construction and a Poverty Reduction Plan. Additional details of the BC NDP plan will be released in the coming days. Please go to www.bcndp.ca for more information.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

Homelessness is not an isolated issue. More often than not, homelessness is the result of circumstances and risk factors that compound in a cycle of poverty.

Research suggests the best way to break the cycle is through a housing-first approach. By taking homelessness out of the equation, people can have the stability and support necessary to then deal with the other risk factors that compounded and led to their homelessness in the first place.

In recent years, Greater Victoria has become one of the least affordable regions to live in the entire country. We need to ensure that those who are homeless have the supports necessary to get back on their feet—and this starts with having a home.

We must expand our investment in affordable housing and ensure that our shelter allowances and social supports are indexed to the increasing costs of living in Greater Victoria. We need to increase the number of supported housing units for people with mental health and addiction issues and we need to increase the availability of rental subsidies so that fewer at-risk populations end up homeless in the first place.

Taking these steps demands governance that transcends politics and a decision-making that is rooted in evidence, not ideology. The Green Party is the only major party that allows members to vote their conscience—and represent their constituents—in every vote. I have built my career on cooperation and evidence-based decision-making and will bring that legacy to my work as an MLA.

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

Plainly the shelter allowance for a person receiving a disability pension or social assistance is not sufficient to permit the recipient of such an allowance to reside in Greater Victoria. Social housing may be able to alleviate some of that problem. Certainly people with disabilities in financially strained situations require support. BC Conservative policy is committed to supporting accommodation and housing assistance to those in need.

Question 6

The Housing Procurement Action Plan released by the Coalition in March of 2012 estimates that the supportive housing required to end homelessness in Greater Victoria would cost approximately \$13.9 million per year. This includes capital costs as well as maintenance, support staff and admin fees. What kind of investment can you commit to in order to end homelessness in Greater Victoria by 2018?

Ida Chong, Liberal:

The BC Liberals value our partnerships with Greater Victoria municipalities and non-profit housing operators, and we will continue to work with partners to address homelessness in the region. Our government has invested significant capital dollars into new and renovated supportive housing in Victoria and the Region. Recent supportive housing projects for those who are homeless include:

- Clover Place, 18 units of supportive housing (2010);
- Camus Gardens, 44 units of supportive housing (2011);
- Rock Bay Landing, 23 units of transitional housing (2010);
- Olympic Vista, 36 units of supportive housing (2011);
- Swift House, 23 units supportive housing (2012); and
- Queen's Manor, 36 units supportive housing (2012).

Since 2001, 950 units of affordable housing have been created in Victoria with a further 68 in development or under construction. We are also a funding partner in the Streets to Home

program that helps hard to house individuals find and maintain that housing with support from an outreach worker. Last year, homeless outreach teams in Greater Victoria helped connect 420 people connect with stable housing, income supports, and a range of health services through the Homeless Outreach and Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Programs.

Jessica van der Veen, NDP:

The BC NDP understands the importance of investing in a wide range of housing options, including those with support programs. Additional details of the BC NDP plan will be released in coming days. Please go to www.bcndp.ca for more information.

Andrew Weaver, Green:

Ending poverty and homelessness is not just socially responsible, it's also fiscally responsible.

Research from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, estimates that poverty costs our province more than \$8 billion each year. The estimated cost of a comprehensive poverty reduction plan in BC is \$3 to \$4 billion. Ending poverty would save BC money.

Yet to do so, requires a significant investment. We know that one of the most effective ways to end homelessness in the long-run is through a housing-first strategy. If a \$13.9 million annual investment would end homelessness and take us a significant step further towards ending poverty, then we must look at the evidence. And the evidence suggests it's the right thing to do.

I will not be premier, and so my ability to realistically offer the necessary funds is limited. But here is what I can offer:

First of all, you have my full support for a Housing Procurement Action Plan. Homelessness is a serious problem and ending it requires strong support in the legislature.

Secondly, I will offer accountability. I have built my career on a depth of research, problem solving and integrity that I believe is lacking in the legislature. I am running to help change that.

Finally, I will offer a genuinely open ear. I believe very strongly in using evidence to inform action. If you have evidence that our policies are off, I want to hear it.

Greg Kazakoff, Conservative:

I have reviewed the Housing Procurement Action Plan released by the Coalition in March 2012 and note that there are a number of potential funders for this project including municipal, provincial and federal governments. The BC Conservatives recognize that all these potential funders have a role to play in the process of ending homelessness and, if elected to government, pledge to work closely with all stakeholders towards a workable resolution of this problem.