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More than 125 organizations call for end to welfare time limits in B.C.

(Vancouver) More than 125 organizations are calling on B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell to totally rescind the two-year time limits on welfare benefits, despite his government's announcement of a new exemption that will lower the number of people thrown off welfare rolls. The 25th exemption to the time limits rule, announced February 6, means that those who are complying with their employment plans and seeking work won't be affected. But provincial legislation still defines welfare as a time-limited benefit, rather than one based on need.

The organizations are also asking Prime Minister Paul Martin to attach conditions to the transfer of federal dollars to the provinces in order to bar British Columbia or any other province from making receipt of social assistance subject to a time limit in future.

"We need conditions in place that will prevent governments from playing brinksmanship with the lives and human rights of the most vulnerable people, as the B.C. Government is doing," says Shelagh Day of the Poverty and Human Rights Project.

The groups view the time limits as a serious breach of *Charter* rights and of the Canadian social contract. The organizations include a broad range of national and B.C.-based church, community service, social justice, professional, union, and anti-poverty groups.

National Anti-Poverty Organization President, W. Robert Arnold, says, "The time limits are bad policy whether they affect thousands or 339 or one. As long as the time limits are on the books, there will be a problem of people being needlessly threatened with homelessness, hunger and deprivation."

Wendi Lawrence, Vice President of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union says, "We are relieved that the government has decided back off on applying these time limits to thousands of people, but, as long as they are on the books, we are concerned about how these rules will be used against people in genuine need."

"Intentional or not, bad welfare policies are another form of systematic discrimination against Aboriginal people. Because of Canada's history of racism and colonialism, there are disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people among the poor and among those in need of welfare. Bad welfare rules, like the time limits, hit vulnerable Aboriginal people hard," comments George Holem, President of the United Native Nations.

Reverend Bob Korth of the Justice and Peace Unit of the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster adds, "The time limits on welfare assert the right of the government to leave some Canadians destitute. We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and we have an important tradition of sharing our resources in order to ensure that no one of us is without help when we are sick, old, disabled, or poor. This is a Canadian tradition of caring that must be maintained."

The time limit provisions state that a person without children who is deemed employable can only receive income assistance for 24 months out of every 60-month period. The time limits also provide that families with children, where the parents are deemed employable, will have their already inadequate benefit cheque reduced after they have received benefits for twenty-four months.

The letters to Premier Campbell and Prime Minister Martin have been posted on www.povnet.org.

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