

# B.C.'s Time Limit on Eligibility for Income Assistance

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British Columbia leapt to the lead in regressive Canadian welfare legislation in September 2002 when,

under Bill 26, the government legislated time limits to eligibility for income assistance. The time limit is referred to as the two out of five year rule, as some recipients will have their benefits cut off entirely, and others will have their benefits cut back, after they have received benefits for 24 out of 60 months. The cutoff or cutback will continue for the remainder of the five years.

The government backdated the rule when it was legislated, so that the clock began to run for recipients effective April 1, 2002. We are now past the halfway point of the two years.

Single persons who are expected to work and who have reached the two-year time limit and couples without children, both of whom are expected to work and who have reached the two-year time limit, will be cut off entirely. Families with children will have their already inadequate benefits cut back by \$100 or \$200 per month.

This rule will apply to 64-year-old women or men. It will cut them off of benefits regardless of whether they have any other possible source of support, and regardless of their efforts at obtaining paid work. Sending an elderly woman or man to live in the streets is one of the harshest acts possible, and is justified by the government on the basis of reducing waste and ensuring that income assistance goes to those who need it most.

In April 2002 there were 86,152 adult recipients in BC in the "expected to work" category. This number had been cut to 62,222 by January 2003, the most recent month for which the numbers are available. In Victoria, there were 6,921 adult recipients expected to work in April 2002, and 4,377 as of January 2003.

These cuts to the number of recipients have been achieved by other harsh measures, including a three-week wait to apply for monthly benefits, a two-year independence rule under which people are not eligible for income assistance unless they have had a certain minimum number of hours or earnings from paid employment in each of two previous and consecutive years, and cutting recipients off of benefits if they miss two appointments with ministry staff.

The numbers of 62,222 adults province-wide and 4,377 adults here in Victoria indicate that on April 1, 2004, large numbers of people will find themselves cut off benefits. Others will have their benefits reduced to

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from looking for or accepting employment have happened since April 2002 and yet the ministry had you classified as employable, it may still be possible to get supportive notes from your doctor, counsellor or other people who are aware of your situation. These months may not have to count toward the 24 months out of 60.

If there is a chance that you may be eligible for "Person with Persistent Multiple Barriers to Employment" or "Person with Disabilities" (PWD) designation, get the information about how to qualify, and then get the request started as soon as possible. When it comes to employable people being cut off benefits when their 24 months is up, the ministry will not be calculating their delays in giving appointments or processing paperwork.

(It will not count toward the 24 out of 60 months if you are: pregnant; under 19 years of age or 65 years of age and older; a child in the home of a relative; in a training program approved by the Ministry of Human Resources; receiving a reduced amount because someone in your family unit is receiving reduced welfare because of the 24 month limit; on PPMB or PWD status; a single parent caring for a child, foster child, or child in the home a relative who is under three years old; a single parent caring for a child, a child in the home of a relative or a foster child who has a mental or physical condition that requires you to be at home; not eligible for welfare because of your immigration status; or "temporarily excused" from work. [Employment and Assistance Regulation 27 and 29])

### How to Get Yourself into a Different Category

Find out from an advocate what it takes to qualify for "temporarily excused," PPMB, or PWD status.

We have information at the TAPS office on such things as the ministry employability screen, and information for physicians writing medical reports for the ministry.

The current government dealt budget cuts of 35 percent to the Ministry of Human Resources. Now the ministry is singularly focused on reducing the number of people on income assistance, and is accomplishing this by making people ineligible. The best way to survive this government's agenda of providing tax breaks to wealthier members of society and cutting people off of income assistance is to plan a strategy for yourself that includes getting support from family, advocates, churches, counsellors, doctors, nurses, and neighbours. Keep your eyes open for community coalitions organizing against time-limited income assistance, and get involved.

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tenant's activities have resulted (or will result) in damage or jeopardizing other tenants." (TRAC, April 2003) While tenants still have the right to dispute such a notice at arbitration, tenant advocates are concerned that vulnerable tenants will be unlikely to do so, especially given the lack of tenant advocates in the province.

A number of scenarios come to mind when considering the impact of each of the above changes on tenants. Consider, for example, the case of a single 55 year old woman attempting to survive on income assistance and who is given an 18 percent rent increase. What are her options? If she "chooses" to move and try and find a new home, and she has a pet, how is she going to pay the extra pet deposit? How likely is it that her new landlord will keep her deposits if she fails to make her second inspection

appointment due to an unexpected hospital visit?

The sections of Bill 70 outlined above raise many alarming questions for tenants in BC. Bill 70 appears open to numerous abuses by landlords, and in situations where landlords are subject to penalties (such as failure to follow the appropriate process when withholding tenants' deposits) Bill 70 does not provide a means of enforcement. On the whole, ambiguities and loopholes contained within the act allow for unscrupulous landlords to victimize tenants, especially the most vulnerable tenants in the province. Given this, the fear of a marked increase in homelessness in BC appears warranted.

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the point that even paying the rent will be a great hardship. Among the consequences will be homelessness, hunger, ill health, and apprehension of children.

There are many other consequences. Couples, including those with children, will have to decide whether they should break up in order that the family does not have their benefits cut. If they do this, the other parent has no income whatsoever upon which to live.

The reason for this tearing up of our social safety net is the government's decision to cut the Ministry of Human Resources budget by \$580 million, or 35%. This is less than the projected government expenditure on the Olympics, and less than a third of the \$2.2 billion tax giveaway of 2002.

Murray Coell, Minister of Human Resources, can be reached by mail at PO Box 9058, STN PROV GOVT, Victoria, B.C. V8W 9E2, by phone at 250-356-7750, by fax at 250-356-7292, and by e-mail at murray.coell.mla@leg.bc.ca if you wish to express your views to him.