

Editorial

Leaked numbers sound alarm on welfare time limits

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The clock is ticking on BC's new welfare time limits, and as the reality of the looming social crisis sinks in, people are getting nervous.

Most anxious of all are those who have spent a year or more on social assistance. Starting April 1st, most "employable" people without kids who've been on welfare for two years will be cut off. "Employable" people with kids over three will lose \$100 per month from a social assistance cheque that is already virtually impossible to live on.

If radio call-in shows and letters to the editor are any indication, BC's unprecedented new rule isn't sitting well with much of the public at large either. The reality of people hitting the two-year limit won't be pretty: it means no money to pay the rent, buy food, take the bus, buy clothing, have a telephone, or otherwise meet the basic human needs we all share.

Maybe even Minister of Human Resources Murray Coell is feeling nervous. He's busy introducing a variety of new exemptions to the two-year rule, no doubt hoping to delay off the unseemly task of throwing thousands of people off welfare and into the street.

But his ministry's own internal documents -- leaked in early October by a staff person no doubt frustrated by their Minister's refusal to say how many people are at risk of maxing-out the two-year time limit -- show that this has the potential to be a social catastrophe. According to the leaked figures, as of October, over 14,000 "employable" adults in BC have accumulated over 13 months on the welfare time limit clock. And the leaked document makes clear that this doesn't include people recognized as disabled, or anyone else exempt from the rule. Another group of almost 15,000 people is just behind, having received social assistance for seven to twelve months.

These are very troubling numbers. People who stay on social assistance for more than a year generally do so for a reason. Historically, about 80% of people stay on welfare for less than a year. In other words, despite all the rhetoric and mythology about "welfare dependency," the reality is that people only turn to welfare as a last resort, and most don't stay long. Living on welfare is bloody hard. Once people find their feet, they leave.

A person who stays on welfare for more than a year does so either because a tough job market makes steady employment hard to find, or they face some barrier to employment that makes finding and keeping a job extremely difficult. These barriers are often invisible -- social, mental and addiction problems unrecognized by the Ministry, a lack of affordable childcare, etc. It is these so-called "employable" folks who are most at risk of hitting the time limit wall.

Minister Coell insists that everyone who can work will find a job. He claims that as many as 10,000 jobs are available, waiting to be filled, right now. But his numbers don't add up. There are over 50,000 "employable" adults receiving social assistance right now. And any available jobs are most likely to go to those who have been on welfare for a shorter period of time -- people with fewer barriers to employment. And with the

unemployment rate currently above 9%, the folks on welfare are part of a larger group of over 200,000 people in BC looking for jobs. That's stiff competition, and a grim outlook for those at risk of hitting the two-year wall.

Interestingly, the Ministry released its fifth quarterly "exit survey" of welfare leavers in September -- the surveys Minister Coell keeps pointing to as proof that people leaving welfare are finding jobs. This quarter, however, there was no accompanying news release -- perhaps because the news wasn't that good. Compared to the same period a year earlier, all the numbers are worse. Fewer people are leaving for work or school. And while caseloads are going down, it's not because more people are leaving welfare. It's because fewer people qualify under BC's tough new rules. And with unemployment at an 8-year high, at least a few of those people are ending up on the streets.

Which brings us back to the unsettling nature of the time limits. Those British Columbians who are outraged by the recent increase in squats and panhandling should direct their anger towards the causes of this poverty, not the consequences. Leaving people out in the cold, literally, doesn't make much sense. It's morally bankrupt, and it's bad economics--for which society will pay in increased health costs and increased crime. Either way, unless the provincial government backs off the two-year time limit rule, the social fallout will continue to confront us on the street.

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