



## Memo to Council

### From the Office of Councillor Amy Lubik

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Date: January 18, 2021

Subject: Request to Advocate for Permanent top up to Disabilities and Social Assistance Rates

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*Adapted from Oped from Vancouver Council, January 17, 2020.<sup>i</sup>*

As Premier John Horgan and the NDP government prepare the new budget expected in April, all members of Vancouver's City Council are adding our voices to the chorus of community advocates urging the province to reinstate the \$300-a-month supplement to social assistance rates granted in response to the COVID emergency.

That \$300 increase should be made permanent, as one step toward increasing income and disability rates so that, at a minimum, they reach the officially defined poverty line, and then scheduling regular increases linked to inflation.

Since they were elected in 2017, the NDP government, supported by the B.C. Green Party, has increased basic social assistance rates by \$150. Before that, the previous government had frozen rates at \$610/month for a decade, and only made small increases to disability assistance.

As a result, for more than a decade, thousands of British Columbians have lived in dire poverty. In B.C., income assistance is currently \$760 a month, and disability assistance is \$1,183 a month.

That amount has to cover everything: food, rent, medical supplies, clothes, heat, bus fare, and more. It is hard to imagine this being enough to live on anywhere in B.C., and it certainly isn't in Vancouver.

After COVID hit last year, workers who couldn't work received \$2,000 a month from the newly created CERB to keep them afloat. In that initial moment of crisis, the federal government determined that \$2,000 was the amount required for an acceptable minimum standard of living while not able to work, far above what had been considered acceptable for people on social assistance.

At the same time, people on income and disability assistance in B.C. received a temporary \$300-per-month increase, for a total of \$1,060 a month for a single person and \$1,483 a month for someone with a disability — still below the poverty line.

Last month, it was announced that the extra benefit would be cut in half and the rest could be cut off in April. This small but important increase made a tangible impact in the lives of those who received it, and it should not be taken away.

A coalition of disabled and neurodivergent people launched the “300 to Live” campaign, calling for the temporary increase to be made permanent, and for social assistance rates to be further increased to at least the poverty line, and indexed to inflation. Their website highlights what the \$300 increase has meant to people on social assistance.

One person said, “It allowed me to make rent this month and still have food for my one-year-old daughter.” Another said, “I feel like I have room to breathe, literally. Despite COVID, I feel less anxious for the interim. I was able to buy some very urgently needed clothes. I hope I can buy shoes even. For groceries, I was able to buy comfortably, without feeling like I had to wither down my cart to just a few options, and actually afford enough food.”

Low social assistance rates create or worsen other social crises, including homelessness and mental health issues.

In Vancouver, many single-room occupancy hotels charge \$800 a month or more for a room with a shared washroom down the hall. If you lose a job and have to rely on welfare, unless you live in social housing, you are very likely to become homeless. This means more people living in city parks, or taking shelter in front of stores under awnings to keep dry. [Similarly, advocates in the Tri-Cities are very concerned about the impact of the pandemic and economic instability homelessness in local communities].

Shelter spaces in Vancouver [and across Metro Vancouver] are regularly full. City staff and community outreach workers try to find affordable housing for people, but there simply is not enough. Police get calls to move people who are homeless from sidewalks and storefronts. Park rangers struggle to balance preserving parks for recreational use and recognizing the humanity of people who have no other place to go.

Trying to live on \$760 a month often results in escalating mental health issues, as people understandably become increasingly anxious about not being able to eat and pay the rent. This level of poverty can also be isolating, and limits many types of basic care and comfort that support stable mental health and healing.

As locally elected leaders, we don’t have the legal tools or taxation powers to respond to these desperate situations. Social assistance is a provincial responsibility. However, we can advocate to other levels of government for the benefit of our residents. In June 2019, Vancouver City Council passed a resolution calling for “assistance rates to be raised to the market basket poverty line.”

We are optimistic about the spring budget. Premier Horgan said he will be advocating for a “permanent increase” to social assistance payments, adding, “Thank goodness we have advocates in the community that are saying loudly and clearly to government, we need to do better.”

Across political parties, we agree. We urge Vancouver residents to join us in advocating for permanent, ongoing, and substantial increases to welfare and disability rates in B.C., starting with making the \$300 COVID benefit permanent.

Suggested Recommendation:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT

The City of Port Moody write to the Provincial Minister of Finance, the Premier, the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and the MLAs for the Tri-Cities advocating that the government reinstate the \$300 monthly top-up for people receiving disability assistance and permanently raise the rates of income assistance and disability assistance to a livable rate that is above the market basket measure.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://theprovince.com/opinion/opinion-vancouver-council-agrees-social-assistance-increases-should-be-made-permanent>