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**Living Wage Roundtable  
Minutes of November 30th, 2007  
Library Square, Vancouver**

**In attendance:**

**Art Kube – Council of Senior Citizen's Organizations**  
**Eva Villeneuve – Dietitians of Canada**  
**Hillel Goelman – UBC/Human Early Learning Partnership**  
**Anita Couvrette – Thyme 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage Transition House**  
**Mervyn Van Steinberg – Canadian Labour Congress/United Way**  
**Sheila Paterson – Justice and Peace Unit, Anglican Church**  
**Sandi Wingrove – Women Elders in Action**  
**Andy Wachtel – United Way**  
**Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher – Franciscan Sisters**  
**Linda Western – United Way**

**Susan Hollick-Kenyon – Social Policy Unit, Service Canada**  
**Rebecca Siggner – Social Planning and Research Council of BC**  
**Andrina Perry – First Call**  
**Karen-Marie Woods – Simon Fraser University**  
**Al Vigoda – Vibrant Surrey**  
**Geoff Meggs – BC Federation of Labour**  
**Gudrun Langolf – Council of Senior Citizen's Organizations**  
**Lesley Richardson – First Call**  
**Adrienne Montani – First Call**  
**Raquel Trinidad – First Call**  
**Jennifer Whiteside – Hospital Employees' Union**

**1) Welcome**

Chairperson Adrienne Montani opened the meeting. A round of introductions followed.

**2) Background on the Living Wage Calculation**

First Call has been working with the Hospital Employees' Union, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and others on calculating a living wage for the City of Vancouver.

We have held two previous Roundtable meetings, in December 2006 and July 2007.

A living wage calculation group has been meeting to develop agreement on the cost components behind a Greater Vancouver living wage rate.

**3) Objectives of this Meeting**

The goal of this meeting is to discuss our perceptions of the data used to calculate a living wage and the values that the data is based on.

After this session, this information will be shared with focus groups in immigrant and refugee communities for more feedback.

Comment – We should use an ethical argument to fight for a living wage.

**4) Presentation of the Living Wage by Jennifer Whiteside, Hospital Employees' Union**

Jennifer presented for the living wage calculation project team.

This project is modeled on a campaign in London, UK, where labour and community groups took the lead in advocating for a living wage. In Canada, it's the family poverty advocates who have been pushing for a living wage.

The Victoria Community Council has previously produced a living wage report calling for \$14.88/hr.

A living wage is an hourly rate of pay that enables a family of two parents and two children with sixty hours of paid employment per week to have a minimum level of access to consumer items and social activities that are an expected part of life in our society.

In London, the calculation was in part based on the principle that if items that 80% of the community had an item (e.g. cell phones) then it was included on the basis of social inclusion.

The living wage is based on the following principles:

- Enables families who are working to escape from poverty
- Promotes social inclusion
- Supports healthy child development principles
- Ensures that families are not under severe financial stress
- Is a conservative, reasonable estimate
- Engenders significant and wide-ranging community support
- Is a vehicle for promoting the benefits of social programs. It does not presume that labour market wages alone can solve all problems of poverty and social exclusion.

While the calculation team was only able to focus on one family type, it is hoped that a national methodology will be developed that will take into account different family sizes and regions.

This living wage is based on a family of four with two children ages four and thirteen, with one child in full-time child care.

### **Calculation of the Wage**

This is the formula used to calculate the living wage:

Income from employment (living wage) + Income from gov't transfers – EI and CPP premiums, federal and provincial taxes = Annual family expenses

### **Family Expense - Food**

Based on the Dietitians of Canada *Cost of Eating* report, it would cost \$653.87/month and \$7,846.43/year to feed this family of four. These figures are based on the 2006 report, and need to be updated to reflect the 2007 figures that have just been released. The cost has gone up in the last year.

### **Family Expense - Clothing**

The amount calculated for clothing works out to about \$50/month for each family member, or \$191.64/month and \$2,299.70/year for the whole family.

Reaction to clothing amount:

- It is not enough to clothe children who are growing.
- Poor quality shoes can increase health care costs.
- It is not enough to buy work boots for someone seeking higher paid employment.
- It is a very conservative budget.
- People in some communities may not have access to used or reduced cost clothing and shoes.

### **Family Expense – Shelter and Utilities**

The rent, including utilities, calculated for this family is \$1161.09/month and \$13,933.08/year. This figure is based on CMHC Rental Market Statistics for 2006 and BC Consumer Price Index to June 2007 for the median rent of three bedroom apartments and three bedroom row housing in Vancouver. Utility amounts included in the living wage are \$29.34/month for electricity and \$36.89/month for telephone.

Reaction to rental and utilities amount:

- A one bedroom apartment in Vancouver costs \$917/month.
- Conservative figures can be good – better too low than too high.
- Metro Vancouver Social Planning may have other sources for more realistic housing rates.
- A one bedroom apartment in the West End goes for \$1500, a 2 bedroom for \$2000 – this amount is unrealistic.
- Electricity costs more than this. There is an assumption that hot water and heat are included in the rent, which is becoming less and less common.
- Most people in Vancouver have cell phones as well as landlines.

### **Family Expense – Transportation**

The transportation expenses include 2 adult (2 zone) bus passes at \$99 each and 1 concession pass for the 13 year old. It also includes one return taxi trip per month at \$23.20, for a total of \$263.20/month and \$3158.40/year.

Reaction to transportation amount:

- Assumes people live close to Vancouver.
- There is a lack of access to adequate transportation. This is one example of structural changes that need to happen in addition to a living wage.
- This family only has access to public transportation, which is unrealistic.
- Why not 3 zone bus passes?
- Because transit system is so poor, many workers live close to their work.
- The bus should be free.
- Wage should include costs for the Westcoast Express for workers coming from outlying areas.
- The cost of a minimal private vehicle would increase the wage by \$1 an hour.
- The Market Basket Measure is modified for people living in rural areas that don't have access to transit.
- Transportation is vital to a good paying job.

### **Family Expense – Other**

This category includes personal care, household needs, furniture, school supplies, and modest levels of reading materials, recreation and entertainment. The amount calculated for the living wage for these expenses is \$570.71/month or \$6,848.60/year.

Reaction to "other" amount:

- Does not include language training for recent immigrants.
- Leaves no room for emergency expenses – if someone needs to have a crown, they end up getting their tooth pulled.
- Not much for entertainment.
- Lack of spending money can lead to social exclusion.
- This is based on a very "plain" family – no special needs are built into this budget.
- Should low income families have a vacation? One week of camping in the summer?
- Very conservative figure.

### **Family Expense – Child Care**

Amount calculated is \$643.00/month and \$7716/year for full time preschooler care.

Reaction to child care amount:

- Should find more recognizable source for this figure (currently uses Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre) – HELP or MCFD?

### **Family Expense – Medical**

MSP premiums would cost \$108/month and \$1296/year for this family. The wage includes a budget for non-MSP covered health care expenses of \$133/month and \$1596/year, based on a Pacific Blue Cross insurance plan.

Reaction to medical amount:

- Doesn't include complete costs.

### **Family Expense – Cushion of Two Weeks Pay**

This amount is for the contingency that the wage earner is unable to work due to illness or injury. In addition, the two weeks pay amount would provide an income for the family during the two weeks waiting period for which Employment Insurance benefits are not paid.

This amount would be \$1,836 for a family with both parents working 30 hours per week, or \$1,884 with parents working 40 and 20 hours per week.

Reaction:

- Banks recommend that individuals should have six months of income in reserve.

- In reality, almost no one has three to six months of income saved.
- Ask a certified financial planner to endorse the statement that a family's cushion should exceed two weeks pay.

## Summary

In order for this family to pay all of these expenses, they would have to be earning a living wage of \$15.30 an hour if both parents are working 30 hours per week, or \$15.70 if one parent is working 40 hours and the other 20 hours per week.

## 4) Discussion

Reaction to wage:

- What does the average Vancouverite make?
- The wage should be doubled.
- We have a \$15.5 billion surplus – we need to be hollering about low wages.
- The wage is too conservative – we need something that will really support families.
- The wage is not enough to build healthy communities.
- We need to be driven by a vision and not choose the lowest figure so as not to scare people.
- The 30/30 work split between parents is not necessarily a typical family.

Strategies and campaigning:

- What do we want to do with this information?
- We need to talk more about how to take action.
- We need to put out a vision of the type of society we want to create and live in.
- We should use the living wage as a credible source.
- We need an action plan and talk about tactics – should create a political wage.
- We should lobby at the provincial level for a child care system and lower MSP premiums.
- There are other ways to ease the financial burden on employers than a straight wage increase.
- A living wage will help with recruitment and retention issues.
- We need ethical employers (big and small) to make statements in support of a living wage.
- We could be more thorough in our analysis of who doesn't want a living wage.
- We need a cultural shift and an end to blaming the victims.
- Victoria says that if we ever raise the minimum wage it will destroy the economic boom – we need to get religious folks to engage politically and fight this.
- How will the Olympics factor in to political will?
- Try to engage the leaders of United Way and corporate interests.
- Try to engage civil society leaders.
- Will a higher living wage resonate?
- Publicize the actual statistics on the spread of hourly wages across employees in the province.
- Remember, a living wage is better than the poverty line.
- Both VanCity and Coast Capital have expressed interest in this issue, but could not attend this meeting.
- Need to reach out to young people who have a different perception of poverty, see poverty as people panhandling on the street.
- Business people have said that we need to look for leadership wherever we have it. Explain how it benefits business to pay this wage. Let's find leaders who are willing to step up.
- A Coalition for Economic Justice may be in formation in Vancouver.

Related concerns:

- Part-time work and lack of benefits are a problem.
- We need to think about the outcome of low wages for elders.
- We need to be careful not to drive ourselves to a 60 hour work week.
- People at the bottom should have some power.
- Lots of women are stuck with a low wage and taking time off to care for children and families.
- What about showing a calculation for a female lone parent family?
- The cost of housing is creating hardship even for middle income earners.
- Other countries deal with poverty – in Norway people pay high income tax, but they have a different attitude and don't blame the victim.

Additional comments:

- Visit the Metro Vancouver web site to comment on their Regional Growth Strategy (<http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/growth/strategy-review.htm>). It seems to lack a social component.

## 5) Next Steps

- Connecting with employers.
- Working with immigrant communities.
- We should work with the Co-operative Housing Federation.
- Advocate for national child care system.
- Reach out to student groups such as Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group, teachers and students.
- Make our message clear and simple.
- Whatever the figure is, we want to see it everywhere, so that it becomes a benchmark for the public.
- A conservative number is not necessarily what we want – we need to look at it more.
- We should try to get support from unions' political action funds.
- First Call and the CCPA have applied to United Way for funding for the living wage project.
- We need a lead organization – maybe SPARC BC?