

Developing a Vision to End Energy Poverty

BACKGROUND

Energy poverty is a critical, but often overlooked inequity in Canadian society, impacting over 270,000 households in British Columbia and more than 2.8 million people nation-wide. Energy poverty is broadly defined as a lack of affordable access to the energy services that contribute to quality of life — heating, lighting, hot water, cooking, and communication. As it is intimately tied to comfort and air quality in homes, energy poverty is also a key social determinant of health, particularly as people spend more time at home during the pandemic.

Canadians spend as much as 90% of their lives indoors, so it's no surprise that drafty, inefficient housing contributes to a whole host of problems, such as mould and moisture, and corresponding health issues including asthma, cardiovascular disease, and increased vulnerability to diseases like COVID-19.¹ Nowhere are the impacts of energy-inefficient housing more pronounced than in low- and middle-income households, where limited funds for upgrades and higher energy bills create a vicious circle that only serves to perpetuate energy poverty.

British Columbians are facing increased financial pressures and health concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, loss of income, and rising costs. With the recent announcement of a new income-qualified home energy retrofit program to be developed as part of CleanBC Better Homes, the BC Government has demonstrated its intention to take meaningful action in addressing these issues. However, work remains to be done to ensure this program rolls out successfully and is supported by an ecosystem of complimentary initiatives.

We are calling on the Province to develop a clear plan and targets to eliminate energy poverty in BC within ten years. This effort will require at least a tenfold increase from current levels of funding and ambition, but we believe that this vision is achievable and will also help us to meet a whole host of other goals including economic stimulus and job creation, poverty reduction, and climate action. In order to meaningfully address BC's energy poverty problem, action must be taken on a number of fronts where current policies are either not working effectively or are missing altogether.

Bill protections programs and lower utility rates, designed to offset energy costs for vulnerable customers, are only one part of the solution. A complete policy approach to ending energy poverty must also include strategies for raising wages and creating more secure employment — now more than ever as we rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a third part of the equation, which relates to the way we use energy in our homes and buildings. This work is often simply labelled 'energy efficiency', yet it's important to remember that there is much more than efficiency at stake when we consider the related impacts to the comfort and safety of our homes.

Rethinking home energy retrofit programs in BC and making progress on eliminating energy poverty is not simply a matter of increasing funding for existing programs. Systemic issues, like social and racial inequity, power dynamics, and a lack of accountability, must also be

¹ <https://www.iea.org/reports/multiple-benefits-of-energy-efficiency/health-and-wellbeing>

addressed. A holistic, justice-based program approach is needed: one that ensures that energy access is affordable and safe for everyone.

This moment presents an opportunity to begin addressing many of the challenges facing British Columbians, from energy poverty to the climate crisis to the housing crisis. By introducing policies that act on all three major drivers of energy poverty, we could lower utility bills, improve the quality of the housing stock and make it ready for a changing climate, and make our indoor spaces more comfortable and healthier. It is rare that policymakers have an opportunity to address so many urgent social issues in a cost-effective and holistic way.