

BULLETIN

DATE: February 21, 2019

Update on Budget 2019

On Tuesday, February 19 the BC NDP government introduced Budget 2019. Following from the Throne Speech, the budget allows us to see the actual investments being made in critical program areas and the new initiatives government has prioritized for the coming year.

Budget 2019 continued to build on the government's focus on increasing affordability for families and strengthening health care and social services. There were a number of new programs and policies introduced worth highlighting:

- The new BC Child Opportunity Benefit will replace the early childhood tax benefit as a new benefit for low- and moderate-income families with children under the age of 18. It will provide families up to \$1,600 per year for the first child, up to \$2,600 per year for families with two children, and up to \$3,400 per year for families with three children.
- The elimination of interest on student loans for new and existing student loans provided through the BC Student Loan Program. The average undergraduate student has \$11,200 in BC student loan debt upon graduation and total federal and provincial student loan debt totaling \$28,000. Current and future HSA members are likely to benefit from this important measure.
- \$105 million over three years to improve services provided by BC Cancer Agency, including increasing the number of cancer-related surgeries, diagnostic imaging, PET and CT scans.
- New funding for parent-child social and emotional development programs for the child development sector as part of a \$74 million commitment from the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions over three years.
- Expanding BC's Fair Pharmacare program with an additional \$42 million over three years to include more drug coverage for low- and moderate-income British Columbians with diabetes, asthma, and hypertension.
- \$550 million over three years in additional supports and teachers for BC's K-12 classrooms.
- Investing \$902 million in the *CleanBC* environmental strategy over three years, with \$189 million in 2019/20 for incentives for electric vehicles and energy efficient building retrofits.
- \$297 million over three years to revenue-sharing with BC First Nations to support BC's commitment to Reconciliation with First Nations. This funding will be provided to First Nations to support priorities in their communities.

Elements of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy were previewed in the budget. Some of the aspects of the plan will include increased financial support for children in the foster care system; extra supports for parents whose children have special needs; funding to remove barriers to access to social assistance and disability assistance; BC Transit service improvements in over 30 communities; and a \$50 monthly increase to income and disability assistance rates. We expect the full Poverty Reduction Plan will be released in the coming weeks and we look forward to seeing how these, and other initiatives, will be rolled out. As health care and social services professionals, we know well that addressing poverty is critical to health outcomes.

The government also continues to make investment in health care infrastructure. This budget shows a \$4.4 billion commitment for a variety of capital projects: Camosun College Centre for Health Sciences, Children and Women's Hospital, Royal Columbian Hospital Redevelopment, Burnaby Centre for Mental Health and Addiction, Royal Inland Hospital patient tower, Penticton Regional Hospital patient tower, VGH operating room renewal, and a new St. Paul's Hospital.

Affordable child care continues to be a priority area, with a \$1 billion investment to-date that includes a fee reduction initiative to reduce child care costs for families, increased child care spaces and improved wages for care providers.

This budget also provides for a \$74 million investment in youth mental health services, including additional funding for expanding the provincial network of Foundry Centres. HSA will continue to advocate for the funding needed for early years mental health services to children in need, with a specific focus on creating / enhancing the services offered through the Child Development Centres.

One area we were hoping to see more investment was in new training spaces for health sciences professions. The Ministry of Health's workforce strategy highlights a number of priority professions in light of current and future labour market challenges. The majority of these priority professions are health science professions. This is an area the HSA will continue to advocate with both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training. We know too well that without growing the workforce in these key professions, the efforts to expand and enhance health care and community services will be challenged.

Overall, we were encouraged by Budget 2019 and will continue to work with the government on key policy areas that will help improve health care and patient outcomes, make life more affordable for British Columbians, and address inequalities across our province - whether income, health or access to critical public services.