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For Immediate Release

17,000 Workers Still Waiting for Low Wage Redress

Vancouver, BC – The BC CEO Network – which represents over 120 community and social service agencies across British Columbia – continues to advocate for fairness with the provincial government with respect to the issue of low wage redress (LWR).

Impacting over 17,000 employees across the province, the government’s decision to provide wage increases that are three times greater to unionized workers - and not to non-union workers doing the same work - has resulted in the galvanization of union, partial-union and non-union agencies to speak against this serious injustice.

Despite the Network’s continued momentum, the provincial government has appeared unresponsive and has avoided the opportunity to set things right.

Recently, in a column by Tom Fletcher (*Community Care Workers Next on NDP’s Union Checklist*), BC Premier John Horgan stated that “non-union agencies are those who ‘aligned themselves with the Liberals for question period fodder.’” However, Doug Tennant, Board Chair of the BC CEO Network, was quick to set the record straight.

“Agencies have endeavored to meet with all MLAs across the province, however we have heard of only one NDP MLA willing to meet with their constituents about this important issue. Minister Darcy and Minister Farnsworth have not been available, and Minister James has been unresponsive to a letter sent directly to her by the BC CEO Network.” Tennant went on to say “Agencies are looking for representation within their own communities and the reality in BC is that almost half of constituents are represented by Liberal MLAs.”

In addition, in his column, Mr. Fletcher points out that “The new party line is that these targeted agency managers might just line their own pockets instead of paying employees to keep them from leaving.” Board Vice-Chair, Karyn Santiago, described the inference as a “disheartening attempt to discredit the very services the government claims to be protecting and supporting.”

Santiago goes on to say that “The fact is that all unionized and partially unionized agencies that are impacted by this decision, report their wage rates to the Community Social Services Employers Association (CSSEA) on a yearly basis. CSSEA can absolutely verify the wage rates that are paid by the agencies and contract monitoring by funders ensures that the services are accurately delivered.”

For the last three years, CSSEA has also collected data on more than 675 non-union agencies. Each year, non-union agencies provide “funding assertion” letters to the funder to confirm that they will deliver 100% of the wage increases directly to the employees.

In the midst of this challenging – and often disheartening rhetoric – the BC CEO Network remains resilient and committed. They recently took another step to hold the provincial government accountable.

“Last Friday our lawyer sent a strongly worded letter to the provincial government making it clear that not only is their decision unjust, the letter also made it clear that the BC CEO Network would continue to pursue a response on behalf of their member organizations; inclusive of legal action, if necessary” says Tennant.

Quotes from the letter to the Minister of Finance:

We are writing to express our clients’ serious and urgent concerns about your Government’s unanticipated decision to deny wage increases identified by Government as critical to the fair treatment of social service workers (“Low Wage Redress” increases) to social service workers who are not represented by a union. The Government’s decision to deny an aspect of wage increases deemed appropriate for the sector to all non-union workers (even those who work along-side workers who are unionized for hybrid employers) is entirely unprecedented in the history of inclusion of social service workers in the broader public sector structure created by the *Public Sector Employers Act* in the early 1990’s.

This action is unfair and damaging to the continued provision of quality social services in the province, and also infringes both the *Labour Relations Code* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Our clients require your Government’s urgent attention to this matter or will have no choice but to pursue legal action.

As to what comes next, Tennant explains “We’re still waiting to see if the government will respond directly to us with regards to this obvious discrimination against the lowest paid workers in the public sector. We have the support of our members and partner provincial umbrella organizations to get Low Wage Redress for all community social service workers, no matter how long it takes. We are looking for a solution but, to date, the government has been unwillingly to communicate a solution or articulate a plan to resolve this problem.”

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Similar, but not identical, issues arose in the late 1990's and early 2000's when the Governments of the day purported to deny approved wage increases to workers employed by non-union employers (we note that all employees of hybrid employers have, until now, been funded for any bargained increases without question). Due, in part, to legal action and other advocacy by the agencies that employed non-union social service workers, the Government has consistently funded wage increases approved by PSEC for social service workers for all social service workers, regardless of union affiliation, since 2006. Network members expected your Government to follow that well-established pattern following the June 2018 wage settlement for the sector approved by PSEC (ratified in August 2018) for several reasons. First, the settlement included a landmark wage adjustment (the Low Wage Redress) based on this Government's public recognition of the importance of social service workers in the province. Network members and their workers welcomed this recognition, and thought this Government meant what it said about the value of social services workers to province. The Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction said in Question Period on Tuesday, April 9th *"This is about the services to the people who require those services. It's about those organizations and ensuring they can deliver those services. It's about ensuring those organizations are sustained and are able to do that."* Network members and their workers did not anticipate that their value to the Province would vary depending upon unionization.

Second, the Government did not provide any notice or indication to CSSEA or anyone else involved in the discussions that led to the June 2018 settlement of its plan to drastically alter this policy. Indeed, Government has yet to communicate its shocking decision in any organized fashion to the agencies and workers affected. Network members learned about your Government's reversal of established policy only informally and mere weeks before the first Low Wage Redress increase was to commence on April 1, 2019.

Finally, all non-union and hybrid employer social service agencies have complied with data reporting requirements that your Government has made mandatory, so expected that Government was well aware of the cost of Low Wage Redress across the sector at the time of the commitment. Previous administrations had pointed to a lack of information with respect to non-union or non-CSSEA-member workforces as an excuse for not funding wage increases for the group. There is no similar lack of data available to your Government.

The Network has written to you and written to and met with your colleague the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction to explain these concerns, but has received no indication that your Government is prepared to reverse its decision to limit Low Wage Redress increases to unionized workers. Our clients require your Government's urgent attention to this matter or will have no choice but to pursue legal action.



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If you or your colleagues wish to discuss these matters with our clients those discussions can be arranged by contacting Ms. Brenda Gillette, CEO of the Network at 604-819-4164 or brenda@bcceonetwork.ca .

Yours very truly,

Roper Greyell LLP

Per:

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DMS:DS

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