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More questions than answers in social services delivery Greater balance needed between public sector and non-profits

Edmonton – The Alberta government should reverse decades of failed experimentation in the delivery of critical social services in the province by re-establishing the proper balance between services delivered by Alberta Human Services and the province’s non-profit sector. A much-needed first step is to develop an accurate picture of the current relationship between the government and non-profits.

A new report released today by the Parkland Institute, *Neoliberalism and the Non-Profit Social Services Sector in Alberta*, argues that starting with changes implemented by the Klein government in the mid-1990s, successive Progressive Conservative governments have shifted a disproportionate amount of responsibility for social services delivery from the public sector to an often underfunded non-profit sector.

“There’s no question that the thousands of organizations that make up the non-profit social services sector in the province have a critical role to play in services delivery,” says Barret Weber, one of the co-authors of the report. “But two decades of short-sighted focus on reducing the cost of public services has meant a downloading of services to non-profits that they are sometimes ill-equipped to provide.”

Of particular concern, the report argues, is a troubling lack of available government information about the state of the non-profit social services sector. Almost no public information is available about the terms of the contracts that Alberta Human Services signs with non-profits, and there is little quality data regarding the tens of thousands of hours worked by volunteers and paid staff in non-profit social services delivery.

“Our research revealed clear indications that the sector is feeling the strain of decades of government downloading, and that has obvious implications for the people who depend on those services and for those who work in the sector,” Weber argues. “But without a better understanding of the state of the sector, and without taking steps to ensure proper oversight over the terms under which these agencies are delivering these services, the government is simply not in a position to take steps to correct the current situation.”

The report concludes with a series of five recommendations, including regular and comprehensive reporting on the state of the non-profit social services sector, full and publicly available disclosure of the terms of the contracts with the non-profit sector to the Auditor General, legislated clarification of the respective roles of the public and non-profit sectors, and a commitment to adequate, long-term funding for both the public and non-profit sectors through Alberta Human Services.

The Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The report *Neoliberalism and the Non-Profit Social Services Sector in Alberta* is available for download on Parkland’s website at parklandinstitute.ca.

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