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Honourable Irfan Sabir  
Minister of Community and Social Services  
Members of Executive Council  
Executive Branch  
224 Legislature Building  
10800 - 97 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

December 15, 2017

Dear Minister Sabir,

As your Government is refining work on the 2018 Provincial Budget, we are writing to you on an issue we believe is of utmost importance to the most vulnerable women of our community.

As you know, the Women's Centre of Calgary is every woman's place for support, connections and community. We offer women opportunities to both receive and provide support, connect with others and build community through a variety of programs. In 2017, we will have connected with and assisted more than 9,000 women, half of whom identified as living in poverty. The Women's Centre works to reflect their experiences and priorities in policy making and bring their voice to the table. We believe that understanding the effects of public policies on diverse women's lives is vital when prioritizing and allocating public funds.

**We deeply appreciate everything your Government has done so far to alleviate poverty in our province,** and help the most marginalized Albertans to better meet their basic needs and have better access to services, employment and community life. Your efforts stand out all the more considering they were implemented during hard times for Alberta's economy.

**However, we are still deeply concerned about the extremely low social assistance rates in our province.** The base annual income support benefit of the 'single employable' recipient was just under \$8,000 in 2016, which comes to as little as **38% of the poverty line**<sup>1</sup>. Those deemed 'unable to work' receive a base benefit of just under \$10,000, coming up to 48% of the poverty line. The benefits are not indexed to inflation, so they have been steadily eroding over the years. Individuals who qualify for AISH fare better, but **AISH recipients also have incomes below the poverty line (at 94% of it in 2016), and their benefit is not indexed to inflation either.**

While the federal Canada Child Benefit and the Alberta Child Benefit have helped raise the incomes of low income families with children, **single women on social assistance are struggling to pay rent and eat every day of the month.** With social assistance rates so dramatically below the poverty line in Alberta, we see higher demand for our direct assistance services every year. In the first three quarters of 2017, 15% more women than in the same period of 2016 have come to us to get help with meeting basic needs. Deep income poverty also leaves women at a greater risk of having to stay in situations of domestic violence and reduces their ability to participate fully in their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the most commonly used standard in the country, the after tax low-income cut-offs (AT-LICO), calculated at \$20,675 for 2016 (source: *Welfare in Canada, 2016*, Canada Social Report 2017, p. 43, available at: <http://www.caedoninst.org/Publications/PDF/1119ENG.pdf>)

We are aware that Alberta's economic downturn has resulted in a **caseload increase and higher costs** of the Income Support program to the budget. However, as many academics, practitioners and activists have argued – including economists and public health professionals – **the costs of inadequate social assistance are greater, and spread across other support systems**. Higher levels of social assistance in Alberta are likely to lead to tangible outcomes, such as less food insecurity, lower incidence of homelessness and improved health outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

**Our complex and inadequate income support system needs reform.** We hope that the federal and provincial governments will soon take joint action to create a more comprehensive approach to dealing with income poverty, one which would be anchored in a more equitable collection and distribution of our financial resources. This should include exploring how a universal basic income guarantee could provide an adequate and predictable income for all who need it.

In the meantime, however, an **increase of social assistance benefits – and indexing them to inflation** – would mean that those now living in deepest poverty would be able to meet more of their basic needs. It would make the difference between having a place to stay and being homeless, between going hungry and having just enough food to go on.

**We ask you to consider raising income support benefits, starting in 2018. It is a step that would take your government closer to fulfilling its commitment to making sure *all* lower-income Albertans can meet their needs and participate in communities. All Albertans deserve to live a life of dignity.**

We thank you for your time. If you would like to discuss this issue further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Kerry Lynn Okita  
Co-Chair of the Board of Directors

Susan Gillies  
Executive Director

CC: Honourable Joe Ceci, President of the Treasury Board, Minister of Finance;  
MLA Nathan Cooper, Community and Protective Services Critic, United Conservative Party;  
MLA Greg Clark, Party Leader, Alberta Party;  
David Khan, Party Leader, Alberta Liberal Party; MLA David Swann, Caucus Leader, Alberta Liberal Party  
Calgary MLAs

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<sup>2</sup> Recent paper (2016) by University of Calgary's School of Public Policy argues that improved income support to the "very poor [...] is an effective strategy for shrinking the need for [homeless] shelter beds." "Shrinking the Need for Homeless Shelter Spaces," by Kneebone and Wilkins, available at: <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/homeless-shelter-spaces-kneebone-wilkins.pdf>. Also, a study (2015) by researchers at the University of Toronto demonstrated that total health care costs in the province rose systematically with increasing severity of the household's income-related food insecurity. "Association between household food insecurity and annual health care costs," by Tarasuk et al, available at: <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/early/2015/08/10/cmaj.150234.full.pdf>