

# Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation Toolkit

## For Community Legal Clinics

July 29, 2013

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## I. Poverty Reduction Background and the Consultation Process

The provincial government has just announced that they are starting the process of community consultations on the next five-year poverty reduction strategy. The announcement is available here: <http://news.ontario.ca/mcys/en/2013/07/ontario-government-renewing-its-commitment-to-reduce-poverty.html>.

The *Poverty Reduction Act* passed in 2009 requires that government enact a poverty reduction strategy every five years. The current strategy expires as of December 4, 2013. Consultations before a new strategy is created are required by law. (See page 3 for info on the *Poverty Reduction Act 2009* and the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy.)

This toolkit is intended to help community legal clinics across Ontario push to ensure your community is included in consultations, make sure that people living in poverty, allies, advocates and community groups are included, and prepare the information that you and the individuals and groups you work with will use to contribute to the consultation process.

Consultations will be taking place in communities across the province, with local MPPs acting as host along with members of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction. The consultations will begin the week of August 6 and conclude in October. We have been told that a consultation schedule will be available shortly on the Poverty Reduction Strategy consultation website. This website will also allow for feedback from the general public based on “an online feedback form”, and will include “a toolkit to facilitate your own consultation”. See the consultation website here: <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/consultations.aspx>.

The timing is difficult and the timeline is tight, so we hope this toolkit – and the work that you and other groups continue to do in your communities – will help you to prepare.

There have been many consultations over the past several years – on poverty reduction, the long-term affordable housing strategy, the social assistance review, etc. – and people in communities, including you, may well feel “consulted out”. You may feel that government knows what needs to be done and should just get on with doing it.

However, consultations on poverty reduction are, at least in part, an important strategic opportunity to reiterate the critical work that government must take on to address the problems that people living on low incomes in our communities experience. They are an important opportunity to ensure that the issue of poverty in our communities – and the responsibility of government to deal with it effectively – gets attention in the public realm. And they’re an opportunity to tell government where and how the first poverty reduction strategy didn’t do enough, and what the second strategy should do.

The consultations will focus on getting feedback on key aspects of a poverty reduction strategy – like specific poverty reduction targets, initiatives that government should undertake that will improve the lives of Ontarians who live in poverty, and indicators to measure the success of the strategy.

The consultation website indicates that “consultations will seek feedback on, but not be limited to, the following:

- Elements of the current strategy that have worked well or need improvement;
- Refining execution of current policies, programs and initiatives;
- Continued barriers to success;
- New models of collaboration and partnership;
- Areas of special priority and urgency”

You may wish to think through these areas of focus when preparing for your local consultation meeting or when preparing to host your own meeting.

The 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction has created “Five Priorities for the Next Poverty Reduction Strategy”, which may be helpful in your preparations. These are:

- Bold poverty reduction targets for adults as well as children and those living in the deepest poverty;
- A comprehensive action agenda of strong policy measures;
- A plan to ensure sufficient public revenues to make the required investments;
- Instruments to ensure a high standard of accountability on progress;
- Strategic, dedicated investments in every provincial budget.

More detail on the Five Priorities is available here: <http://25in5.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/25in5-five-Priorities-for-the-next-PRS-July-2013.pdf>

In addition, this toolkit includes suggestions for key messages on issues that relate to social assistance reform and its relationship to poverty reduction, but we are keeping these focused on the “big picture” of more general issues and concerns. We know that social assistance will be discussed at the poverty reduction consultations. But we also know that you will want to talk about affordable housing, transportation, health and dental care, child care, good jobs, community programs, immigration, issues facing First Nations (whether urban or on reserve), and a host of other concerns. That’s why we’re keeping our suggested key messages on social assistance more general.

As you know, the government received a report and recommendations in October 2012 from the social assistance review commission. That report is highly uneven. Many recommendations reflect a broad-based consensus and should be acted upon immediately. Other recommendations may require further study. And some recommendations should clearly not be adopted – such as those that would negatively impact on people with disabilities. See our response to the Commission’s report for more detail (<http://sareview.ca/isac-news/isac-responds-to-final-report-of-social-assistance-review/>).

While government has made the commitment to reforming the social assistance system, the critical question is which reforms will be made. The government cannot simply adopt the Commission’s report wholesale. The measures announced in Budget 2013 were a small first step toward reform. But the Budget also states clearly that the government will engage communities in further dialogue about the Commission’s recommendations and next steps for reform.

We understand that government is poised to announce how this engagement will take place. This means there will be two separate opportunities to talk about social assistance – at the poverty reduction consultations and in another process on the more detailed issues. ISAC will also be providing information on that process as we get more information about it.

## **Info Sheet: The Poverty Reduction Act (2009) and the first Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008)**

On May 6, 2009 the Ontario legislature unanimously passed Bill 152: *The Poverty Reduction Act*. All parties in the legislature – the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives, and NDP – supported the legislation, which is available here: ([http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_09p10\\_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_09p10_e.htm)).

The legislation is significant because it acknowledges that poverty is not inevitable and that government can and should create policy to reduce poverty.

### **There are 3 key facets of the legislation:**

1. It requires both current and future provincial governments to set a new poverty reduction target at least every five years, and to create a new poverty reduction strategy after having consulted with low-income Ontarians, specifically including those most at risk of poverty.
2. It requires all poverty reduction strategies to include a specific poverty reduction target, initiatives that will improve the lives of people living in poverty, and indicators to measure the success of the strategy.
3. It requires the government to report directly to the Legislative Assembly on its progress on reducing poverty.

### **In addition, all poverty reduction strategies must be based on eight principles:**

The language below is taken directly from the legislation:

1. There is untapped potential in Ontario's population that needs to be drawn upon by building and establishing supports for, and eliminating barriers to, full participation by all people in Ontario's economy and society and, in particular, persons who face discrimination on the grounds of their race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.
2. Strong, healthy communities are an integral part of the poverty reduction strategy; their potential must be brought to bear on the reduction of poverty.
3. Not all groups of people share the same level of risk of poverty. The poverty reduction strategy must recognize the heightened risk among groups such as immigrants, women, single mothers, people with disabilities, aboriginal peoples and racialized groups.
4. Families must be supported so that they can play a meaningful role in the reduction of poverty and in promoting opportunity.
5. All people in Ontario, including those living in poverty, deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

6. Ontarians, especially people living in poverty, are to be involved in the design and implementation of the strategy.
7. A sustained commitment to work together to develop strong and healthy children, youth, adults, families and communities is required to effectively reduce poverty.
8. The third sector, including non-profit, charitable and voluntary organizations, are integral to a poverty reduction strategy by delivering the programs and services that matter to people, by strengthening communities and by making a positive contribution to the economy.

### **The Poverty Reduction Strategy (2008)**

The provincial government's first poverty reduction strategy was entitled "Breaking the Cycle".

This first strategy included:

- a specific target of reducing child poverty by 25% in five years;
- a number of initiatives in various areas including ;
- a series of indicators, including a low income measure, a deprivation index, and others.

The 2008 strategy is available, along with annual reports, at this website:

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/index.aspx>

## II. Ensuring Your Community is Included

We don't yet know how extensive consultations on poverty reduction are going to be this time around, but we do know that consultations are unlikely to happen in every city and town across Ontario. Ensuring a consultation takes place that people in your community can participate in will help to ensure that community voices are heard.

It's as important now as ever to take advantage of the opportunity to restate and reinforce what we're all fighting for in our advocacy and community organizing work. People continue to live in poverty and deep hardship across Ontario. They and their allies need to be heard by their elected representatives.

Here are some tips on ensuring that a consultation takes place that your community can participate in. Of course, these are generic tips that may or may not apply in your community – use them and / or adapt them as you see fit.

### 1. Contact your MPP

This initial contact – whether by phone or email – is to find out from your MPP:

- When the consultation for your community is to take place;
- Whether it is scheduled in a location and at a date and time that makes sense in your community and gives individuals and groups the time they need to prepare;
- Whether appropriate resources will be provided so that low-income people in your area can participate.

Your conversation may include items like the following:

- If they are a Liberal MPP, let them know that you know that a schedule for consultations is being drawn up, and you want to make sure your community is included;
- If they are an NDP or Conservative MPP, let them know that the government is conducting consultations on poverty reduction. Remind them that their party supported the *Poverty Reduction Act* in the unanimous vote in the Ontario legislature on May 6, 2009. Tell them that they therefore have a responsibility to make sure their community is heard;
- Ask them what their outreach strategy is going to be;
- Offer to assist their office with outreach to make sure that low-income people are included;
- Make sure that they include important groups in your community that should be consulted – e.g., your local municipality, service groups, poverty reduction roundtables, social planning councils, shelters, ethno-racial community organizations, etc.;
- Press them to provide funding for low-income people to participate (e.g., transit/transportation money, child care, etc.) and/or to host more than one meeting if your community is geographically dispersed;

- Give them ideas for when to best schedule the meeting to ensure the most participation possible. Clearly, consulting over the summer is not optimal, so try to make sure that they find the best time to include as many people as possible, especially people who are living on low incomes.
- Use this **Accessibility Checklist** to press them on when, where, and how to hold the meeting:
  - Will there be sufficient opportunity for people from disparate geographic areas in the community to attend? Will there be more than one meeting?
  - Is it in a location that is easily accessible by transit (if it's available)? Are there other ways, like organized carpooling, to ensure people can attend?
  - Is the space accessible for people with physical disabilities?
  - Will money / tokens be provided for the transportation necessary to get people to the meeting?
  - Will translation services (French / English / ASL / other languages), attendant care, and child care be provided?
  - Will there be refreshments? Is the space scent-free?
  - Are there other issues that could limit the participation of people living on low incomes, and what will be done to resolve them?

Work with your MPP's office as appropriate – and, potentially, bring other groups into this work – to make sure the consultation is as inclusive as possible.

## **2. Get Community Members Involved**

You'll want to engage your community on the substance of the consultations – that is, making sure people in your community are prepared to participate in the consultation meeting. We're providing tips for that process in Section III. But you may also need to get your community engaged to press your MPP into action.

If you're having difficulty reaching your MPP, if no consultation is being scheduled in an area that your community can participate in, or if your MPP is refusing to respond to your concerns about accessibility, bring in others to help convince him / her.

Talk to leaders in your community. Tell them that the next five-year poverty reduction strategy consultations are about to happen. Tell them that it's important that your community has a voice in the planning for Ontario's second poverty reduction strategy. Ask them to contact your MPP to make sure your community can participate.

The leaders in your community can also provide important resources to ensure as many people as possible are engaged in the consultation – energizing their own contacts, reaching out to low-income people, etc.



### **3. Get Your Local Media Involved**

Contact your local media. Tell them that the provincial government is hosting consultations on poverty reduction.

Remind them that people in your community continue to live in poverty. Tell them that serious action to reduce and eliminate poverty is not only needed, it's possible. Tell them that good public policy coupled with serious investments can make the difference.

Tell them that poverty and inequality are not inevitable. They are a result of choices we make in public policy. They are a result of business choices about paying people enough for the work they do. They are the result of choices we make about whether we build inclusive communities or allow division to grow.

Pitch them on writing a story or series of stories (potentially over the summer) to highlight poverty in your community. They could cover things like:

- the personal story of an individual (or series of individuals) in your community who is/are living in poverty;
- the contributions that local groups are making to address poverty in your community, and the challenges they face in doing so;
- the pressing issues (like housing, transportation, child care) that people in your community are facing;
- the importance of making sure the provincial government and the Opposition parties take their commitment to reducing poverty in Ontario seriously;

Tell them that they should cover the poverty reduction consultations and the work you and other groups are doing to engage with it.

Note that, as requested, we will be providing a sample press release and generic op-ed in the coming days that you may wish to use.

### **4. What If There's No Consultation in My Community?**

If you find that there is no consultation scheduled in an area that will allow people in your community to participate, and your MPP isn't being helpful on this front, you may want to host your own meeting to engage your community and provide feedback in other ways. See page 11 for tips on hosting your own meeting.

### **III. Getting Ready for the Consultations**

#### ***Before the Consultation: Organizing and Preparing Key Messages***

Getting ready for the consultation includes doing any or all of three things, in various combinations:

- engaging with a group you've already been working with (your "partners")
- expanding the organizing with other members of your community
- preparing your key messages

Doing this work in your community is about building a "big tent" to bring as many people together as possible to pressure government to make the right policy decisions and investments to reduce and eliminate poverty in Ontario. It's about the ongoing work of building coalitions in communities and contributing to building experience and skills with the low-income people we work with. And it's also about working to ensure that the issues that are raised at the consultation aren't in competition but are complementary.

#### **1. Engaging Your Partners**

Your clinic may be involved with a group that works on poverty-related issues. That group may be made up members of the community who have lived experience of poverty, may be agency-based, or may be some combination of the two. It may be a group that was involved in earlier consultation processes on poverty reduction, affordable housing, or the social assistance review.

Engaging with this group may be a good place to start to organize toward the poverty reduction consultation.

Let your partners in this group know what you know about the consultations. You may want to make a few phone calls, send a detailed email, or call a meeting to discuss how to plan for your involvement in the consultations. Use the information in the Background section (page 1) as required. Talk with them about how to prepare for the consultations and how to get other community members involved, and particularly people who are living on low incomes and those from groups who are systemically disadvantaged.

If you haven't engaged with partners in your community for a while, here are some things to remember:

- Think broadly about who the important groups are in your community who have a stake in reducing and eliminating poverty. Even if you don't know them well, reach out to them to engage them in this process. Consider including:
- People who have lived experience of poverty;
- Caseworkers in other legal clinics that are also located in your MPP's riding;
- Caseworkers in your local community health clinics or other service providers;
- Ethno-racial community organizations;
- Housing organizations;

- Women's shelters, men's shelters, soup kitchens;
- Social justice organizations;
- Agencies serving immigrants;
- Social planning councils;
- Faith-based groups;
- Seniors groups;
- Activist organizations and labour unions / labour councils;
- Unusual suspects – those who might not be expected to partner with you on this issue, such as doctors or other health care professionals in your area (less poverty means a healthier community) or business people (reducing poverty means increasing the economic health of their community, and they also have a role to play by providing employment opportunities to people in your area).
- Don't forget to include members of the Board of Directors of your clinic.

### ***Specialty Clinic Organizing***

Specialty clinics, who often have a client group that is dispersed geographically across many communities, can play an important role in organizing for the community consultations. Specialty clinics can organize with and support their clients to attend meetings in their own local communities across the province. Specialty clinics can also host their own meetings. Check page 13 for tips.

## **2. Expanding the Organizing**

You have likely done a lot of organizing in your community, whether around previous provincial consultation processes or for various local actions and activities. Here are some tips to consider:

- What strategies have you used to organize with community members before? What worked and didn't work?
- Who did not participate last time and why? How can you get them involved?
- How can you take an equity approach to your organizing? In other words, how can you ensure that people who are the most disadvantaged (women, people from racialized groups including Aboriginals / First Nations / Metis, new immigrants, migrant workers, people with disabilities, etc.) are included in your work and in the consultation process?
- Think about both the usual and unusual suspects when organizing with community members, and how to get in contact with them.
- Think about how many of the groups and organizations listed above can contribute to the organizing you want to do.

You may want to hold a meeting with your partners group to develop a strategy to outreach to and engage with people in your community to get them involved in the poverty reduction consultation.

### 3. Preparing Key Messages

Together with your partners and members of your community, prepare the messages that you want to raise at the consultation meeting. Call a meeting with your partners and community members to help create, review and approve these key messages.

If you like, you can use the key messages that we've included in the next section as a guide, adapting them as necessary. Create your own key messages about issues that are particularly important in your own community. For example, if housing is an important issue, the key message might be "*The next poverty reduction strategy must include a commitment to provide X number of affordable housing units in communities across Ontario*".

To create your key messages, you may wish to go back through any submissions you made to consultations on the previous poverty reduction strategy, the social assistance review, or the housing strategy. You may want to review documents produced by your clinic or other groups in your community who have identified key issues facing people living on low incomes in your area.

Use these documents and others to bolster your key messages with whatever facts, figures, and statistics you need. Some others might include reports produced by your municipality, groups in your community, the province, Statistics Canada, etc.

Remember that the consultation website will provide a "consultation toolkit", which might help you with your preparations. In addition, the website says that "consultations will seek feedback on, but not be limited to, the following:

- Elements of the current strategy that have worked well or need improvement;
- Refining execution of current policies, programs and initiatives;
- Continued barriers to success;
- New models of collaboration and partnership;
- Areas of special priority and urgency"

You may wish to think through these areas of focus when doing your preparations.

You may wish to consult the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction's Five Priorities for the next poverty reduction strategy for ideas (see the link on page 2).

Share your key messages with everyone you're working with and those who will be attending the consultation in your community.

Assign someone to take notes during the consultation. This can help with any information sharing you want to do to other groups and with any debriefing you want to do after the consultation takes place.

A few days before the consultation meeting actually takes place, you may wish to send out an e-mail or make some phone calls to your partners and community members to remind people of where the consultation is taking place and at what time.

## **Specialty Clinic Key Messages**

Preparing key messages is a great way for specialty clinics to be involved in the consultations. If each specialty clinic prepares a brief set of key messages on their area of expertise (e.g., seniors, children and youth, ethno-racial communities, environment, etc.), those key messages can be shared with community clinics and their partner groups, who can raise them in the local consultation process. More details on how specialty clinics can be involved are on page 13.

## **4. Hosting Your Own Meeting**

Regardless of whether or not a consultation is scheduled in your community, you may want to host your own meeting, particularly if you are partnering with other groups who can help share the workload and get more people involved.

The province's consultation website says "an online feedback form and a toolkit to facilitate your own consultation" will be available on August 6. You may choose to use the consultation toolkit to focus the discussion at your meeting.

(<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/consultations.aspx>).

And remember that the consultation website also says that "consultations will seek feedback on, but not be limited to, the following:

- Elements of the current strategy that have worked well or need improvement;
- Refining execution of current policies, programs and initiatives;
- Continued barriers to success;
- New models of collaboration and partnership; Areas of special priority and urgency."

You may want to focus on these elements at your meeting, or take another approach depending on what you and your community partners want to focus on.

- Use the list in the Partners section above to think about who to include in the meeting. Try to include many different groups and people in your community as possible (those that deal with areas like, for example, housing, child care, women's issues, racialized groups, new immigrants, Aboriginal and First Nations issues, health care, labour, income support, etc.).
- Make sure to think about equity in planning your meeting. Those who are often left out of government and organization consultations are usually those who are most vulnerable. Find ways to support them to get involved.
- Make sure the date and time of your meeting is scheduled to be as accessible to everyone as possible. Think through other issues of accessibility – see the Accessibility Checklist on page 6 for more ideas.
- Think about using a webinar to engage your community, if they are dispersed geographically. Clinics may be able to get technical support for a webinar through CLEO's Your Legal Rights project (<http://yourlegalrights.on.ca/>).

- Make sure to invite your MPP to attend your meeting, as well as other important partners in your community. You may also want to invite the media.
- Consult the government's consultation website (see the link above) to download the toolkit in advance of your meeting.
- Think about the format of your meeting – often starting with a plenary, dividing the larger group into smaller working groups to tackle separate questions or aspects of poverty reduction, and then reconvening in the plenary to report back from each of the small groups can work well.
- You may want to start your meeting with an introduction that talks about why it's important that any provincial government sets poverty reduction targets, as a focus for policy action and investment. You may want take some time to remind people about the variety of government programs and services that can contribute to poverty reduction and eradication – social assistance, housing, health care, child care, good quality jobs, employment equity, the minimum wage, etc. You may want to then move into small groups to discuss the questions in the government's materials, or your own questions or issues.
- Gather the results of the discussions at your meeting and write them up in a report. Submit the report on the website, or to the consultation email at [povertystrategy@ontario.ca](mailto:povertystrategy@ontario.ca).
- You may want to use other means of conveying the points you want to make. Make videos with local people in your community. Use art projects to engage people in telling their stories. Distribute the materials you produce on websites and through social media to share and amplify what your community has to say.

## **5. After the Consultation: Debrief**

Whether you have participated in the consultation hosted by your MPP or held your own meeting, it may be helpful to debrief with your partners and community members. This can help you determine what you learned from the consultation, how people felt about the consultation process, and what your next steps could be.

Questions that could guide this conversation include:

- What did we do well? What can we do better next time?
- What did we learn about how the MPP's position on poverty reduction and/or the issue of poverty in our community?
- What did we learn from other participants?
- What are important next steps that we as a community can do in the next few months leading up to the release of the next poverty reduction strategy?
- What are the follow-up activities that will maintain the momentum of our local organizing efforts?
- How can we connect our work in our community with what other communities are doing across Ontario?

## 6. What Specialty Clinics Can Do

There are at least two key ways that clinics that don't have specific geographically-defined communities can be involved in community consultations on poverty reduction.

### a) *Engage Client Groups*

Those specialty clinics that have client groups that are dispersed across the province can work to engage their clients in the poverty reduction consultations taking place in their communities.

Once the official provincial consultation schedule is available, specialty clinics can alert their clients to the time and location of the consultations and encourage them to take part. If the local clinic is taking part in the consultation – or if the local clinic is hosting their own consultation meeting – the specialty clinic can connect their clients with the local clinic for engagement, support and assistance.

Specialty clinics may also want to engage their client group by **hosting their own community consultation meeting**. There may be a client group that you work closely with whose members are primarily located nearby and who could attend an in-person meeting, or you could choose to set up a webinar to engage people remotely. See page 11 for tips on hosting your own meeting.

Specialty clinics can also provide their clients in other geographic areas of the province with background information and key messages, such as those that are included in this toolkit or those that are created to address the area of work of the specialty clinic itself.

### b) *Prepare and Share Key Messages*

Specialty clinics can also prepare their own Key Messages to share with local clinics and their community partners for inclusion in consultations.

Specialty clinics could prepare a brief set of key messages that connects their area of expertise (e.g., seniors, children and youth, ethno-racial communities, environment, etc.) with action that government can and should take to reduce and eliminate poverty. Keep the key messages brief, but provide enough background information for people in local clinics, who may not have much familiarity with your area, to understand the issues.

Make sure to put your Key Messages on your letterhead, or provide some other identifying information so that local clinics and communities know where the information is coming from. Also, providing your contact information will be helpful if people need any additional information or clarification.

Share those key messages on the clinics' Community Development list. Local clinics and their partner groups can use these Key Messages when they are preparing in advance of their consultation meeting, raise them in the course of the consultation, and/or include them in any feedback they are providing through the government's website.

## IV. Suggested Key Messages

There are many issues that you will want to raise at the poverty reduction consultation, which will be driven by the pressing issues of poverty in your community. You may want to focus on housing or on the challenges around child care. You may want to highlight the issues facing women, recent immigrants, or people from racialized communities, or focus on the challenges for First Nations communities or people living in the North.

We're including some suggestions below for some key messages on investing in poverty reduction that you may want to include. Suggestions for key messages on social assistance follow. You may also want to consult the 25in5 Network's Five Priorities for the next poverty reduction strategy (see the link on page 2).

### **On Poverty Reduction, Austerity, and the Need for Investment**

#### **1. The next poverty reduction strategy must commit to reducing poverty regardless of the economic context**

- ***Economic downturns are no excuse for governments to renege on poverty reduction commitments***
  - The first poverty reduction strategy gave government an “out” – it said that a robust economy was a pre-requisite for the success of the strategy. It said that all bets were off if the economic situation in Ontario went bad.
  - In 2008, that's exactly what happened. We saw the biggest economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.
  - In 2009, the provincial government kept true to its commitment by making investments that ensured that child poverty started to go down. But by 2010, the government had changed course, citing the lingering economic downturn and resulting provincial deficit as the rationale for pulling back on poverty reduction commitments.
  - Instead of backing off from its commitments in tough economic times, Ontario needs to step up for Ontarians.
  - Programs to support people are most needed when an economic downturn hits them with job losses and when people who are already living on low incomes need more support.
  - An economic downturn is not the time for government to pull back from their commitments – it's the time for government to step in and provide the supports that Ontarians need.
- ***Continuing austerity will undercut poverty reduction efforts***
  - When government prioritises deficit reduction over program spending, it stops focusing on the needs of the people it is supposed to serve. Austerity in Ontario may not be as bad as in places like Europe, but continuing to pursue



- policies that restrict spending in order to pay down the deficit means we're not spending what we need to ensure the health of people and of the economy.
- The 2013 budget restricts government spending over the next three years to “maintenance” levels. This restricts government’s ability to invest in the initiatives that are required to reduce and eliminate poverty.
  - The budget says “eliminating the deficit is the single most important step the Province can take to grow the economy and create jobs”. But restricting government spending to eliminate deficits could actually stand in the way of growth. This approach contributed to a double-dip recession in the UK and continuing economic stagnation in Europe. The International Monetary Fund is now cautioning countries – the UK, Greece and most recently the US – that reduced government spending could reduce growth.
  - The government has proudly declared that Ontario has the lowest program spending per capita of any province in Canada. This is not something to be proud of – it demonstrates an unwillingness to do the hard work required to reduce and end poverty in Ontario.
  - If government is serious about poverty reduction, it must abandon its focus on austerity and refocus on investing in Ontarians. And it can do this by committing to raise the revenues necessary to make the required investments.

## **2. The next poverty reduction strategy must include firm commitments to make the investments required**

- The investments that the provincial government made in the first years of the 2008 poverty reduction strategy – investments in the Ontario Child Benefit and the HST rebate, in particular – were responsible for reducing child poverty by 6.6% between 2008 and 2010 – right at the height of the recession. This means that investments can get results.
- The need for investment is great. For example, a recent report from the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and the Cooperative Housing Federation estimates that those Ontario households in the most pressing housing need require an extra \$290 per month, just to afford housing that’s the right size and in good repair – and there are more than 500,000 of these households in Ontario. The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care estimates that Ontario needs to spend \$300 million just to stabilize the current child care system – let alone providing good quality, affordable child care for everyone who needs it. And investments are needed in many other policy areas as well.
- Reducing poverty can’t be accomplished by “doing more with less” or by simply reorganizing existing programs. Some program reorganization could help, but the only real way to meet the target is to invest resources.
- The next strategy must identify how much money government is going to invest in each of the program areas that the strategy contains, and in what year of the strategy these investments will be made.

**3. The next poverty reduction strategy must identify any new revenue tools that are required to ensure poverty reduction efforts actually pay off**

- Since the 1980s, public policy has been driven by the belief that tax cuts produce economic growth. But the evidence has shown that this is not the case. Instead, dramatic tax cuts to the wealthiest and corporations have contributed to increasing levels of poverty and inequality.
- It's time for government to recognize that this approach isn't working. Unless there is sufficient revenue to invest in poverty reduction, any targets that are set simply won't be met.
- In the same way that the government has made a commitment to finding the revenues required to improve public transit across Ontario, government must commit to find the revenues required to reduce and eliminate poverty.
- The amounts of investment that are needed to get the job done must be identified – whether from current resources or from new revenue sources. The sources of revenue to invest in poverty reduction must be identified and a plan must be created to raise them.

**On Poverty Reduction and Social Assistance Reform**

**1. The next poverty reduction strategy must make the commitment that social assistance reforms will have the explicit objective of reducing poverty**

- The commitment to review social assistance was made in the 2008 poverty reduction strategy. In other words, the review was done because government made a commitment to reducing poverty. Reforms to social assistance should therefore have reducing poverty as their primary objective.
- Whether reforms are focused on changing the structure of benefits, refocusing the outcomes of the programs, or changing the way the programs are administered, they must all be judged by whether or not they reduce poverty.
- No one receiving social assistance – whether now or in the future – should lose money as a result of reform. In a program where the purchasing power of benefit rates has eroded steadily for nearly twenty years, reforms must be made to ensure more money for people on social assistance.

**2. The next poverty reduction strategy must recognize that reforming the social assistance system will require investment, and commit to making those investments**

- Social assistance can't be reformed in ways that reduce poverty by "doing more with less" or by reorganizing the existing programs. Some program reorganization could help to save money that could be redirected into providing better benefits and services. But the only real way to make meaningful, positive change is to invest resources up front. If the right reforms and investments are made now, savings will come later.

- The social assistance system has eroded for the past twenty years. For example, OW benefits for a single person would have to increase by 56% and ODSP by 22% to have the same purchasing power as they had in 1993. We can't ensure people have enough money to live in health and dignity without making significant investments.
- Employment supports and services and the variety of other services that people need like child care, mental health supports and services, and many others need to be improved. This takes money.
- Reforms must be accompanied by sufficient resources to get the job done.

### **3. The next poverty reduction strategy must commit to specific actions that will improve the quality of jobs in the labour market**

- A primary focus of the social assistance review was to find ways to help people on social assistance get into paid employment in the labour market. There was a particular emphasis placed on helping people with disabilities find work.
- The OW program has to move away from pushing people into the “first available job” regardless of the quality of that job or the amount of money they could earn. Instead, the objective of getting people into a job should be to get them into a good job – a sustainable job that provides enough money to live on.
- A recent study from Florida has shown that welfare programs that push people into the labour market by threatening to take away their income benefits actually result in a higher rate of death among participants than programs that support people into and during paid employment.
- ODSP must not become more like OW. People with disabilities don't need to be pushed into low paid jobs – especially if this threatens their benefits. This only creates more hardship, health problems, and desperation. This is particularly true knowing that the labour market is not a welcoming place for people with disabilities, and that it's hard to find a job that accommodates a person's disability. (See point 5 below for more information on this.)
- And employment supports for everyone have to improve so that all people are given the supports and tools they need to get into the labour market.
- The problem with the labour market, however, is that many people who have paid jobs in Ontario live in poverty. The minimum wage is currently \$10.25 an hour. A single person working full time at minimum wage would get a net income of \$19,490. That's including refundable tax credits from the provincial and federal governments. That's a lot more than the amount a single person on Ontario Works receives in their total income (i.e., including tax credits). But it's still \$1100 below the Low Income Measure that Ontario uses to track progress on poverty reduction. Surely, working should not mean living in poverty.
- The poverty reduction strategy must include specific commitments to increase the quality of paid work in Ontario. The minimum wage must be increased.

- Employment Standards have to be enforced. Ontario needs a Good Jobs strategy. And Ontario needs a labour market strategy for people with disabilities.

#### **4. The next poverty reduction strategy must direct all appropriate ministries to be involved in social assistance reform**

- Many people end up on social assistance because of failures in other systems – like the health care system, WSIB, child services, Employment Standards, etc. Fixing the failures in these other systems would mean many people wouldn't have to end up relying on social assistance.
- And when people are on social assistance, they often experience problems from the way that social assistance rules interact with rules in other programs – like rules around housing charges, rules in other income support programs, child care rules, rules in benefits delivered by the Ministry of Health, and others.
- And some of the social assistance rules result in problems in other systems that are administered by other ministries. Health is a good example. Giving people on social assistance the income and supports they need would almost certainly reduce costs for the health care system.
- Government has to think bigger than just social assistance when making reforms. Making sure that people have adequate incomes and are treated with respect and dignity depends on all appropriate ministries working together.

#### **5. The next poverty reduction strategy must recognize that people with disabilities face special barriers and need a specialised program**

- There's a reason that there are two separate social assistance programs, one for people with disabilities and one for people who don't have disabilities. People with disabilities have unique needs and many need long-term, ongoing support.
- People with disabilities face particular barriers – complex social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that restrict their ability to participate fully in society, including the labour market, and to be understood, respected, and accommodated. They need a specialised program that understands these barriers and addresses them effectively.
- A particular problem for people with disabilities is the barriers in the labour market. The labour market is not a welcoming place for many people with disabilities, and disabilities aren't often not properly accommodated. These barriers often compromise the ability of people with disabilities to fully support themselves from paid employment. And competing for jobs in the labour market is harder for people with disabilities than for other people. Having a disability may mean facing these barriers for an entire lifetime.
- While government is taking steps to make the labour market more welcoming (like the Employment Standards under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or AODA), we're still in the early days. People with disabilities need income security and a program that will provide it.

- The lack of accommodation in the labour market and the often lifelong nature of disability mean that people may move in and out of the labour market, and on and off of assistance. Government must take responsibility for ensuring that people who experience this kind of relationship to work are guaranteed an adequate income and the additional supports they require.

**6. The next poverty reduction strategy must commit to equity and justice, not sameness and benefit reductions. Acting fairly means ensuring equity.**

- The *Poverty Reduction Act* explicitly recognizes that not all people have the same risk of poverty, that some groups of people face barriers to full participation in society, and that some groups face discrimination.
- This recognizes that different supports and services are needed for different groups, to address the particular barriers that people face.
- So it's only fair that some groups of people get some services that other groups of people might not need. And that's not just fairness. That's equity and justice.
- Some people say that people on social assistance shouldn't get certain benefits because other people – people who aren't on social assistance but who also have low incomes – don't get them. They say that people on social assistance shouldn't get benefits that people who are working for minimum wage don't get. They say that's not fair.
- But you don't make things more fair by taking benefits away from one group just because another group doesn't have them. That's just makes things bad for everyone. That's not what fairness should mean.
- People who receive social assistance, whether from OW or ODSP, have a variety of needs. They're not all the same. Some need more help and some need less. Some have particular challenges, and some don't. Everyone should get the help they need – even if other people on social assistance don't get that help. That's equity.
- And people who aren't on social assistance – people working in low income jobs – should be able to access the same benefits that people on social assistance can get. Don't take away benefits from people on OW or ODSP. Give more benefits, to all low income people in Ontario. That's fair.
- The provincial government signalled what could be the start of an important trend in social assistance policy in the 2013 Budget – they provided a little bit more money to single people on OW than they did to others. While the amount of money provided is nowhere near what advocates – and the social assistance review commission – were recommending, this approach recognizes that some people need extra help. Government must make more significant investments in incomes. But they must also take this same approach to other people who also need extra help – an equity approach.
- What's fair is what's equitable, not what's the same. There's nothing unfair about equity. In fact, taking an equity approach is what fairness really means.

## V. Key Resources

Beyond the resources already listed, and those of your own groups and communities, the following resources provide more information on some of the above key messages.

- ISAC resources
  - Budget 2013 analysis:  
<http://www.incomeseconomy.org/documents/BudgetAnalysis2013.doc>
  - Resources on the social assistance review: [www.sareview.ca](http://www.sareview.ca)
  - Webinar on the report of the social assistance review commission:  
<http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/webinar-the-commissions-report-and-future-direction-for-social-assistance-reform/>
- Other social assistance resources:
  - ODSP Action Coalition's five Position Papers related to recommendations of the social assistance review Commission: [www.odspaction.ca](http://www.odspaction.ca)
  - Report of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC):  
[http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/publications/social/sarac/toc\\_sarac.aspx](http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/publications/social/sarac/toc_sarac.aspx)
  - Media report on the Florida study: <http://medcitynews.com/2013/06/pressure-on-welfare-recipients-over-losing-benefits-slightly-increases-risk-of-dying/>
- Anti-austerity arguments:
  - CCPA Ontario budget 2013 analysis:  
<http://behindthenumbers.ca/2013/05/02/ontario-budget-2013-four-more-years-of-austerity/>
  - Why austerity may be wrecking the recovery:  
<http://www2.macleans.ca/2013/05/16/squeezed-to-death/>
  - Is the evidence for austerity based on an Excel spreadsheet error?:  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/04/16/is-the-best-evidence-for-austerity-based-on-an-excel-spreadsheet-error/>
  - IMF warns Canada against harsh austerity measures:  
<http://metronews.ca/news/canada/635391/imf-warns-canada-against-harsh-austerity-measures/>
- Resources on substantive equality / equity:
  - Equality Rights in the Charter: <http://www.ccppcj.ca/e/rights/rights-charter.shtml>
  - Disability, Poverty, and Citizenship: A Short Note:  
<http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/socialpolicy/poverty-citizenship/disability-poverty-citizenship-a-short-note>
  - The Racialization of Poverty in Canada: Implications for S.15 Charter protection:  
[http://www.hcci.ca/hcci1/images/hamilton/geg\\_section\\_15\\_implications\\_of\\_racialization\\_of\\_poverty.pdf](http://www.hcci.ca/hcci1/images/hamilton/geg_section_15_implications_of_racialization_of_poverty.pdf)
- Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage: <http://raisetheminimumwage.ca/>
- Where's Home? 2013:  
[http://www.onpha.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Where\\_s\\_Home&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=14518](http://www.onpha.on.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Where_s_Home&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=14518)