

poverty reduction plan

November 26, 2007

Dear Member of Provincial Parliament:

We are writing on behalf of 25 in 5: Network for Poverty Reduction, a multi-sectoral network comprised of sixty local and provincial organizations and individuals working on eliminating poverty in the province, to urge your support for a strong commitment to a provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy in the upcoming Speech from the Throne.

Expectations are high for poverty reduction in Ontario in 2008, fueled by Premier McGuinty's commitment to set anti-poverty targets and timetables within 12 months and the appointment of Deb Matthews as the lead Minister. As we look ahead to next week's Throne Speech, four simple words will signal the degree of the government's dedication to anti-poverty: **targets, policies, consultations** and **resources**.

As we are learning from other jurisdictions, **targets** are critical to following through on good intentions.

Tony Blair set a target of 25% poverty reduction in 5 years, which opened the door for impressive gains in the UK. Closer to home, Premier Williams has pledged to bring Newfoundland's poverty rate to the lowest level of any province by 2010. Quebec adopted a detailed anti-poverty law as a guidepost to its nation-leading efforts. And just last week, Stephane Dion raised the stakes in the poverty debate by promising to cut child poverty by 50% in 5 years should his party win the next Federal election.

Ontario should follow suit by setting bold yet achievable targets for reducing poverty. We have called for a poverty reduction target of 25% in 5 years, and 50% within the decade.

Discussion about targets inevitably leads to the question of how we will measure success. While arriving at the right measure of poverty deserves rigorous thinking, it need not monopolize the government's strategy over the next few months. At the end of the day, regardless of which measure of poverty is chosen, what is most important is that we get on with the job of improving the lives of all Ontarians.

Which brings us to the question of **policies**. The good news is that the Liberal government has already taken a number of steps that have the potential to drive down poverty. What it needs to do now is to build on those initiatives for a longer-term vision and track progress regularly and accurately on each front.

Start with the principle that a hard day's work should equal a fair day's pay, through minimum wage increases and stepping up the enforcement of labour standards. Give families real income security by bolstering the newly created Ontario Child Benefit and providing adequate systems of support for those who cannot work full time.

Make affordable housing and quality child care top provincial priorities, and ensure that everyone in our society has real access to medical and dental care.

Acknowledge that there is a disproportionate and persistent connection between poverty and race, Aboriginal status, newcomer status, gender and disability so that targeted poverty reduction policies and programmes can be developed.

Regular reporting on how the government is progressing on each of these policy fronts will go a long way towards instilling confidence in Ontarians that a poverty reduction strategy is on the right track.

Is the Ontario Child Benefit making a positive difference in the lives of families? Are we investing adequately in child care and affordable housing? How are racialized communities, the disabled, Aboriginal people and newcomers doing? Are workers being treated fairly in the workplace? And how are large urban centers faring, such as the City of Toronto where poverty is disproportionately higher?

The other piece of developing a poverty reduction plan with wide support from Ontarians is **consultation**. The government deserves credit for consistently pledging to work with a wide range of Ontarians on developing the province's strategy. Community and civic leaders, policy thinkers, low income people and business representatives, all need to be involved in discussions about what targets to set, what measures to use, and the kinds of policies that will make a difference.

Poverty is not simply about those who are poor. It is ultimately about the well-being of our communities, our society, and our economic present and future.

Finally, good intentions and a great plan will remain stalled unless backed by significant **resources**. Ontario showed real leadership in its last budget by prioritizing available funds to create the new Ontario Child Benefit. This is the kind of bold action that can make a real difference in the lives of Ontario's poor. However, without new investment the Benefit will not reach its fullest potential; affordable housing units and childcare spaces will not become available; the promise of dental benefits for the poor will not materialize; and, poverty reduction promises will ultimately fall short.

The government's course of action on poverty so far has earned it the benefit of the doubt for many community stakeholders. Next week's Throne Speech will be an important signal of whether the Ontario government means business about an issue that concerns all of us. Serious action on poverty reduction speaks to not only the promise "to" Ontario, but the promise "of" Ontario.

We look forward to your response regarding how you and your party plan to push forward Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Please count on our Network for any assistance in this regard.

A 25 in 5 op-ed ran in the Toronto Star on Sunday, November 25, 2007. It is attached for your reference.

M. P. Baetz, *Senior Director*, Direct Energy; *Board Chair*, Yonge Street Mission
Rev. Dr. Brice Balmer, *Secretary*, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition
Ahmed Bayoumi, *MD*, Medical Reform Group
Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld, *Co-Chair*, June Callwood Campaign Against Child Poverty
Rev. Michael Blair, *Executive Director*, Toronto Christian Resource Centre
Gary Bloch, *MD*, Inner City Health Associates
John Campey, *Executive Director*, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
John Cartwright, *President*, Toronto and York Region Labour Council
Bibi Tiffanie Chattergoon, *Cause Organizer*, Toronto Youth Cabinet
John Deacon, *Partner*, Deacon Insurance Agencies Limited; *Branch Out Care Ministries*
Greg deGroot-Maggetti, *Poverty Advocate*, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
Susan Engle, *Chairperson*, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition
Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni, *Co-Chair*, June Callwood Campaign Against Child Poverty
Karen Dick, *Workers Rights Advocate Organizer*, Worker's Action Centre
Rick Eagan, *Community Development Coordinator*, St. Christopher House
Doris Grinspun, *Executive Director*, Registered Nurses Association of Ontario
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Arli Klassen, *Executive Director*, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario
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Rick McKinley, *President*, Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada
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Catherine Oliver, *MD CCFP*, Health Providers Against Poverty
Most Rev. John Pazak, *C.Ss.R., D.D.*, *Chair*, Social Affairs Commission, Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops
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Gerald Vandezande, *C.M. Retired National Public Affairs Director*, Citizens for Public Justice; *Member of the Order of Canada*
Nancy Vander Plaats, *Chair*, ODSP Action Coalition
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Walking the walk on poverty

Thursday's throne speech provides an early test of McGuinty's commitment to helping Ontario's poor

Nov 25, 2007 04:30 AM

**JOHN CAMPEY
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Fuelled by Premier Dalton McGuinty's commitment to set anti-poverty targets and timetables within 12 months, expectations are high for poverty reduction in Ontario in 2008. As we look ahead to this Thursday's throne speech, four simple words will signal the degree of the government's dedication to anti-poverty: targets, policies, consultations and resources.

The need for action is nothing short of urgent. As reported by UNICEF Canada last week, despite our record levels of economic growth, child poverty has persisted at the same high rates for an entire generation. Among aboriginal populations, racialized communities, newcomers, single mothers and people with disabilities the situation is even starker, with adult and child poverty rates that can be many times the Ontario average.

So it is encouraging that Ontario's government has pledged to do its part to reverse this situation. The appointment of Deb Matthews as lead minister and the expected formation of a cabinet committee on poverty reduction are concrete steps in the right direction.

As the government now decides on its next move, it would do well to learn from those jurisdictions that are working successfully to tackle poverty.

As a start, it is increasingly obvious that setting clear targets is critical to following through on good intentions.

In the U.K., Tony Blair set a target of 25 per cent poverty reduction in five years, which opened the door for impressive gains. Closer to home, Premier Danny Williams has pledged to bring Newfoundland and Labrador's poverty rate to the lowest level of any province by 2010. Quebec adopted a detailed anti-poverty law as a guidepost to its nation-leading efforts. Nova Scotia is in the midst of consultations on

its own poverty reduction strategy. And just days ago, Stéphane Dion raised the stakes in the poverty debate by promising to cut child poverty by 50 per cent in five years should his party win the next federal election.

Ontario should follow suit by setting bold yet achievable targets for reducing poverty. We have called for a poverty reduction target of 25 per cent in five years, and 50 per cent within the decade.

Discussion about targets inevitably leads to the question of how we will measure success. While arriving at the right measure of poverty deserves rigorous thinking, it need not monopolize the government's strategy over the next few months. At the end of the day, regardless of which measure of poverty is chosen, what is most important is that we get on with the job of improving the lives of all Ontarians.

This brings us to the question of policies. The good news is that the Liberal government has already taken a number of steps that have the potential to drive down poverty. What it needs to do now is to build on those initiatives for a longer-term vision and track progress regularly and accurately on each front.

Start with the principle that a hard day's work should equal a fair day's pay, through minimum wage increases, stepping up the enforcement of labour standards, and breaking down barriers based on discrimination.

Give adults and children real income security by bolstering the newly created Ontario Child Benefit and providing adequate systems of support for those who cannot work full time.

Include policies that specifically address the disproportionate impact of poverty on racialized communities, aboriginal people, women, persons with disabilities and newcomers.

Make affordable housing and quality child care top provincial priorities.

Ensure that everyone has real access to medical and dental care.

These are all crucial elements of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. A commitment to regular reporting on how the government is progressing on each of these policy fronts will go a long way toward convincing Ontarians that our poverty reduction strategy is on the right track.

Ontarians will want to know if the Ontario Child Benefit is making a positive difference in the lives of families. Are we investing adequately in child care and affordable housing? Are workers being treated fairly in the workplace? Are the most disadvantaged communities benefiting? And how are large urban centres, such as Toronto, faring where poverty is disproportionately higher?

Consultation to determine these and other questions is critical to building wide support for a comprehensive strategy. To its credit, the government has consistently pledged to work with a wide range of Ontarians on developing the strategy. Community and civic leaders – including those from diverse communities and the most seriously disadvantaged groups, policy thinkers, low income people and business representatives – all need to be involved in discussions about what targets to set, what measures to use, and the kinds of policies that will make a difference.

An Ontario poverty reduction plan is not simply about those who are poor. It is ultimately about how we ensure the social and economic well-being for all our communities and our province.

Finally, good intentions and a great plan will remain stalled unless backed by significant resources.

Ontario showed leadership in its last budget by prioritizing available funds to create the new Ontario Child Benefit. This is the kind of initiative that, properly implemented, can make a positive impact on the lives of a good number of Ontario's poor. The reality, though, is that without new and appropriately directed financial investment the Ontario Child Benefit will not reach its fullest potential; new affordable housing units or improvements in the existing housing stock will not happen; child-care spaces will not become available; the promise of low income dental benefits will not materialize, and the existing inequalities facing the most marginalized will remain.

In short, the success of poverty reduction promises ultimately depends on a firm commitment to invest what is needed in what works. Without it, an anti-poverty strategy is destined to fall short of its objectives.

The government's course of action on poverty so far has earned it the benefit of the doubt for many community stakeholders. This week's throne speech will be an important signal of whether the Ontario government means business about an issue that concerns all of us.

Serious action on poverty reduction speaks to not only the promise "to" Ontario, but the promise "of" Ontario.

John Campey, executive director of the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto; Uzma Shakir of the Colour of Poverty Campaign Steering Committee; and Doris Grinspun, executive director of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, are members of the Ontario 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction.