

Jonah Schein
The Stop Community Food Centre
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September 22, 2008

Dear Mr. McGuinty,

Cc. Hon. Deb Matthews, Tony Ruprecht

Re. Poverty Reduction Report from Davenport West Community, Toronto Ontario

We are a group of community members in west Toronto that experience poverty in our own lives and/or witness poverty in our community. We envision a vibrant and healthy neighbourhood, with a civically engaged community, organized around principles of inclusion, equity, and social justice. This vision stands in stark contrast to the reality in our community where many people live in despair and feel helpless to overcome the immense barriers they face. For too many people in our community poverty means struggling to pay the rent. It means skipping meals and eating unhealthy food. It means sharing a room with cockroaches, bedbugs, mice and rats. It means living in communities that feel unsafe. It means few opportunities, depression and hopelessness.

The Ontario Government's promise to reduce poverty has ignited hope around this province and in our community. We applaud your government's promise of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. Only a comprehensive strategy will reduce the great inequality that exists in this province. You have a very difficult task ahead of you. There is so much to do, and frankly the situation is desperate for hundreds of thousands of people across Ontario and for thousands of people in this community. We know the impact that poverty has in our community. We see too many of our families, friends and neighbours unable to get through the month without going hungry.

Many people in our community are cynical about government commitment to poverty reduction. Many have lost faith in government and for good reason. We have experienced years of cuts to vital programs and services, and it has been a long time since we have seen any real change for the better.

We understand and support the need to set targets and benchmarks for poverty reduction. Community agencies in our community including have endorsed the 25-in-5 Declaration for Poverty Reduction. We believe that the government must set targets to reduce poverty by 25% in 5 years and by 50% in ten years.

We know that this will not be easy, but we know that it is possible. We also know that for many people in our community, this will not be fast enough.

We support the 25 in 5 framework to address poverty in three ways:

- 1) Investing in good sustaining jobs that lift people out of poverty
- 2) Ensuring livable incomes that support people that are unable to participate in the work force
- 3) Building strong and supportive communities with affordable housing, child care, public education and community programs

In addition to the 25 in 5 targets, we urge the government to look at some very obvious and existing benchmarks as a starting place for a poverty reduction plan.

As a first step to escaping poverty, each person in this province must have food and shelter. As a community that sees people regularly go without access to healthy food, we have called on the government to release a Nutrition Allowance - based on the research of public health - to ensure that no person is deprived of the opportunity of three nutritious meals each day. We do not believe that this is too much to ask. Toronto's Board of Health recognizes that lack of access to healthy food due to poverty is a growing health crisis and has endorsed the introduction of a Nutrition Allowance.

We all know that food and shelter are basic necessities and yet social assistance benefits for a single person in this province are only \$560 per month.

The average bachelor apartment in this city is more than \$700. The cost of eating a frugal but healthy diet is no less than \$200 for a single grown person. We know these food statistics because your own government requires public health departments to publish the Nutritious Food Basket each year to report the cost of healthy eating. Which begs the question, how are the rates determined?

The fact that social assistance benefits remain so inadequate undermines our confidence in the government's commitment to reducing poverty. We insist on knowing the rationale for setting the rates of OW and ODSP. Clearly, they are not based on the market costs of living in this province in 2008. Furthermore, no one's income should not be susceptible to the whims of politics or partisanship. To ensure that income security programs do not continue to enforce poverty, we recommend that social assistance rates be set by an independent panel based on the actual cost of living.

Poverty is about everyone. This government talks about a poverty reduction strategy focused on children. Perhaps it's seems easier to gain public support for low-income children. We believe that no one deserves to be poor.

Certainly some communities feel the impacts of poverty more than others – this community certainly suffers more than others. Poverty disproportionately affects people with disabilities, women, native people, and racialized communities across this province. The experiences of these groups must be recognized in the design of the poverty plan.

Poverty and inequality affect all of us – and we will need everyone on board to win this struggle. From the single person stuck in a tiny room living on a fixed income, to the laid-off autoworker that now faces a very uncertain future, to the person without status working in fear, poverty affects everyone and we need a strategy that works for everyone in this province.

Inequality and instability impact our entire economy. There are health costs, school costs, shelter costs and the criminal justice costs we all bear when we ignore poverty.

It is not just about the kids that go to school without breakfast or that drop out of school to support their families. It is also about the kids that they leave behind in the classroom. It is about the lessons that we teach our children about fairness and it is about the psychic scars that we all bear for living in communities where we allow such disparity.

Poverty and inequality affect everyone in this province, and we need to hear this right from the top. We need to hear the premier of Ontario acknowledge the depth of poverty in this province. We need to hear clearly that there is a serious, structural problem. We need to hear loudly your commitment. We want to see you act boldly, to raise expectations, and galvanize all Ontarians to this struggle.

Our expectations are very high for this government, and this is a good thing! We believe that we all want to live in communities that reflect our values of compassion, shared responsibility, equality and justice. We don't think these are difficult values to stand behind.

We've already heard cautionary tones not to expect too much. We have heard the government promise that this poverty reduction strategy will emerge using existing resources, will not include any increase in taxes, and will maintain a balanced budget, and that with a slowing economy that now is not the time for public investment.

This is totally unacceptable. For years, surplus money has been used to pay down debt and has been given away in generous tax breaks to the affluent. Despite record economic growth, that money did not flow down to significant numbers of poor of people in this province.

Now we need your government - starting with the Premier and the Poverty Reduction Committee - to roll up your sleeves and lead the way.

Poverty reduction will take courage, it will take determination, and it will absolutely require substantial investment. As a community, we support major reinvestments in Ontario to ensure the dignity and prosperity of every person in our province.

We are here to stand behind you and to work with you to ensure that we realize our dreams of equality and justice.

Sincerely,

Jonah Schein

On behalf of the Davenport West Income Security Council

Davenport West Poverty Reduction Town Hall Meeting Report

On June 25, 2008 the Davenport West Income Security Council, in partnership with The Stop Community Food Centre, the Community Action Resource Centre, Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre, St. Christopher House, West Toronto Community Legal Services, and Sistering, hosted a poverty consultation with Minister Deb Matthews, MPP Tony Ruprecht and members of the Davenport community.

Panel members spoke about the need for a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy to address the lack of good employment opportunities, high cost of housing, the gross inadequacy of income supports, and the effects these have on our access to healthy food and the impacts on our health. The panel also spoke about the need for the poverty plan to address everyone – not just children. Panelist spoke about the fact that any useful strategy will require significant public reinvestment.

Town hall participants worked in discussion groups to address particular issues including: racism and poverty, Ontario Works, parenting and childcare, education, infrastructure and resources, employment and jobs, women and poverty, ODSP, housing, and health and food. Each group recorded their thoughts on what was needed to reduce poverty as it affected their issue.

The community's feedback is reported here. The list is long and indicates the great number of barriers that need to be addressed. We hope that this report will be taken seriously and used in the Ontario Government's poverty reduction strategy.

Community Reports:

Housing

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Access to quality, affordable housing in neighbourhoods where all families feel safe
- Different types of housing for different people's needs including: More supportive housing, more transitional housing, more harm reduction housing, more co-operative housing, housing that is inclusively designed and is accessible to people with disabilities
- Rent control
- To license and regulate landlords
- Better organization of tenants in social housing
- Standards for supportive housing
- Respect from housing providers
- To upload the cost of social housing to the province and federal government
- Respect for tenants
- \$300 million in capital repairs to TCHC

Employment and Jobs

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- More well paid jobs
- A livable minimum wage now!
- Well paid permanent jobs with benefits
- Well paid temporary jobs with benefits
- Well paid part-time jobs with benefits
- To make alternative forms of employment available for people on the street
- Greater access to technology
- To use less technology (that puts people out of work)
- To regulate temp agencies
- To enforce existing labour standards and raise awareness about workers' rights
- Human rights protection for transgendered people
- To regulate banking services that take advantage of low-income people

Ontario Works

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- More money and higher rates
- Livable incomes that reflect market costs of housing, food, transit, etc. and we need this to be implemented within this government current term in office
- A transparent process for setting social assistance rates
- An independent panel (that includes people with lived experience of poverty) to set rates
- To increase personal needs benefits
- To reverse the 1995 cuts to OW
- Social assistance to actually be a safety net that can support people and provide stability during difficult times. People need enough money to rely on!
- Ministers to experience what it is like to try to live on OW for a month
- Reduce claw backs on earned income
- Eradicate asset rules that require people to “bottom out”
- Re-instate ‘community start-up’ program
- Free transit passes without conditions
- Dental care program (more than emergency services)
- Accountability at all levels of government
- To make the system more comprehensive
- Opportunities to develop trusting relationships with OW workers marked by good communication and mutual respect
- To establish standards for OW workers re. client treatment.
- Workers who work as advocates for those who are unable to represent themselves
- Shorter OW wait times
- Supports for people to go to school and get off OW
- provides skills training that offers more than entry-level job opportunities

ODSP

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- More money, higher rates
- Livable incomes that reflect market costs of housing, food, transit, etc. and we need this to be implemented within this government current term in office
- A transparent process for setting social assistance rates
- An independent panel (that includes people with disabilities and lived experience of poverty) to set rates
- Rates raised to reflect pre-1993 rates and indexed to inflation

- Social assistance to actually be a safety net that can support people and provide stability during difficult times. People need enough money to rely on!
- To implement a health promotion strategy and focus on preventative measures to support and maintain the health of people on ODSP. (e.g. nutrition, access to health care)
- Eliminate the claw back of child benefits and employment income
- Less bureaucracy, more accessibility
- More supports from the ODSP
- Training and education opportunities for more than entry level positions
- To treat people on ODSP with dignity and respect- from the ODSP office to society
- To address the isolating nature of poverty for people on ODSP
- Full ODSP benefits to be maintained when recipients are hospitalized or imprisoned (for short term periods).
- Shorter ODSP wait times for people trying to access the program
- To stop cutting benefits of people who enter relationships and cohabitate.

Parenting and Childcare

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Universally accessible, high quality childcare (accessible in terms of cost, distance, etc.)
- Affordable flat rate childcare (i.e. \$7/day in Quebec)
- Single parents to have enough money to raise their children.
- Maternity leave benefits to be extended to women who are self-employed
- Parenting supports for parents with disabilities

Education, Infrastructure and Resources

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Less policing and more supports for those living in poverty (Police in schools and school safety are symptoms of other social problems)
- To make schools more accessible for people to use as community centres
- More activities at schools during summer and holidays
- Schools to reflect the culture and values of our communities
- Tuition reduction for post-secondary education
- Universal daycare
- School meal programs
- More support for special education
- More teaching assistants
- More supportive education programs for youth with disabilities
- A new school funding formula

- To end the “Safe Schools” act
- Free public transit (i.e. Portland Oregon)
- Accessible transit (Inaccessible transit is a barrier to people living in poverty - i.e. for people living in remote areas, wheelchair access, expensive fares.)
- Integrated regional transit
- New shelter beds
- More addiction treatment, more detox beds, more safe beds
- Supports for persons with disabilities: more aides, more hours of support
- More knowledge of resources (i.e. multilingual 311 service at provincial level, similar to Telehealth)

Health and Food

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Increased income so that we can buy better, healthier food (especially fruits and vegetables)
- A provincial nutrition allowance to ensure that every person can afford the Nutritious Food Basket (as measured by public health departments)
- To stop relying on charities, food banks, and non-profit organizations to fill gaping holes in income security programs
- Fair minimum wage, subsidized housing, more subsidized childcare
- Increased OW and ODSP rates
- To increase incentives and subsidies for local farmers with sustainable practices, and use incentives/disincentives to encourage grocers to carry local produce (that will benefit local farmers)
- To keep good arable land for food production (not for subdivisions)
- Access to grocery stores with affordable, quality produce
- Timely treatment for health problems
- Emphasis on prevention strategies (i.e. It costs more to treat diabetes than prevent it)
- To reverse the discriminatory changes that were made to the Special Diet Allowance for people on OW and ODSP
- To fund community-based food and health centres with comprehensive approaches to food security and wellness
- Access to healthcare services and ongoing care including more Community Health Centres and health teams

Racism and Poverty

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Recognition of people’s foreign credentials and experience (and stop falsely advertising unrealistic Canadian job opportunities to people in other countries)

- Improved access and quality of settlement services for newcomers
- Financial assistance and support to aid new Canadians to join the workforce
- Comprehensive services that integrate newcomers into communities
- ESL for children and adults
- Better funded education for newcomers and racialized communities
- To recognize the barriers faced by racialized youth and act to improve education and support services for them
- To stop discrimination in employment
- To stop discrimination in housing
- A “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (re. immigration status) for people applying for OW
- To stop racial profiling and discriminatory policing
- To repeal the Safe Streets Act

Women and Poverty

To reduce poverty in Ontario we need...

- Decent jobs, affordable housing, and good income supports
- Equal pay for equal work
- Women to be paid for the informal childcare and eldercare they provide from home
- 1 year paid maternity leave for all women
- To be allowed to have money in our bank accounts when we are on OW
- To stop all claw backs
- More transitional housing for survivors of violence
- Nice, safe places to live
- More childcare spaces and more access to childcare
- More community programs and free afterschool programs
- Free medication/drug plan for all low-income people
- Free public transportation for kids going to school
- Affordable grocery stores in our neighborhood
- Tax breaks for women’s personal items
- More women in government
- Better homecare for seniors that helps people continue to live in our own homes
- Real commitment (backed by significant funding) to end violence against women
- To enforce restraining orders against abusive men
- To make feminist (non-psychiatric) supports available/accessible to survivors of violence and abuse

Voices from our Community:

Measuring Poverty:

We know that there are many ways to measure poverty. This is how people in our community define poverty:

“Living in poverty means not eating healthy food.”

“Living in poverty means not being able to have my friends over for dinner.”

“Living in poverty means going without winter boots for several winters.”

“Living in poverty means that I have to do a lot of walking.”

“Living in poverty means not being able to join my team for a beer after a game.”

“Living in poverty means isolation.”

“I realized I was living in poverty when I drove around on garbage day to find toys for my son.”

“I realized I was living in poverty when I had to drop out of my "non-profit" weight loss support group because I could not pay my back dues.”

“I realized I was living in poverty when I picked up the extra roll of toilet paper at a restaurant because I could not afford to purchase it, and my friend that took me to the restaurant was coming over and I had no toilet paper.”

“I realized I was living in poverty when I was ridden with debt and my expenses were more than what I earned.”

“I realized I was living in poverty when I had to move into low-income housing and had to rely on the food banks to eat.”

“I feel poor when I can't take my kids to see a movie without gift certificates.”

“I feel poor when I can no longer go out to see friends perform.”

“I feel poor when transportation is a major expenditure.”

“I feel poor when I am alone on the holidays.”

“I feel poor when I cannot afford good, nutritious food.”

“I feel poor when I cannot afford appropriate health care and dentistry for me and my family”

“I feel poor when I cannot afford something that the majority of the people living in society can afford.”

“I feel poor when I repeatedly cannot afford to do my laundry.”

“I feel poor when my family is too ashamed to come and visit me in my low income apartment.”

“I feel poor when I have to ask my pastor for a food voucher or \$5 near the middle of the month or ask my family for help.”

“I feel poor when rent takes up half my cheque.”

“I feel poor when after rent, groceries, phone bill, there is not enough left.”

“I feel poor when I feel ashamed and afraid to ask for help”

“You know that you are poor when your dentist's idea of dental care is a tooth extraction.”

“You know that you are poor when out of mistaken kindness, your family leaves you out of the gift exchange.”

“You know that you are poor when you feel like you have no control over your finances or life.”

“You know that you are poor when you need to wait to give your child his asthma medicine because you can't afford the aero-chamber.”

“You know that you are poor when shopping for groceries means begging at the food bank.”

“You know that you are poor when having to put stuff back at the cash because you don't have enough money is not an unusual experience.”

“You know that you are poor when you choose to feed your pet before yourself.”

Indicators of Success:

All governments need to account for their successes and failures in reducing poverty and inequality. These are some ways that people in our community will measure the success of this government:

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I can afford to make important household repairs.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I can entertain friends at home or serve dinner them dinner.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I can once again have my open house Christmas dinner for people that have nowhere else to go.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when my family accepts me and invites me to family reunions, baptisms, weddings, and Christmas get-togethers.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I am eating nutritious food with my children.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I have appropriate transportation.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I am deemed a person of dignity.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when my money lasts to the end of the month and I don’t have to worry about my mortgage payment bouncing and my utilities being turned off.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I can go to the Science Centre with my kids.”

“I’ll know I’m above the poverty line when I can go on holiday with my kids.”

“I’ll know that the government has really heard me when they hear and listen to what people have to say and change restrictive attitudes, laws, and rules that keep people from getting the help that they need and from healing from past hurts.”

“I’ll know that the government has really heard me when I see the money.”

“I’ll know that the government has really heard me when my friends stop dying from preventable and systematic problems.”