



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Toronto Central Council
240 Church Street, Toronto, Ontario M5B 1Z2

Submission Regarding Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy

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ST. VINCENT DE PAUL
COMMUNITY STORES

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RE : PROVINCIAL POVERTY REDUCTION INITIATIVE

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a nonprofit registered charity that has been serving our neighbours in need in Ontario since 1850. We are part of an international organization, founded in Paris, France in 1873. Since its inception the Society has endeavored to assist people in need through personal interaction. Although a faith based organization, our volunteers help anyone seeking assistance by visiting them in their homes. During these visits we provide material assistance, friendship and hope in order to help alleviate the degrading and debilitating aspects of living in poverty.

Throughout the province of Ontario, 4600 of our volunteers made over 70,000 visits to people seeking assistance in 2007. In the Greater Toronto Area, over 1200 of these volunteers made over 20,000 home visitations assisting 65,000 people. This assistance is predominately in the form of food and furniture vouchers.

Our involvement in home visitations has also prompted us to become involved in other works that attempt to deal with issues of poverty in a more concentrated and specific manner. In Toronto, we operate four emergency and transitional shelters for women funded by the City of Toronto. Provincial funding allows us to operate three homes for the developmentally disabled and provide residential and counseling services for people battling addictions. An affiliated corporation is a registered nonprofit housing provider, operating a 164 unit affordable housing building.

As front-line volunteers and service providers, we know first hand that the causes of poverty are diverse, complex and numerous. Sometimes poor or failing health (both physical and mental) is the main culprit, robbing people of the ability to obtain employment. In other instances inadequate education and (for many new Canadians) the inability to have acquired skills and education recognized present barriers to employment and prosperity. For others, domestic violence or being members of traditionally oppressed communities play a role in keeping people in poverty.

In spite of these myriad factors, our volunteers see one particular characteristic that is common to most of the people we visit. Trying to cope with insufficient income is a heavy psychological burden, and contributes to a diminished sense of self-worth. Constantly having to choose between whether to put more nutritious meals on the table; or finding a better and more expensive to place to live; or purchasing a new pair of shoes for a child; or which bill is a priority to pay this month— are a few of the often mutually exclusive options people in poverty have to sort through on a daily basis. The stress grinds people down. This leaves people less inclined and prepared to address the hurdles, barriers, setbacks and bureaucracy that have to be surmounted in order to even hope for a better quality of life.

Just as those living in poverty have tough choices to make, we as a society need to make some choices in order to address this issue. Resources are not a problem; our economy is producing abundant wealth and riches. The distribution of this wealth is where we have to make our choices. Figures show that, in spite of a prolonged period of economic expansion, in the past 30 years families in the top 10% of the income spectrum have realized an average income growth of 41%, whereas families in the bottom 40% of the spectrum have actually lost ground.

To see such growing inequity and the persistence of poverty after such a prolonged period of economic growth is troublesome. We all have a right to share in the wealth produced from our human and natural resources. Amidst such prosperity, principles of fundamental justice and common decency dictate that we need to adjust our priorities in order to rectify the inequities and gaps that are evident in our social infrastructure.

Flowing from our experiences and observations, we at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul feel that it is of paramount importance to keep the following factors in mind when preparing a poverty reduction strategy.

A Poverty Reduction Strategy requires a comprehensive, coordinated approach.

In public policy parlance, the issue of poverty reduction and its remediation is a *wicked problem*. Public policy needs to address the myriad factors that lead people to poverty as well as the factors that lead to its persistence. There is not one or even two root causes, but many that intertwine, compound and potentially complicate efforts intended to address the situation. This underlines the importance that the province involves all ministries and resources when planning and designing its poverty reduction strategy. It must take a long-term approach, avoiding inappropriate, one-off, short term fixes that do not provide for sustained change.

Each ministry needs to understand its role in the overall initiative. Politicians and civil servants within each ministry need to be identified and tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that their department is contributing to the poverty reduction strategy. Similarly, priorities, efforts and programs need to be coordinated at the municipal and federal levels of government.

Our volunteers, especially in Northern Ontario, are acutely aware of how particular groups such as our aboriginal communities face even more daunting obstacles in their struggle to make ends meet. Systemic racism, discrimination, remote geography and limited economic and educational opportunities are a few of the factors that contribute to an even more despairing and painful experience of poverty. The government's poverty reduction strategy must recognize the unique needs and requirements of communities, groups and populations that are over-represented in poverty statistics.

Minimum Wage and Social Assistance Benefits need to be increased and based on a realistic, comprehensive cost of living index.

Many recent studies have demonstrated that it is extremely difficult for most families that rely on social benefits or minimum wage income to adequately address their shelter, nutritional and educational needs in our society. Our volunteers are distributing more food vouchers to an ever increasing group of recipients, as shelter and food costs rise far faster and higher than wages or benefits.

The minimum wage should be raised immediately to \$10.00 per hour and then tied to some appropriate, realistic cost of living index. Likewise, Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program need to adjust their benefit levels to reflect the actual cost of living. An objective, realistic set of criteria needs to be established that would insure recipients are not unduly penalized

when economic factors beyond their control cause the cost of shelter, food and other basic necessities to rise beyond their capability to pay.

In the course of our home visitations, the frustration and discouragement of many of those on social benefits who seek to better their quality of life and take a few steps down the road of rising above poverty by taking on part-time work is often expressed. The government should look at allowing people to retain more of their earned income before their social benefits are reduced.

When social assistance income benefits do cease, perhaps programs such as subsidized daycare, dental care, and prescription coverage should continue up to a certain earned income level. This would provide for a period where an individual or family could transition from social benefits to full employment. It would also recognize that full employment does not necessarily provide every family with the means required to adequately meet their basic needs.

A more flexible arrangement would encourage more social assistance recipients to enter the workforce, knowing that they are not putting the welfare of their family and dependents in possible jeopardy. Such an approach would also address the precarious nature of low-paying employment. It would provide some stability to workers in jobs that are temporary, lack benefit packages and are part-time or subject to flexible hours.

We feel it is important to stress that any increase in social assistance benefits and the minimum wage is an investment in our society and communities. By and large, people living in poverty shop locally and do not participate in offshore investment schemes. Our volunteers have seen first hand how the ability to put more nutritious food on the table or to have a decent bed to sleep in can lift the spirits of a family and assist their capacity to be contributing members of their community.

Ontario needs to get back into the business of building affordable housing.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been involved in the provision of affordable housing since 1994 through its nonprofit housing affiliate the Vincent Paul Family Homes Corporation. We have witnessed how stable, quality, affordable housing plays a huge role in enabling families to lift themselves out of poverty. In the case of our building, Gower Park Place in Toronto, many families have moved on to successfully purchase their own homes.

The public policy responsible for the building of Gower Park should be revisited as a model of how affordable housing can be provided in a timely and effective manner. The Ontario government financed the entire capital expenditure, and nonprofit housing providers were enlisted to develop and then manage the buildings. The buildings themselves contain a mix of deep subsidy, shallow subsidy and market rent units. This allows families who improve their financial situation to maintain their residency if they so wish. The diversity of the tenant mix, culturally and economically, provides for the kind of dynamic community and varied set of skills that has resulted in successful homework clubs, resume workshops and literacy improvement initiatives at Gower Park. It also provides for an engaged, committed pool of tenants that serve on the building's Board of Directors.

It is obvious that the current capital funding model for the provision of affordable housing is dysfunctional. Cost share agreements between the province and federal government are tenuous and

subject to the constant threat of being withdrawn. The burden on small nonprofit housing providers to provide relatively large amounts of start-up capital is an unrealistic expectation. As a result, virtually no housing has been built under the present arrangement.

The provincial government needs to resume its leadership role in this area. It needs to act as a mediator and coordinator, interposed between private developers, nonprofit housing providers and other levels of government. Providing incentives to private developers and supporting planning reforms that would require a minimum number of affordable units in new developments would bring the private sector to the table. The province also needs to pressure the municipal and federal levels of government to participate in a meaningful way. We need, as a society, to endorse the provision of affordable public housing as a legitimate investment in our social infrastructure network.

Appropriate funding for Shelter and Support services for the most vulnerable.

It is trite and somewhat disingenuous to state that the only thing required to eradicate homelessness is to provide the homeless with housing. Some people can successfully make the leap from homelessness to independent living with little trouble. Others, however, are incapacitated by factors such as addiction problems or mental, physical and psychological health issues.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto Central Council, has experience providing for people who need help to transition from homelessness and poverty to independent living. We operate women's shelters that are considered transitional accommodation, where the residents are provided the resources and help they require to eventually live independently. We have witnessed many success stories. Women who were mired in poverty (due to abusive relationships, family breakdown and a host of other factors), when given the stability and opportunity to work through their problems, have managed to go on to acquire and maintain housing, jobs and independence.

We operate another residence for people living with mental illness, subsidized by the provincial and municipal governments. The tenants have their own rooms, but the facility is staffed around the clock and the residents are provided nutritious meals in a common dining room. This is in stark contrast to many other members of our community who suffer from mental illness. Due to limited social benefits and affordability issues, many of them reside in substandard rooming houses, isolated from the resources and supports they require.

The province must recognize the value of supportive, transitional housing as an important component in reducing poverty and easing its effects on vulnerable populations. It must fund municipalities who provide these types of shelters and housing adequately, and assist in increasing its provision where needed.

Working with the nonprofit sector to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

Many nonprofit agencies such as ours are involved in implementing social policy programs on behalf of the state. Recognizing and capitalizing upon this existing infrastructure of nonprofit service providers is an important factor in making poverty reduction achievable.

Nonprofit service providers are comprised of committed citizens serving as Board members; trained, experienced professional employees that implement social policy in accordance with the funder's guidelines and objectives; and a cadre of dedicated volunteers that provide support.

This results in a wealth of experience and knowledge residing in the nonprofit sector, gained through frontline interaction with the recipients of social policy initiatives. The government needs to provide the mechanisms and capacity for these agencies to participate in the design of social policy in addition to its implementation, so as to improve both effectiveness and efficiency.

Conclusion

The province's poverty reduction strategy requires a long-term perspective, and a coordinated approach that involves the participation of all its ministries. The involvement of the municipal and federal levels of government is also vital in order to realize meaningful progress.

Groups and communities that experience traditionally higher levels of poverty require specific approaches that address their unique situations and needs. A 'one size fits all' approach is inadequate.

Social assistance benefits and the minimum wage should be tied to an objective set of criteria that recognizes the actual cost of living in our province. The provision of an appropriate level of benefits should be maintained for recipients who work part-time or work in low paying, precarious employment.

The stock of affordable, public housing needs to be increased. The provision of safe, secure, affordable shelter is a fundamental component of a poverty reduction strategy.

The value of transitional, supportive shelter and housing needs to be recognized and funded appropriately. For many living in poverty, supports and resources are required to heal the physical, mental and psychological factors that act as barriers to rising above poverty.

The nonprofit agencies that currently participate in the provision of social policy initiatives are a valuable resource that needs to be consulted when designing the specific policies that will implement the poverty reduction strategy.