

Pushing feds for poverty plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Citing high rates of local poverty, representatives of the area's Poverty Roundtable fanned out across downtown Tuesday in the hope of bringing attention to the persistent, complex and often misunderstood problem.

It was the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Roundtable staff and volunteers took to the streets at noon to distribute information to the public.

"This is a cross-country movement focusing on ending poverty," said Christine Durant, director of the Poverty Roundtable Hastings Prince Edward, a non-profit group uniting area agencies and citizens to take action against poverty.

Durant said Canada in 1948 ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which lists adequate food, equal access to justice, shelter and more as basic human rights.

"There's an assumption that we all have this — but we don't," she said.

"We never, in Canada, put them into law, so we do not have the right to work; we do not have the right to housing; we do not have the right to live with safety.

"We don't have those rights protected in any way."

The Belleville group was among the 70 groups in more than 30 Canadian cities promoting the need for a federal anti-poverty plan via a campaign called "Chew On This!" The fifth-annual campaign was organized to help end poverty and insecurity. Groups handed out paper bags, each of which contained an apple and pamphlets of statistics and information.

Other groups did the same in Trenton, Wellington and Picton.

That campaign was part of a larger non-partisan effort called Dignity for All and led by charities Canada Without Poverty and Citizens for Public Justice.

Dignity for All's National Anti-Poverty Plan for Canada, released in 2014, focuses upon six areas of public policy which its authors say governments could address to reduce poverty "drastically": income security, housing and homelessness, food security, health, early childhood education and care, and jobs.

The plan is the result of five years of consultation with 600 organizations and people across the country.

Included in Tuesday's pamphlets were statistics showing this region's often higher rates of poverty compared to the Ontario average.

"About 18,000 people are food insecure in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties," said volunteer Ruth Ingersoll, who's also executive director of the Community Development Council of Quinte.

She said poverty is not limited to people receiving social assistance.

"We know it's a lot of our working poor," she said.

"People are actually driving home from work wondering, 'Is my hydro going to be cut off when I get home? Is there going to be an eviction notice? How are we going to make that one piece of meat stretch to feed the whole family?'" said Ingersoll.

"We're seeing a significant amount of rural poverty in the area," Durant added.

"In Belleville, for children under the age of four, 28.5 per cent are living in poverty, compared to the province, (where the rate is) 14.8 per cent.

"It's very difficult for people who are living alone as single parents or seniors or individuals to make ends meet," she said.

"If you're on Ontario Works and you're a single person, your income is probably just over \$700 – which means, probably, you can't stay

where you're living.”

She explained rental and mortgage rates tend to surpass what single unemployed people make, putting them at risk of homelessness.

“On that amount of money, you can't purchase food ... and hopefully you live somewhere that there's enough food programs you can access. You're probably going to be food insecure,” said Durant.

Many in the hurried lunch-hour crowd downtown wouldn't stop to listen, but some said they could relate to the Roundtable's message.

One man approached by volunteers on Front Street said his friends find it difficult to manage while receiving social benefits.

“They don't have a living wage,” he said.

Other passersby told their own stories of poverty.

For Roundtable volunteer Tami Downes of Belleville, the stories of poverty's “daily struggle” are familiar. She's on a provincial disability pension of about \$1,000 per month while raising her granddaughter.

If she were to pay market rent of about \$900 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, she said, she'd have \$100 for food and other expenses.

“So then what do we eat?” asked Downes.

“It's a fact that you have to feed your kids a little bit less every day to make that food budget stretch.”

Downes said poor people “believe nobody's listening” to their plight and she volunteers “in the trenches” because of the Roundtable's “hands-on approach” to making changes.

Changes in government policies are needed, Downes said.

Durant encouraged people to speak to politicians in all levels of government and join the Roundtable or its working groups on food security, housing, income security and public awareness.

The package distributed Tuesday included a postcard to be sent to Canada's minister of families, children and social development, Jean-Yves Duclos.

“We're seeing, from the federal government, unprecedented investment in housing,” Durant said, but noted there is still “a lot of work to do.”

Visit chewonthis.ca for more on the campaign and links to the Dignity for All plan.

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