

Vicious circle keeping P.E.I. cook out of the workforce ^[1]

'I don't like to see myself as poverty but it's probably what it is'

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Jun 2018

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Bonnie Lafferty wants to go back to work and get off social assistance, but the path to get there still has too many obstacles.

Lafferty's family struggled through periods of living off social assistance when she was young, but she was able to finish high school and even attend the Culinary Institute of Canada.

And then she went to work. She was on her own with two kids in Charlottetown — a son, now 15, and a daughter, now eight —but her mother was able to look after her two children while she worked evenings and weekends in food service.

"There is no nighttime or weekend child care," she said.

"It's really hard to find an honest, reliable babysitter, especially if you don't know people."

But then her mother got sick and was unable to look after the children. With no child care available evenings and weekends, Lafferty had to give up her job. Now her family is back on social assistance because she still can't find her way back to work.

From her current situation, the way into the workforce requires a string of improbable circumstances to come together, even if she was to find a day job.

Without a job, she is not eligible for child-care benefits. Without child care, she can't accept a job, because there is no place that can take her children on short notice. There are waiting lists.

And, given the work she is trained for, it is still unlikely she is going to find work inside the Monday to Friday, eight to five offered by most child-care programs, despite the fact that there is a strong demand for cooks on the Island.

The province notes while generally you need to have work to be provided child care, there are exceptions and people on social assistance should always talk to their social workers if they have questions.

Lafferty's son may be able to take charge of her daughter soon, but she doesn't believe he is ready for that responsibility yet.

She feels that she is not alone in this predicament.

"I definitely want to see something done with the child care so we can work the different hours," she said.

"We need something other than the straight eight to five we've got going on right now, because our jobs are no longer eight to five."

Low-income rate rising

In the years from 2012-16, an average of 14.3 per cent of Islanders were living below the low-income line, which Statistics Canada defines as half the median household income. The national average was 13.5 per cent.

That is a recent trend. As recently as 2007-11 P.E.I. had the second lowest rate of low-income households in the country, behind only Alberta. The rate was also below the national average from 2002-06.

[Bar graph available: 'Percentage living under the low-income line']

CBC is looking at five-year averages to account for regular year-to-year fluctuations.

"The standard that we're being compared to is a national one. As long as our progress is a bit slower than what you see nationally we're going to continue to fall behind as far as those statistics go," said UPEI economist Jim Sentance.

An economic paradox

And in fact, what happened from 2002-2011 is incomes on P.E.I. grew faster than in the rest of the country. In 2012-16, that growth rate fell behind again.

Paradoxically, economic growth can have a negative impact on the number of people living under the low-income line.

"Strong economic growth usually lifts incomes for individuals in the workforce more so than those on a fixed income, such as seniors," said the province.

[Bar graph available: 'Growth in median income']

And in fact, the statistics show seniors were moving below the low-income line more than others.

The number of people living on low incomes is also, as it turns out, a poor measure of income equality.

While people living with low-incomes was high, the provincial government notes that in 2016 P.E.I. had the lowest rate of income inequality in the country, and Sentence says it is comparable to the rate in some Nordic countries. That is partly, said Sentence, a reflection of the fact that there are relatively few rich people.

"We're still the poorest province in the country," he said.

"That's largely a reflection of the economic base of the Island. There's really not much you can base making a whole lot of money on."

'It definitely leads to depression'

When Lafferty hears that more Prince Edward Islanders are falling below the low-income line, she can only say, "It's sad."

"I don't know what else to say about that."

Lafferty knows the struggle those people are facing.

"It's stressful. It definitely leads to depression," she said.

She, her mother and two children share a three-bedroom apartment in Charlottetown.

"I can't afford to live on my own and neither can she afford to live on her own," said Lafferty.

"I don't like to see myself as poverty but it's probably what it is."

New help

The government says it has implemented and improved a number of programs to help Islanders on low incomes.

- Increase to P.E.I.'s personal tax exemption good for low-wage workers, CFIB says
- Increases to food rates, personal comfort allowances and shelter rates.
- Increases to seniors and low-income home repair programs.
- Investments in Seniors Drug Program.
- Increases to school breakfast programs.
- Increases to minimum wage.
- Increases to child-care subsidy.

But some significant areas are being missed, said Lafferty. Rent and food allowances may be up, but there is still no clothing allowance.

"I have no money to pay for my child's clothing," she said.

"Things need to change."

Region: Prince Edward Island [3]

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