

Don't forget plight of poor children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As Canada's premiers meet this week in Niagara-on-the-Lake for their annual gathering, important issues related to the long-term viability of the health-care system will dominate the agenda.

The outcomes of this meeting might well be one of the driving forces of Prime Minister Paul Martin's minority government. And, as the newly minted MPs reconvene in October, we are reminded that their session will mark the 15th anniversary of the 1989 all-party resolution to end child poverty.

Provincial and territorial leaders must know that the well-being of children and the health of Canadians need to be approached as one and the same.

Yet, 15 years after the resolution to end child poverty, more than 1 million children still live in poverty in Canada — a shameful legacy for one of the richest countries in the world.

The evidence is well established: There is a fundamental link between a healthy start in life and the long-term impact on the well-being of children.

And, we know that low-income children are more likely to encounter more hurdles to healthy development and to experience a host of negative situations that affect their health and well-being. Sadly, the political will and actions have not followed suit.

To begin to turn around the appalling situation facing almost 1 in 6 children in Canada, our premiers must urgently collaborate to further the 1999 framework for a National Children's Agenda. They must significantly increase investments in a comprehensive plan for children — one that promotes a healthy and inclusive society.

Investments in preventative measures and health promotion must become an integral part of the health system.

We know what it takes to make a difference. Nations that have significantly reduced child and family poverty have done so by investing in widely accessible early childhood education and care programs, effective child benefit systems, national affordable housing programs, a healthy stock of good jobs and generous income security and unemployment benefits.

We have reason for hope. Early learning and child care are at the top of the new federal government's agenda. We ask the premiers at this week's meeting to lay the founding stone for a cross-Canada system of child care. We ask them to pledge their commitment to partner with the federal government.

We note that the chair for this week's meeting is Premier Dalton McGuinty. His pledge to increase the affordability and quality of early childhood education and care in Ontario is encouraging.

But some provinces, including Ontario, continue to undermine the huge potential of this program by denying federal dollars to families on social assistance. Over the past decade, social assistance rates have plunged further and further below poverty rates across the country. We must step up for these families.

Federal and provincial governments must also break the housing logjam. Finally, the most important way to support struggling parents to break out of the cycle of poverty is to make sure that a job is a pathway out of poverty.

The premiers can contribute to meeting two major promises to Canadians this week: They can make meaningful inroads to reduce child poverty and they can take essential steps to protect the future of our public health-care system.

In the long run, the sustainability of medicare and of this country depends on how well we deliver in both. To do so, governments at all levels must work together with the interests of children as a guiding principle for action.

Premiers: This year, put child poverty on your agenda.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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