

Anti-poverty activists take wait-and-see approach to Ford as mayor^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Downtown Toronto may still be reeling from last week's municipal election, but in the city's suburbs where Rob Ford swept every ward, anti-poverty activists and social service agencies are cautiously optimistic.

"We're hopeful," said East York mother Elise Aymer, of ACORN, a 20,000-member group of low- and moderate-income residents in the city which champions tenants' rights, living wages and tighter rules for the payday loan industry.

"I think Rob Ford's message of fiscal accountability resonated with many Torontonians of low- and moderate-income," she said.

Aymer lives next to the ethnically diverse and economically challenged Crescent Town area, one of the city's 13 priority neighbourhoods targeted for social investment under outgoing Mayor David Miller.

"I hope (Ford) will keep in mind the needs of low- and moderate-income people and the things ACORN fights for," she said.

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Ford's record as a councillor may be cause for concern. Just this year he introduced a losing motion to cut the city's \$47-million community grants budget by 10 per cent. But Ford's election platform vowed no service cuts and his economic plan suggested he'd plow savings from cuts into services for the vulnerable.

Under Ford's platform, one quarter of the \$1.7 billion he projects to save by cutting waste at city hall would be allocated to "priority services" such as child care, services for seniors, improving accessibility for the disabled, affordable housing and fixing public housing.

The question, of course, is what happens if he doesn't find those savings.

"Our city is very complex," said Gail Nyberg, executive director of the Daily Bread Food Bank. "Let's just sit back and watch...The worst thing we can do as a sector is overreact."

Four areas where the city plays an important social role are housing, child care, welfare delivery and improving vulnerable neighbourhoods.

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Advocates believe they have powerful ammunition to block any cuts to child care: Working parents and provincial funding.

Ford would not want to hurt middle-class families that rely on the service. Nor would it make sense to hurt struggling low-income parents who need child care to upgrade their education and hold on to low-paying jobs, they say.

Since the province pays 80 per cent of the city's child-care costs, every dollar the city cuts in this area triggers a \$4 loss of provincial money.

"It's not a very cost-effective way to cut, especially if it makes your core constituency of working parents angry," said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

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There will also be opportunities for Ford to put his stamp on many of the new programs being launched in these areas, he added.

As Aymer of ACORN noted, many people in these communities elected Ford as a "plain spoken man of his word" who will look after their interests too.

Nick Saul of The Stop Community Food Centre, which serves about 16,000 people annually in the city's struggling downtown west-end, says there are hundreds of social agencies in the city that rarely make the news but play a crucial role in holding neighbourhoods together. The small community grants they receive from the city fund key services such as meals for shut-in seniors, after-school programs for at-risk youth and career planning for newcomers, he says.

"All levels of government have to wrap their arms around the social issues that affect urban centres," he said. "And the city has to have skin in the game to be an effective advocate."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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