

Poverty fight must go on despite deficit, activists say ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ontario's 2008 pledge to fight child poverty can't be sacrificed in the name of provincial austerity, says a new report being released Monday.

On the eve of economist Don Drummond's expected call for dramatic public spending cuts, anti-poverty activists are urging Queen's Park to help low-income families by increasing the minimum wage and making new investments in child care, affordable housing and welfare reform.

"If the Ontario government wants to stay on track and reduce child poverty, it has to see poverty reduction as a priority, a key consideration in public sector decision making," says Ontario Campaign 2000, in its annual report.

The province's child poverty rate dropped to 14.6 per cent in 2009, down from 15.2 per cent a year earlier, according to the latest available data from Statistics Canada.

But about 393,000 Ontario children - or one in seven - were still living in poverty, the report notes.

The report lauds the province for introducing programs such as the \$92-a-month Ontario Child Benefit and raising the minimum wage to \$10.25 an hour.

As a result, some 19,000 children have escaped from poverty. But those gains threaten to be lost if Queen's Park shifts its focus now, the report warns.

"Far too many children live in poverty and with the forthcoming cuts in the public sector, many more may end up being worse off," said Alizeh Hussain, campaign co-ordinator.

"Unless positive changes are made to current public programs - changes that look to help people rather than cut costs - the rate of child poverty will rise, making life worse for those who are most vulnerable," she added.

At least 71,000 more children must be lifted out of poverty to meet the province's goal of cutting child poverty by 25 per cent by 2013, the report says.

Bridget Perrier, an Ojibwa from Thunder Bay who moved to Toronto 12 years ago, knows what it is like to raise her children in poverty.

She and her family live on about \$1,700 a month in child benefits and the Ontario Disability Support Plan. But she refuses to use food banks or line up for charity Christmas hampers.

"There is the shame. It is embarrassing," says the 35-year-old mother of three who struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder from years of abuse as a child.

"I go without so that my children don't have to."

Perrier often misses meals, she doesn't own a winter coat and forgoes make-up so her 18-year-old daughter in high school can afford it.

But Perrier cherishes child care and affordable housing.

Child care "saved my life," she said, describing how it helped when she first arrived in the city with her daughter, Rose Briar, now 12. Her tidy two-bedroom apartment in a First Nations housing development is her "pride and joy."

"I am moving out of poverty thanks to thee kinds of supports," she says. "But I already see how things have gotten worse since I first came here. I worry for others."

Path to poverty reduction

- Make poverty reduction a priority in provincial budget.
- Hike hourly minimum wage to \$11 in 2012 and index it to inflation.
- Make recommended improvements to welfare rules immediately while awaiting Social Assistance Review Commission's final report this summer.

- Allocate \$287 million in emergency funding to stop hundreds of daycares from closing due to chronic underfunding and all-day kindergarten.
- Improve long-term affordable housing strategy with targets and timetables.

(Source: Ontario Campaign 2000)

The face of child poverty in Ontario

- One in seven children live in poverty. (14.6 per cent LIM after tax)
- About 148,000 children live in families that rely on food banks.
- One in three low-income children lives in a family where at least one parent works full-time.
- A lone parent family on welfare lives about \$9,000 below the poverty line.
- Just one in five children has access to licensed child care.
- About 150,000 households are waiting for affordable housing.

(Source: Ontario Campaign 2000)

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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