

Hunger and poverty: Demand action ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Hunger and poverty are a part of life. They've become so tightly woven into our social fabric that we no longer bat an eye when a new food bank or shelter pops up in our neighbourhood. We accept lackluster solutions from government. We do our best to help meet the needs of people who struggle. And we watch as the gap between the haves and the have-nots widens.

The narrative of this story rarely changes. It's just the way it is. Hunger and poverty are a part of life. It's a sad statement to make.

So why are we OK with it?

Close to 900,000 Canadians rely on a food bank each month and thousands of them live here in Nova Scotia. Does that number have to keep climbing before the issue takes priority?

It's National Hunger Awareness Week - the right time to ask the tough questions and demand more of our government, ourselves and each other.

One-third of the clients our member agencies support are children. The most vulnerable members of our society are falling behind because they lack proper nutrition. How did we get here? In 1989, members of Parliament unanimously resolved to end child poverty by the year 2000. We're still waiting.

We know the damage hunger and poverty do. The World Health Organization has declared poverty to be the single largest determinant of health. People who lack shelter, a safe and secure food supply, access to education, employment, and sufficient income for basic needs experience poor health outcomes. This has been widely acknowledged, but we still accept that in a rich country like Canada, people are unable to access these things. It's impossible to pull yourself up by the bootstraps if you have no boots.

If the emotional appeal isn't persuasive enough, there is also a very rational argument for the eradication of hunger and poverty - it makes good fiscal sense.

Studies have shown that poverty costs our province an estimated \$1.5 billion annually when factoring in things such as health care, crime, the intergenerational transfer of poverty and lost productivity. Low-income Nova Scotians use 43 per cent more health care services than those in middle- and upper-income brackets. One study estimates that an increase of \$1,000 in annual income to the poorest 20 per cent of Canadians would lead to nearly 10,000 fewer chronic conditions and 6,600 fewer disability days every two weeks.

Doesn't this deserve bigger and bolder solutions?

The 2012 budget introduced modest tax breaks for seniors, Nova Scotians with disabilities and people with dependents. The NDP also increased the Affordable Living Tax Credit and the Poverty Reduction Credit. These are good first steps, but they are not enough. The federal government has offered even less, despite requests for a poverty-reduction strategy, and the recent pension reforms will bring even more hardship to vulnerable seniors.

Why are we complacent about these counterproductive solutions? We cannot continue to settle for anything less than innovative and effective. We need to demand more.

Food Banks Canada made the following recommendations in their annual HungerCount survey this year, and we strongly echo their thoughts.

We need to invest in affordable housing.

We need to improve the income assistance program so it supports our most vulnerable citizens in becoming self-sufficient.

We need to update the employment insurance program so it better recognizes and supports Canadians in non-standard forms of employment as well as older workers facing permanent layoff from long-tenure positions.

We need to address the growing reality of disadvantaged workers resulting from low-paying jobs, high likelihood of layoffs during downturns and labour market changes.

We need to take further action to protect Canada's seniors, especially single seniors who are most vulnerable to poverty.

We need an increased investment in high-quality, affordable and accessible early learning and child care. Out of 25 developed

countries, Canada ties last place for failing to attain nine of UNICEF's 10 benchmark indicators of quality and access to early childhood education and care.

And we need a commitment from the federal government to maintain the current annual increase of three per cent to federal transfer payments to support programs such as post-secondary education, social assistance and child care.

These things need to happen now. Hunger and poverty are costing too much. Use Hunger Awareness Week (May 7-11) as a push to start advocating for change. Be vocal. Let your elected officials know your priorities, so this time next year, we're celebrating tangible advancements in this fight.

Hunger and poverty are solvable problems. The narrative doesn't have to continue on this way. Let's all get engaged, be vocal and help rewrite the next chapter.

-reprinted from The Chronicle Herald

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