



Poverty Free Ontario
Pulling poverty out by the roots



Bulletin #7

September 12, 2011

Poverty Free Ontario: Questions to Anticipate

The Poverty Free Ontario campaign is getting its message – “*Let’s Vote for a Poverty Free Ontario*” -- up in signs posted on the properties of supportive individuals and organizations in 16 communities across the province. As the signs go up, the questions from the media and from citizens will follow. So, we should be prepared to answer them.

The Poverty Free Ontario brochure provides good background information to our position as does our web site www.povertyfreeontario.ca . But there follows some short answers to questions that we might anticipate.

What is Poverty Free Ontario?

Poverty Free Ontario is an initiative to bring together communities across the province in order to:

- 1) make ending poverty a public issue in the 2011 provincial election;
- 2) urge that *all* political parties commit to a poverty eradication agenda if elected; and
- 3) ask that *all* electoral candidates have poverty eradication as part of their platforms and campaigns.

Twenty communities across the province support Poverty Free Ontario and sixteen are actively participating in the democratic process to promote this message during this provincial election campaign by displaying election-style signs and talking to the general public and electoral candidates.

Is it realistic to talk about actually ending poverty in the province?

More than 1,689,000 Ontarians live in poverty according to Statistics Canada’s latest figures. This is 13.1% of our provincial population, the highest rate of poverty in thirty years.

While a zero poverty rate may not be achievable just because some people experience short-term circumstances that drop them below the poverty line periodically (“shallow poverty”), northern European jurisdictions have managed to drop their general poverty rates to as low as 4%.

With a comprehensive poverty elimination plan in Ontario we could do the same within this decade. We must start by ending “deep poverty” in our province. Currently a single person on social assistance struggles to survive on an annual income that is more than \$11,000 below the poverty line and a single mom with one child lives \$9,500 below the poverty line annually.

It is imperative that our provincial government adopt and implement a comprehensive plan to ensure that no one lives in deep poverty (80% or less of the poverty line) by 2015. Introducing a \$100 a month Healthy Food Supplement as a first step to establishing adequate benefit levels in social assistance would be a start.

And raising the minimum wage in three 75 cent increments over three years would ensure that all Ontarians working full-time at lower wage jobs would live above the poverty line. Right now, the minimum wage still leaves a full-time worker about \$1,000 below the poverty line.

Which parties or candidates does Poverty Free Ontario recommend that people vote for in this election?

Poverty Free Ontario is non-partisan. We do not endorse or encourage that Ontarians vote for any particular party or candidates.

We do urge Ontarians to question all electoral candidates on their commitment to ending poverty and to make their own individual choices about which candidates and political parties they believe will act to end poverty in this province.

Which political party is addressing the concerns of Poverty Free Ontario in this election?

Although the official election campaign is only in its second week, none of the political parties and very few of the electoral candidates running under party banners have expressed a clear commitment to ending poverty within a reasonable timeframe nor made it a priority issue for discussion with the public.

None of the published party platforms give any prominence at all to poverty or its elimination.

Poverty Free Ontario sees its job to raise the issue and to encourage the electorate to recognize that poverty of the scale and depth that currently exists is intolerable, unjust and a risk to the overall quality of community life for everyone in our province.

How could the province ever pay for eliminating poverty in this decade?

The provincial government always has fiscal options for addressing major social issues. Poverty Free Ontario has pointed out elsewhere that in the long run investment in a serious plan to eliminate poverty is self-financing resulting from the eventual savings to our health and social services systems (estimated \$38 billion annually including foregone tax revenues).

[see <http://www.povertyfreeontario.ca/2011/07/14/pfo-bulletin-4-fiscal-options-for-a-poverty-free-ontario/>].

Reclaiming public revenue by ending or adjusting the schedule of corporate and personal income tax cuts would also enable the government to address deep poverty.

Wouldn't a housing benefit to low income Ontarians be a major anti-poverty initiative?

There is a place for a carefully deigned housing benefit to alleviate the pressure on the budgets of low income households. Poverty Free Ontario supports a housing benefit that protects the core incomes of both social assistance recipients and low wage working individuals and families.

The first important step, however, is to ensure that social assistance benefit levels and wage levels provide adequate basic incomes for daily living. Then, a full housing benefit could complement basic income levels for individuals and families who have higher housing costs than their basic incomes can manage.

The housing benefit currently being proposed in some quarters would not provide this kind of coverage. Its proponents estimate that about 200,000 low income tenants would qualify. The social assistance caseload itself is approaching almost 600,000, so that clearly the housing benefit proposal as it now exists would be inadequate.

The risk, of course, is that a future government would jump at this relatively low cost anti-poverty measure (estimated at about \$240 million) as its gesture to fighting poverty, while the depth of poverty in the province would not be significantly reduced, let alone eliminated.

Poverty Free Ontario believes that the structural issue of inadequate basic income levels through adequate social assistance rates and decent wages must first be assured. Then, measures such as a housing benefit to *all* low income Ontarians with high housing costs could be designed and implemented to protect the ability of household budgets to meet the daily cost of food and other necessities of life.

For further information contact:

Peter Clutterbuck, SPNO Coordinator

(416) 653-7947 cell (416) 738-3228

pclutterbuck@spno.ca

Web site: www.povertyfreeontario.ca