

# INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION

## ISARC



NEWSLETTER

December 2008

### Priorities for Anti-Recession Spending

Poverty most affects peoples of colour, single women, children, native Canadians, new Canadians, and people who have mental health and physical challenges. While many would like to blame individuals for falling into poverty, these characteristics show the systemic nature of poverty. Therefore, we need systemic, rather than individual, solutions to break the cycle. Yet these people are at the lowest priority for anti-recession spending.

As governments discuss the spending of billions, politicians talk about manufacturing, mining, automobiles, forestry, and finance sectors. They are also interested in infrastructure spending, which affects everyone. But where are the discussions about the people who are affected by job loss? Where is the concern for children? Why do persons with chronic health issues or physical and mental challenges fall off the budget radar?

Monies allocated to help the lowest economic quintile (20%) will be spent locally. People need groceries, household items, transportation, and better housing. Monies to create non-profit affordable housing mean fees for architects and consultants, jobs for construction workers, and materials and supplies from local businesses. Funds released into the pocket books for lower income folk can cycle through the local economy seven times, according to economists.

Advocates have pressed governments for more child care spaces, increase in EI and social assistance benefits, additional community funds, affordable housing, better transit, and more training funds. Non profit commu-

nity organizations are struggling because of losses from contributors; they can be stabilized. It takes political will to think about people instead of economic sectors.

Instead of holding back on the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, Premier McGuinty and the Members of the Provincial Parliament can move faster and spend more in the 2009 budget. Have you and/or your faith group talked to provincial politicians?

Currently we do not know who will be the federal government after January 2009, so citizens need to push all MPs to ask Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Finance Minister Jim Flaherty to include funding for programs which address the needs of those in the lowest quintile in his January 2009 budget. Though money for the various business sectors and infrastructure improvement are needed, they should not forget those who are impoverished because of race, ethnicity, divorce, childhood, mental health and physical challenges, and recent immigration. Can these peoples have a "hand up" with monies which increase local spending?

One wonders what could actually happen if governments took their responsibility for the poor as seriously as they listen to the cases made by business sectors.



#### Important events:

- PRAYER VIGIL AT QUEEN'S PARK
- 2009 BUDGET

#### Inside this issue:

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| ONTARIO POVERTY STRATEGY ANNOUNCED | 2 |
| WATERLOO LUTHERAN SEMINARY - ISARC | 2 |
| ISARC ASKS FOR \$1 BILLION         | 3 |
| COLOUR OF POVERTY                  | 3 |
| PRAYER CHANGES THINGS!             | 4 |
| STUDIES ON POVERTY REDUCTION       | 4 |

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## Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Announced

On December 4, 2008, the Hon. Deb Matthews, cabinet chairperson for the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, announced the government plans. The advocacy of 25 in 5 and other coalitions was evident in the strategy as the government committed itself to reduce child poverty by 25% in the next five years. The government also agreed to use the Low Income Measure (LIM) which is used in the European Union and other countries to measure progress in reducing poverty. LIM addresses how far poverty is below the median income of an area.

The Strategy addresses poverty from the vantage point of various ministries: including education, community and social services, labour, municipal affairs and housing. Legislative, policy and procedure changes will be addressed in the coming year as ministries work together to “break the cycle”, the title of the report. Ontario realizes that poverty is systemic and that government systems need to change to address the needs of residents with the lowest incomes.

As stated by Premier McGuinty and Minister Matthews, this is a child poverty reduction strategy. Many anti-poverty coalitions are concerned that the

strategy does not address lower income adults, who do not have children living with them. These adults include non-custodial parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and friends of the family. Children are raised by a village, so poverty must be eliminated completely.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy recognizes the government’s responsibility to provide monies to keep schools open, to provide neighbourhood service hubs, and work at making communities safer. Monies will also be provided for research and innovation as well as the Vibrant Community organizations, which bring together people from all sectors to eliminate poverty.

The strategy is a good first step. The provincial government has listened and the plan shows the results of the consultations throughout the province. Now the 2009 budget is being prepared. Will there be a down payment on the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy? As citizens and faith groups, we need to talk with our Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs). They will need to advocate for monies in the caucuses, the legislature, and their personal conversations with party leaders.

For the full Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, go to [www.ontario.ca/breakthecycle](http://www.ontario.ca/breakthecycle)



### ISARC and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary:

Waterloo Lutheran Seminary is now the sponsor for ISARC. Brice Balmer has been appointed associate professor for functional theology; he will be working  $\frac{3}{4}$  time for ISARC and  $\frac{1}{4}$  time teaching courses and coordinating a Centre for Public Faith. Murat Ortanca is now the administrative assistant for ISARC.



## ISARC Asks for \$1 Billion Each for Housing and Social Assistance

Two important measures which will “break the cycle” of poverty and address recessionary pressures are to provide additional monies to individuals with the lowest incomes and to build affordable housing. ISARC’s pre-budgetary submission to the Ontario Legislative Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs made three requests:

1. Permanently increase social assistance (Ontario Works & Ontario Disability Support Program) by one billion dollars.
2. Increase the minimum wage to \$11.00 by 2011, which is an additional 75 cent beyond current legislated increases. At \$11/ hour, people working for minimum wage will have purchasing power equal to 1995 when minimum wage was frozen. ISARC also recommended that minimum wage be tied to the cost of living. (For comparison, currently a Living Wage in our urban areas is \$14/ hour for a single person; \$21/ hour for a person with dependents)
3. Permanently increase affordable housing funds by one billion dollars. The construction of affordable housing will provide jobs; housing subsidies allow people to move to better and safer accommodations.

In ISARC’s presentation, Brice Balmer held up the Transitions report of the Ontario Social Assistance Reform Committee of 1988. This report took several years of study and writing. The Liberal government under Premier David Peterson did not push ahead with its recommendations. Then Ontario went into a severe recession.

The recommendations were positively received. In discussion with the committee members, Brice Balmer found out that 75% of the submissions that day had requested monies for the poverty reduction agenda.

Though the date has passed for appearing before the committee, organizations and individuals can send in written submissions. Fax is (416) 325-3505; e-mail is [susan\\_sourial@ontla.ola.org](mailto:susan_sourial@ontla.ola.org)

When writing submissions, check with Lives Still in the Balance which is still relevant; little has changed since 2007. Some religious leaders have also been invited to discussions with Hon. Dwight Duncan, Ontario’s Minister of Finance.

### Colour of Poverty

Colour of Poverty is a Toronto-based advocacy organization pointing to the income disparity between white Ontarians and those of colour. Find out more about Colour of Poverty by going to [www.colourofpoverty.ca](http://www.colourofpoverty.ca) Poverty reduction must address issues of racism.



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# **INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION (ISARC)**



DECEMBER 2008 NEWSLETTER

## **Prayer Changes Things!**

20 years ago ISARC had a prayer vigil in front of Queen's Park legislative building for over a month before the government announced its budget. Would the government put poverty reduction and increases for people on social assistance in the budget? Robert Nixon was then the Minister of Finance. People came to a tent, lit a candle, and prayed that the MPPs would have the courage and strength to act on their convictions. Many MPPs came to the tent; they were curious to find out who was on the prayer list that day.

As he announced the budget, Nixon said that people should be aware of the power of prayer. He then announced monies to increase social assistance and address poverty issues.

ISARC is beginning to plan for a prayer vigil in March 2009. Are you willing to pray? Are you able to come to Queen's Park and join ISARC? Participants and groups will be able to volunteer for a half or whole day. At noon, a religious leader will join the two groups and lead in prayer and reflection. ISARC is hoping that the noon hour will be an inter-faith experience with groups from different traditions participating.

Watch for further announcements. ISARC is still organizing. More in the January 2009 newsletter.

## **Other Studies Support Poverty Reduction in Ontario:**

Over the past two months, a number of studies have focused on different aspects of poverty reduction:

1. "The Cost of Poverty" published by Ontario Association of Food Banks ([www.oafb.ca](http://www.oafb.ca)) shows that poverty costs Ontarians between \$2500 - \$2800 each year.
2. "Poverty Makes Me Sick" is a report from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. ([www.cheo.on.ca](http://www.cheo.on.ca))
3. "Roots of Youth Violence" is the Ontario report looking at gang violence, racism, and poverty. Community recreation in lower income communities are needed to create safe communities for all. ([www.rootsofyouthviolence.on.ca](http://www.rootsofyouthviolence.on.ca))
4. Wellesley Institute regularly reports on affordable housing, poverty, and other urban issues. ([www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com))
5. 25 in 5 is developing a Blue Print for poverty reduction, detailing the costs of the 25 in 5 Declaration. Peter Cluttbuck and Marvyn Novack have toured the province in November and December 2008 to discuss the current declaration and add dimensions to the Blue Print. Go to [www.25in5.ca](http://www.25in5.ca) or to [www.povertywatchOntario.ca](http://www.povertywatchOntario.ca) for the latest reports. You can also sign on for a weekly up-dates from 25 in 5.

Reports are coming through. Will governments listen? Will you talk with your MPs and MPPs? They need to hear that poverty reduction is a high priority ethical and financial issue for us!