

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

SOCIAL AUDIT 2010 A FAITH COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS OF POVERTY IN ONTARIO

Results for Huron County



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A Project of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

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Executive Summary

While roughly 20% of the Canadian population lives in rural areas, public forums to hear the unique concerns of rural people are rarely held. The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition's (ISARC) 2010 Social Audits is deliberately seeking input from rural areas including Huron County. On March 31, 2010 Huron County people living with low incomes, service providers, and the County Warden took part in ISARC's social audit to learn of the social costs of poverty on individuals, families, and our communities. Three main themes emerged from these sessions.

Transportation: The lack of public transportation has been acknowledged has been a matter of study for at least fifteen years in Huron County. Taxis or rides from friends are often the only options available. A couple of years ago, all government services such as Ontario Works (OW) and housing were relocated from five communities into one regional office. This change has made accessibility for people without cars more difficult. Even when services such as food banks are located in small towns, people are still challenged to get supplies home.

Food Security: There are more food banks in more rural communities. Use continues to rise with greater amounts of food being distributed. The clientele at the food banks is also changing; particularly as those who have experienced layoffs from well paying industrial jobs have exhausted their Employment Insurance (EI) claims. Soup kitchens have also been making an appearance in rural areas. Front line workers report that they have witnessed not only an increased in the need for proper nutrition but also a need for learning how to eat healthily on a small budget. Many people do not know how to prepare foods from scratch.

Housing: Some people choose to find market rent accommodations because subsidized housing was either unsafe or in undesirable neighbourhoods. Others view subsidized housing as finally giving them a safe place to live. This disparity suggests that there is an inconsistency in housing quality across the region. Housing is also an issue in relation to access to services. Some people felt they were being forced to choose between adequate housing and a community where their family belonged and having access to the education, support or medical services that they need to maintain better quality lives.

Underlying these themes was the frustration felt by people living in poverty. This comes from the loss of dignity that often accompanies struggling to survive on incomes far below the low-income cut-offs. Low income cut-offs were established as a measure of the costs of necessities in different communities and family sizes. This sense of frustration was shared by those who provide services for those affected by poverty.

There was agreement that change is needed, and that it must come from all levels of government. Change also needs to be developed locally through building on the strengths of our community, our people, and our resources. Through building relationships with people living in poverty we can begin to heal the rifts that emerge as a result of poverty and combat the negative stereotypes of people struggling with low incomes.

Introduction

In 2007, as part of its electoral campaign Dalton McGinty and his Liberal government promised to reduce poverty across Ontario. On May 6, 2009 the Ontario government passed the Ontario Poverty Reduction Law, the first of its kind in the province. It is important to note that this motion was passed unanimously by all parties in the legislative assembly. This legislation will ensure that successive governments in Ontario will remain focused on the fight against poverty.

To accompany the new poverty reduction legislation, the provincial government also launched its Poverty Reduction Strategy and promised to reduce poverty in Ontario by 25% over the next five years. Along with this promise, the government has adopted strategies by which it can measure its success in reaching this goal.

Already we have seen an increase in the Ontario Child Benefit which is designed to give low income families the financial support that they need to provide essentials like food and shelter for their children. Yet in the 2010 provincial budget, the government has called for an increase in social assistance rates by only 1% for the coming year. Even when this increase is combined with other increases to equal 11% over the past seven years, these increases are less than the inflation rate during this same period and people are actually further behind than when the Liberals came into power in Ontario.

ISARC and Rural Poverty

What does it mean to be poor in a rural context? That is the question members of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) and volunteers from across the province have worked to answer in its 2010 social audit.

ISARC was formed 1986 and was born out of the hope that together a coalition of faith groups could contribute to new public policies based on greater justice and dignity for Ontarians marginalized by poverty. ISARC has a strong history of conducting social audits regarding government policies and practices towards people living in poverty in Ontario. This current audit is the fifth time the organization has worked to capture the social costs of poverty.

Using a modified United Nations Rapporteur model, in which dedicated listeners capture not only the stories shared but their personal reflections on those stories, volunteers from across Ontario will meet with people living on low incomes in the places where they naturally come together for support and services.

The objectives for ISARC's 2010 social audit include:

1. To listen to persons with lived experience of poverty. People who struggle with poverty have in the past been minimally consulted in the development of the Government's Ontario Child Poverty Reduction Strategy: it is time for their voices to be heard.
2. To engage faith groups, Social Planning Network of Ontario members, non-profit groups, and advocacy organizations to work together at the local level (city, regions, counties, and neighbourhoods). Through their participation in local hearings people

active in supporting those in poverty can listen and hopefully be re-energized to continue their advocacy work towards poverty elimination.

3. To engage religious and civic leaders to listen, to become supportive of anti-poverty measures, and to speak of their support in other community settings.
4. To increase pressure on Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs) to make poverty elimination even more prominent in the current provincial government agenda and to have poverty elimination on the 2011 election platform for all parties.

In this social audit, ISARC is working hard to hear from rural communities. During its previous social audits, ISARC had visited 13 locations, most of them urban. This time around, ISARC has expanded its audit locations to 30 and is attempting to include several rural locations.

Not a lot is known about rural poverty in Ontario or Canada, as few studies have focused on this problem. Studies from other countries indicate that the experience of rural poverty is considerably different than poverty experienced in urban regions. Furthermore, research on rural poverty in Canada is hindered by the limitations on relevant census data. While published census data provides an indication of the proportion of rural people in different geographic areas living below the low income cut-offs, there is little to no additional information available.

When compared to their urban counterparts, rural communities are faced with barriers due to their lower population numbers. These include less employment opportunities, fewer educational or training programs, lack of affordable transportation and fewer social supports.

Huron County

According to 2006 Census statistics, Huron County has a population of 59,325, and in the years 2001 to 2006 there was a decrease in population of 0.6%. This decline is consistent with a provincial and Canada wide decrease in rural populations that has continued unabated since federation.

Using Census data from 2006, the median household income for Huron County was \$48,904. This income level is more than \$11,000 lower than the median Ontario income. Since that time, Huron County has experienced the loss of many of its higher paying jobs. In 2008, Huron County lost 30% of its manufacturing jobs. This is due to the closing of Dunline Rubber Products (36 laid off), CanGro (130 laid off), Signal Star Publishing (23 laid off), Volvo Road Machinery (500 laid off), as well as the downsizing of Wescast Industries (230 laid off). Income levels not only impact the health of individuals and families, but also the opportunities available to them. In 2010, many of the people who have lost their high paying jobs at local plants are having a difficult time securing new employment. When they are successful in finding new work, it is often at levels of pay far below what they were previously making at their previous employment. As their employment insurance claims run out, many of these families are turning to the social safety net and Ontario Works for support.

While Huron County has lower proportions of households, families and individuals that are living with a low income when compared to Ontario, there are still a significant number of people experiencing deprivation. In 2006, 7.4% of Huron County's population lived on less than

\$10,000/year. Within Huron County, North Huron has the highest rate of persons with low incomes with 10% and Bluewater had the lowest with 4.4%.

According to the Huron County Health Unit 2009 Community Health Status Report, there is a lack of adequate, affordable housing in the area with only 627 social housing units available in the county. These units continue to be full and there is a long waiting list for these rent-geared-to-income units. More than half the applicants for these units are adults without children who are looking for one-bedroom accommodations.

Huron County Social Audit

It is evident that poverty is an issue for Huron County. Many barriers exist that prevent individuals and families from making the transition from dependence to independence and from deprivation to sufficiency. ISARC's social audit in Huron County is a point from which to identify changes to improve quality of life and dignity.

Method:

Beginning with a meeting in January 2010, 11 people from Huron County came together with staff from ISARC to begin the process of examining the social costs of poverty. These individuals represented health and social service agencies, faith communities, and people living in poverty. Together they identified not only the populations within the county struggling with poverty, but some of the places where these individuals come together to access services.

Many locations and groups were approached to participate in the Huron County social audit including soup kitchens, support groups, and skill development groups. As service providers and facilitators approached people living on low incomes and asked if they would be willing to come and talk about their lives, a mixed response was received. Some individuals expressed not only openness to speaking about their lives, but they welcomed the opportunity to do so. Others responded with fear that they would be persecuted and lose their benefits or housing.

The social audit planning committee was also interested in capturing the experiences of the many migrant workers who live and work in Huron County. Unfortunately, the audit took place before many of these individuals arrive in the area to work. An attempt was made to reach those migrant workers who were already in the area; however, resistance from employers made this impossible.

After two and one half months of planning and speaking with people living on low incomes, the Huron County social audit took place on March 31, 2010 in various locations within the county. Four grade 12 students from St. Anne's Catholic Secondary school along with a staff member from the Huron County Health Unit acted as recorders, while clergy and community members acted as both rapporteurs and facilitators.

Two sessions were held with community members living with low incomes. These sessions took place in a soup kitchen and a community health centre. In total, seven people shared their experiences, six of whom were female and one was male. Sessions were also held for service

providers and area municipal councillors. In total, six service providers from across the county attended and the county warden also spoke with us.

Findings:

Several themes emerged as people who live on low incomes participated in the social audit. These included the depth of deprivation, lack rural public transportation, housing issues, effects of poverty on children, food security, and health concerns. Many of these same themes were reflected in discussions with service providers and the county warden. This section of the report outlines stories and thoughts put forth by those individuals who shared their struggles of living in poverty and the individuals who offer services to support them. Some of the stories and comments reflect on more than one theme and many appear more than once in this report.

Deprivation and Dignity

It was clear in speaking with people receiving government assistance, whether Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), the amounts provided for shelter and basic needs simply do not cover the costs associated with living in Huron County. Not everyone is able to live in subsidized housing, and shelter allowances do not come close to covering market rents in the area. Because of the discrepancy in cost and income, many people spoke of going hungry or not being able to purchase healthy food. Others were struggling to cover the expenses of necessary medications not covered by government provided health benefits.

“I had an income of \$10,000 last year, and 80% of it was spent on rent.”

“I have to pay \$195 for medications every two weeks. I can’t afford that.”

“I cut down on myself to feed my children.”

On top of low government assistance rates, some of the people we spoke with had unknowingly received overpayment of benefits. This left them struggling to pay off debts which numbered thousands of dollars and reducing the already meagre incomes.

“Between CPP [Canada Pension Plan] and ODSP I owe more than \$20,000 from overpayments. I will never be able to pay it all back. After deductions are made from my cheque, I have \$340/month to live on.”

“They mailed me a cheque for too much, almost \$20 000, right before Christmas. I wanted to cash it in so bad and spend some of it and have a good Christmas. I’ve never had so much money in my life. But just in case, I called them to make sure it was right. They told me I need to pay it back immediately or I’m cancelled. I had two days to return the money.”

Service providers also discussed the depth of deprivation that they are witnessing in the clients they serve.

“There is definitely increased use at the food bank and there is a different clientele, not only people on ODSP and Welfare, but also people on EI. They have had to make the lifestyle transitions from working to EI to OW. We have seen the ripple effects.”

“There are no new jobs, and if there is a job, it’s not of the same calibre; so people are making less. Local plant closures have greatly affected the community.”

Deprivation goes beyond the simple lack of necessities. It affects a person’s core sense of dignity.

“I don’t say anything anymore, because it’s not worth trying it just to get ignored”

“I have to reuse toilet paper. Do you know what its like to have to use used toilet paper!”

“I have lost my dignity”

“I will win, but what’s it going to cost me? It’s going to cost me my dignity when my son has to help bathe me”

“I had to swallow my pride numerous times going to food banks and calling churches.”

“I don’t want to be dishonest. It’s not in my nature. I just want to be a productive member of society.”

People also shared what they are doing to preserve their sense of self, and in doing so revealed a great deal of resiliency in the face of adversity.

“I volunteer at the food bank.”

“I started a support group for people with COPD with some help from the family health team.”

“That’s the one part I need to work on every single day is HOPE. It took a few years to put a smile back on my face”

“Even if there’s little things we can do to help ourselves, we need to do them”

“I know something has to be done, and so here I am.”

One rapporteur, who reflected on deprivation and dignity, shared the following:

“Hearing first hand stories of those on ODSP was heart-wrenching. The primary emotion was one expressed by each participant: frustration. I was overwhelmed with a sense of frustration that a system designed and well-intentioned to support some of the most vulnerable and suffering in our communities is actually contributing to their loss of dignity as human beings. I was angered that in a free society there are those who believe their life and even their children’s futures are determined by the government and not their own choices, dreams, or freedoms. I was saddened by the trauma of their physical and spiritual being, the weight borne by their families, the hopelessness they feel, and the tangible sense of worthlessness that they believed they are viewed with. I was equally saddened at how even among those “fighting the system” there is a sense of competition and finger-pointing; a recognition that even among those being “helped” there are negative contributions. On the other hand, I was encouraged and inspired by their determination to rise above and their sense of humour.”

Transportation

Lack of public transportation has been acknowledged as an issue and has been a matter of study for at least fifteen years in Huron County. Greyhound Bus Lines provides transportation out of the County but runs only once a week and only out Clinton. Taxis or rides from friends are often the only options available. This lack of public transportation makes accessing services difficult if not impossible for some people with low incomes. Even when services such as food banks are located in small towns, people are still challenged to get supplies home.

“I can’t get to the food bank.”

“Access to help is a key issue. Transportation is the biggest issue.”

“(Lack of) transportation is HUGE, especially in the winter.”

“There are so many resources but trying to access them from rural areas is difficult. Transportation is difficult.”

Government services such as Ontario Works have centralized offices in Clinton, requiring people to travel long distances to access these required services. Up until a couple of years ago, these services were accessible in five communities through the use of outreach services one day a week. Administrators of these services felt centralized services are a



more efficient solution and believe service delivery is not impeded. However service providers from non-governmental agencies identified this relocation as a real barrier.

“OW used to show up once a week in various communities and make appointments. To get OW, you need to have a low income and often no vehicle. But without a vehicle you’re unable to get there to register for OW.”

With owning and operating a car often well outside the means of many people with low incomes, isolation becomes a real issue. Sometimes they make difficult choices in order to stay connected with others.

“For many young people, cell phones are their lifeline and they would rather water it down [baby formula] than lose that lifeline.”

The County Warden Bert Dykstra shared with us that County Council is looking into the issue of public transportation and is studying the feasibility of running a shuttle service from town to town through out the county. As this report is being prepared, a local news story revealed that there may be a partial solution in the possibility of regular transportation services from Goderich to Stratford.

Food Security

Far from the common notion that food shortages are not an issue in rural areas, food banks are handing out record amounts of food in rural communities and soup kitchens and other community meals are becoming more common. In the midst of fields growing produce, people are going hungry.

“I can’t get to the food bank.”

“The only meat you can get at the food bank is hamburgers. One package of hamburger. No other meat.”

“We can’t choose what we like.”

“Everyone knows you’ve been there (food bank). It’s supposed to be one at a time, by appointment: but it’s not.”

“I cut down on myself to feed my children.”

The issue is more than simply the availability of food. Food bank staff are convinced that many individuals do not know how to prepare simple, healthy low-cost meals.

“We need to teach people how to make healthy food choices and prepare their own food so they will be able to support themselves, like making a chicken dinner; therefore, we need to teach people how to cook.”

“We (food bank) were given a bunch of stewing chickens. We could hardly get rid of them; no one knew what to do with them.”

“One woman was given a turkey for Christmas, but she had to give it away. She did not have a pan to cook it in!”

As of March 31, 2010, there are three soup kitchens operating in Huron County. Two are located in Goderich and one in Clinton. Two of these programs are only a couple of months old, and the other one has been in existence for two years. There are also 11 food banks operating in the area. It is important to note that all of these programs are run and supported by Huron County faith communities. Use of these programs is on the rise and with many new first time users.

“Last year (2009), 27 tonnes of food was given out in Huron County, in the first quarter of 2010 we have given out 51 tonnes. The food distribution centre has made such a difference for our food banks.”

“We at the food banks are seeing people in transition from an EI lifestyle to OW lifestyle.”

“There is a different clientele, not only people on ODSP and Welfare, but also people on EI. They have had to make the lifestyle transitions from working to EI to OW. We have seen the ripple effects.”

Children and Youth

In the social audit, we asked individuals how their low income affected their children and families. Many of the people we spoke to had children, some were young and school aged, others were teens, and yet others had adult children. Witnesses shared with us many different ways that their low income affected their families including difficulties with school, poor peer relationships, lack of recreational opportunities, and family breakdown.

“I asked for a computer (from ODSP) but nope. Yet, someone I know whose child has a learning disability got a free computer and they’re not even on disability. Our children need computers to do their homework.”

“My kids can’t keep up in school. They need a computer do their homework.”

“I can’t afford the internet so my child can do homework.”

Parents also shared how their low incomes kept their children from participating in activities with their peers or made for more difficult peer relationships.

“It pains me that I can’t offer \$10 to help my son to go out with friends. But I just can’t afford that. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“My son comes home and tells me about a food drive at school. You want to do this because you don’t want to feel left out. Well it takes away from us.”

“Kids are labelled because their mom is on welfare, because they don’t wear designer shoes.”

Parents did express gratefulness for programs such as Rural Response for Healthy Children and the Huron County Christmas Bureau.

“They (Rural Response for Healthy Children) really helped me when my kids were small.”

“The Christmas Bureau is great, but they need more for older kids.”

One agonizing theme emerged for parents of teenagers. These parents shared the pain of families torn apart when their children turned 18 and the family lost their Child Tax Credit. This loss was accompanied by the expectation by government service providers that another adult member meant that there was another income in the family. In these circumstances, parents can no longer afford to let their children stay home and they are forced to ask their children to leave.

“They cut my cheque when my son turned eighteen. My family has already been torn apart (by divorce) now it will be again.”

“I have the same situation with my daughter. It’s either she stays with me and I get deducted or she moves out. But I can’t help my daughter move out.”

One of the teenage recorders for the Huron audit was particularly moved by this reality. She states, “What I’ll never forget about this experience is how lucky I am. The stories local women shared with us about their teenage sons and daughters potentially being forced to move out so that they can make ends meet was a sickening idea.”

Service providers also shared meaningful observations and experiences from working with families with low incomes. They identified how poverty is often cyclical in nature, and how the children of parents with low incomes often grow up to live in poverty themselves as they often have fewer opportunities, lower educational outcomes, and fewer skills to be successful in life.

“If the parent is poverty, the kids fall into this cycle and find a way into the system.”

“People need education. I think that a lot of people here feel stuck; they grow up in poverty. They feel that they can’t get out of Huron County. They know that they aren’t going to go any farther, so why bother. Kids need to see success stories.”

A situation faced by some older teens and young adults comes from the cost of acquiring legitimate pieces of personal identification.

“We have a lot of kids who have no identity, no birth certificate, no license. If they don’t have a piece of ID they can’t get a piece of ID. It costs money to get

that ID, with no ID they can't get anything: no library card, no OW. If there are problems in the home, kids can't get these documents from their parents."

Service providers and parents identified moving as a barrier to child success.

"Often families run up bills that they can't pay so they are forced to move. Bills are changed into the other parents name and the cycle begins again."

"Do I uproot her (daughter who's just settled at school, made friends) because my personal life is slacking to move to another community where there may be better services or opportunities?"

There is no doubt that children are affected by poverty. As one service provider shared, "What I am always amazed with is that we make programs, but they are just band aids We are all enabling this to continue, this poverty. If the parent is living in poverty, the kids fall into this cycle and find a way into the system."

Health

During the Huron County social audit we heard from several people with chronic physical and mental health issues. Many of these conditions kept people from being able to work both now and in the future.

"I've had 15 surgeries on my back and I need another one on my neck."

"I worked my butt off at two jobs. Eventually I was in such pain that I was at home for six weeks. I went to the doctor several times, had several tests and they finally figured out I had severe anxiety and depression. It affects me physically and mentally."

Some individuals shared their experience of services they utilized to help them maintain their health.

"I use meals on wheels, but I still need to pay for that while being on a budget of less than 40 dollars a month. I also need to buy vitamins because of my illness, but I can't afford them. There are good things. Last year I got a scooter from the Ministry of Health."

"I started a support group for people with COPD [Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease] with some help from the family health team."

"The Canadian Mental Health Association were very helpful."

"My social worker from the family health team is wonderful."

Some of the social audit participants shared how being physically disabled, living on a low income and being unable to work also had a negative impact on their mental health.

“You become mentally depressed because you can’t even go out and buy a pair of underwear”

One of the most common challenges that people shared with us was the financial strain of paying for medications they need to manage their health. They were frustrated that some of the medications they were prescribed are not covered by government assistance programs. In particular, individuals with health problems that cause severe pain were frustrated that while narcotics were covered, alternate pain relief medications were not.

“Why are narcotics covered but not this (alternative pain medication)? When I was on narcotics things were a lot easier, but I made the choice to get off and use other meds. They don’t take the pain away but at least they are not narcotics. I don’t want go back on narcotics because I worked so hard to get off. You’re labelled HUGE, HUGE, HUGE ‘Oh, you’re a narcotic user’.”

“I took myself off of antidepressants; I couldn’t afford them.”

“I have to pay \$195 for medications every two weeks. I can’t afford that.”

“I only take pills I need to live/survive.”

“I bought one pill yesterday, ONE PILL, and it cost me \$17.25: one pill!”

We also heard frustration that other medical costs that are not covered or seemed to be covered for some people and not others.

“My daughter needed lifts for her feet. I asked ODSP and they told me they don’t cover lifts for feet. So then, I went to welfare and I got \$400 arches for my daughter covered.”

“People don’t know if they qualify for more funding because they don’t have a support worker; people are put into files and assigned to a team. People often don’t know that they are eligible for extended health benefits.”

In the session for service providers, comments on some of the poorer health outcomes seen in Huron County were shared. Service providers shared that they see a higher percentage of young mothers and higher drug and alcohol use, and other risky behaviours as being barriers to good health. They and other service providers are also seeing babies suffering from malnutrition because the parents are watering down formula because they do not have enough. Service providers also identified that some individuals with mental health challenges or developmental delays simply do not have the skills to survive and are falling between the cracks. Often these individuals come in contact with the law before they receive the help they need.

Employment

At one of the social audit sessions, employment was an important subject of conversation. While some wanted to be able to get off of assistance and work, others were far too disabled to return to work.

“I have been on ODSP since I was 16, that’s 24 years now. I have a disability but it’s invisible. I’ve worked really hard in counselling. I want to be able to work but I need training. If you’re on OW they’ll pay for training but not if you’re on ODSP. I’m not a lazy or uneducated person, I’m just stuck.”

“I work under the table so that I can survive.”

“If I could work I would: no one will hire you if you have disabilities, it’s disgusting. I’ve been a hard worker all my life, I’ve been working since my teens. I don’t want to be disabled but I am.”

Others talked about how the system pressures them to find work, even as their doctors tell them that returning to work would be detrimental to their health.

“I’m hurting myself because I’m doing what they’re (ODSP staff) telling me to do. I took a computer course and my hands swelled up: I couldn’t feel them.”

“They (ODSP staff) tell me, ‘you have to go back to work’; I tell this to my doctor and he says ‘if you go back, you’ll be in a wheelchair’.”

“I was told ‘get off your ass and get a job!’ I wanted to sue her (OW staff). She made me cry every time.”

It is clear that the desire for employment comes from the need for better finances but also the need to feel worthwhile in society. These people did not want to be seen as lazy or dishonest. They were clear that they did not want to milk the system but to get off of it, yet the barriers to employment were also clear.

Without some training or other assistance, government assistance was viewed as a trap by some of those who spoke with us.

“I tried to ask the ODSP spokesperson how to get off the system, and they told me ‘you have to work the channels’.”

“The only way I can get off the system is to win the lottery.”

“I am in this box, and I can’t get out of this box.”

Service providers discussed the importance of education to make employment possible. They emphasized this need especially for young people.

“We need to bring educational opportunities closer to Huron County. Why not have a college, an agricultural college which focuses on organic growing?”

“We need to emphasize the importance of bringing education to young people. Universal education funds for kids should be provided.”

“The Child Tax Benefit [CTC] is not enough; there needs to be funds towards further education for low income families.”

The effects of the recent recession, especially the jobs lost through plant closures were also discussed.

There are no new jobs, and if there is a job, it's not of the same calibre. Local plant closures are greatly affecting the community.

Housing and Homelessness

Housing and homelessness were discussed as real issues for Huron County by both people living in poverty and by those who provide services. It also became evident that much of the existing stock of social housing in the County is aging and is in a poor state of repair: there simply is not enough of it. Witnesses shared their difficulty in finding safe, appropriate, affordable housing. Others talked about the invisible homelessness that exists as people couch surf (move from house to house sleeping on the chesterfield) as a means of maintaining some kind of housing while others are forced to live in motels.

“We lived in a three bedroom house that was really only a two bedroom. We were constantly pressured by CAS [Children’s Aid Society] to get a bigger house but I couldn’t afford it. My four children worried constantly about being forced to leave. If they (CAS and Housing) would have listened and noticed that a bigger house was needed, it would have been a big difference for us, it took years to find a place big enough that I could afford.”

“I’m in housing now, a nice apartment but my daughter is living on the streets. I wanted her to live with me but housing wouldn’t allow it, I had to ask her to leave.”

“I had an income of \$10,000 last year, and 80% of it was spent on rent.”

“I ended up living in a motel for several months and the ODSP shelter allowance would not cover this cost.”

Some of the people who spoke with us shared that they would rather pay market rent than live in subsidized housing and yet others were very pleased with the subsidized housing they had.

“I want to be able to choose where I live.”

“Rent is either too high or else it’s the dumps.”

“I’ve been in low income (housing), its worse. It’s cheap, sure, but it’s horrible.”

“I am finally in a good place.”

We also heard of the effects from the home improvement tax credit.

“Some landlords increase our rents because they renovated with the rental tax credit.”

“They just slapped some paint on the walls and then raised our rents. I didn’t ask for new paint.”

“Where my girlfriend lives, they put in new windows. They didn’t do a good job, and now she needs to put plastic around the windows and her heating costs went up.”

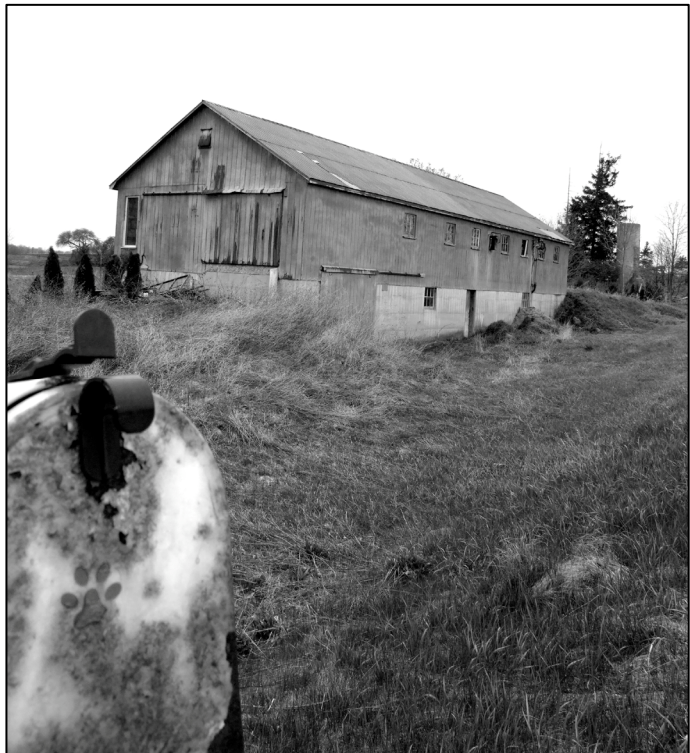
Service providers and the County Warden acknowledged a lack of subsidized housing as a real issue for Huron County. Not only is there a waiting list for subsidized housing, but several service providers acknowledged that the available housing is inadequate for other reasons. Other barriers to finding suitable accommodations were also recognized.

“The cost of housing is the clear problem. People don’t want to live in low income housing. It’s not safe. There should be inspectors to see if housing is safe and acceptable. The landlord shouldn’t decide if it’s safe.”

“People are living in places not meant to be housing.”

“In rural areas it is very hard to recognize that people are homeless. We call it couch surfing, like there is no box on the side of the road, but there is a friend’s couch. Or people are living under bridges in tents.”

“If someone can’t pay their rent and run into arrears they often end up getting evicted.”



“Sometimes landlords are raising the rent and people are being forced to pay it because they have no where else to go.”

Security or residence was also threatened by associated costs such as electricity and heating.

“People don’t have the money for oil, or the money to pay for the hydro for space heaters.”

“People just running the bills up, changing services [i.e. Switch from Rogers to Bell, etc.] and changing the name on the bill.”

Government and Government Services and Programs

The Ontario government provides assistance through Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program. These programs along with social housing are administered locally with funding from the provincial government. Receipt of any kind of assistance means filling out forms that detail one’s exact financial status and living arrangements: every detail of an individual’s life is examined. It was also evident that it is not always easy to get government assistance.

“ODSP wanted to know everything and there is no privacy.”

“My application to ODSP was a fight. It took me 8 months to get onto ODSP.”

“It took me 4 years.”

“It took me 3 years, and I needed a lawyer to help get me on ODSP.”

“I’ve gone to MP/MPP for help but no one cares.”

Social audit participants felt not only the lack of privacy inherent in these forms, but also the pressure to get them filled out in time. Not only was there a tight time limit to returning completed forms, but the penalties for not returning forms on time could include loss of income or housing. If the government makes mistakes at their end, recipients are still held responsible for the consequences of any mistakes.

“If you don’t fill out the forms from ODSP then you could lose your housing.”

“Between CPP and ODSP I owe more than \$20,000 from overpayments. I will never be able to pay it all back. After deductions are made from my cheque and I have \$340/month to live on.”

“They mailed me a cheque for too much, almost \$20 000, right before Christmas. I wanted to cash it in so bad and spend some of it and have a good Christmas. I’ve never had so much money in my life. But just in case, I called them to make sure it was right. They told me I need to pay it back immediately or I’m cancelled. I had two days to return the money.”

Other agencies are also involved our participants lives, sometimes in a conflicting ways.

“We lived in a three bedroom house that was really only a two bedroom. We were constantly pressured by CAS to get a bigger house but I couldn’t afford it. My four children worried constantly about being forced to leave. If they (CAS and Housing) would have listened and noticed that a bigger house was needed, it would have been a big difference for us, it took years to find a place big enough that I could afford.”

At other times, government agencies were viewed as being entirely helpful.

“There was help filling out the forms from the Unemployment office.”

“My daughter needed lifts for her feet. I asked ODSP and they told me they don’t cover lifts for feet. So then, I went to welfare and I got \$400 arches for my daughter covered.”

Ontario Works and ODSP were viewed as intruding in every area of a person’s life.

“It’s either this or I’m going to die. I wouldn’t get covered (by ODSP) because I boarded with a man. It took me 6 months to get funding.”

“When the Child Tax Benefit went up I was happy, until my ODSP decreased at the same time.”

“If you get more money from the CPP, then ODSP will take it off of your cheque, and when my son turns 18, I will lose the CTB, CPP will decrease, and ODSP will decrease.

“I am being honest with you people (ODSP), and every time I am honest with you I get screwed.”

Faced with the need to ask for help to live, some individuals said that they were met with suspicion and a lack of respect.

“They (ODSP staff) tell me ‘you have to go back to work’; I tell this to my doctor and he says ‘if you go back, you’ll be in a wheelchair.’ When you try your hardest then you get people looking at you saying ‘What the hell are you doing?’”

“When I was talking to a woman from welfare, she told me ‘get off your ass and get a job!’ I wanted to sue her. She made me cry every time.”

“We’re angry. People on the phone (at ODSP) bring their voice up to me. I’m sick of everyone telling me how to live my life. And they record everything, so I

can't raise my voice back up to them. They record everything! I want to be treated with respect."

Many service providers recognized the challenges of the present system.

"It is very difficult to get started on OW; to get it you need to come to Clinton in the centre of the county. If you need welfare you have no job, no car, no way to get there. So to get there you steal something and then you get caught in the court system. It is a vicious circle."

"Calling for help from government places, you get the recorded messages on the phone, eventually people give up."

"The personal touch is gone, they are just a number."

"People (staff at OW) are getting sick because they are working too much but the agency just runs understaffed."

"Most people on ODSP don't allow us to help them; we don't know the rules/regulations for ODSP, OW so it's hard to give them assistance; each person should have a support worker to help facilitate ODSP, and who we can work with to help find out what's best for that person."

Non Governmental Organizations

Not all the agencies that people interact with are run by the government. The food banks are primarily organized by faith groups. The Canadian Mental Health Association provides support as well as the social workers working with local Family Health Teams. While the respondents generally felt these groups were supportive and helpful, there were some things that were a challenge.

"The Mental Health Association, they are very helpful and have helped me a lot."

"My social worker (at the family health team) is fantastic! She should get a raise. I get a lot of support from her."

Food banks are seen as a welcome help, but getting to the food bank can be a challenge. Two women at one of the social audit sessions had to take a taxi to and from the food bank where we were meeting. Other people also noted that getting to the food bank was a problem. It was noted that there is a lack of privacy too.

"People talk when we go into the food bank. Everybody knows."

"I can't get to the food bank."

The Christmas Bureau was also seen to be helpful, but sometimes inconsistent in the help being offered.

“They treat everyone differently (at the Christmas Bureau). Other people I know called me and told me they got boxes full of stuff. Their appointment was only 30 minutes after mine. Everyone should get the same thing.”

“On the last day, people can come to the Christmas Bureau and pick out some extra gifts if they didn’t get enough, so I went because I only received very little, and when I walk in people have handfuls of stuff. I was about to grab a shirt and another lady rips off the shirt from my hand. It’s disgusting. It was horrible. People were like animals.”

The local food banks and agencies are being stretched like never before.

“Last year (2009) 27 tonnes of food was given out in Huron County, in the first quarter of 2010 we have given out 51 tonnes. The distribution centre has made such a difference in our food banks. There is definitely increased use at the food banks.”

“There is a different clientele, not only people on ODSP and Welfare, but also people on EI. They have had to make the lifestyle transitions from working to EI to OW. We have seen the ripple effects.”

“Emotionally: It is very hard – to solve their problems. It’s hard for them to come sometimes; People are very embarrassed to come to the food bank; Dealing with people in a human way is very important.”

Proposals for Change:

During the social audit, participants were questioned about what changes are needed to break the cycle of poverty. The ideas gathered from Huron County and across the province will not only help ISARC space recommendations for policy changes aimed at eliminating poverty, promoting social justice, and improving the dignity for all people, but these recommendations can also be used to implement changes locally.

Deprivation and Dignity:

- There needs to be an actual poverty line that they don't let us fall below.
- There has to be a poverty level in the government budget: we need to be treated fairly
- The basic needs and the shelter needs to be raised.
- No claw backs for child tax benefits
- We need to educate Canada about the poverty problem.

Transportation:

- Run a shuttle service to and from each town.

- We need to establish public transportation to help address social isolation and geographic barriers.

Housing:

- More subsidized housing units for large families and for single people is needed.
- An inspection program for rental properties and a safety inspector could insure that places were safe and habitable before anyone moves in.
- Social mixed housing that is flexible is needed.

Employment & Education:

- ODSP could implement retraining programs
- People with children in school should receive a home computer
- A universal education fund for kids is needed
- Government needs to change the Child and Family Services Act, by changing the age for service from 16 to 18 so that we can help kids who presently fall between the cracks. Then we could provide more kids with support, educational opportunities and transition to independence.

Food Security:

- A service that allows an appointment at the food bank with enough time between appointments so that people have some privacy.
- Teach people how to make healthy food choices and prepare their own food so they will be able to support themselves.

Government and Government Services and Programs:

- Staff should be more sensitive to individual cases.
- More social workers are needed to decrease waiting time.
- People in charge need to see the needs of the people they are working with, and take them seriously. They need to provide support.
- We need to eliminate long waiting times at the local assistance centres
- CAS needs to help find more size appropriate houses.
- We need more social workers to carry the case load.
- Assign everyone an individual case worker.
- Local government should be given the money to spend on housing on a regular basis.
- Let local government make the decisions on how to spend provincial funds so that they can implement local solutions for local problems.
- Reduce caseloads for social service workers and volunteers by hiring more professional social workers who are supported to recognize the social and economic determinants of health and who are non-judgemental and without punitive approaches toward the system users.

Non Government Organizations:

- More collaboration between services, especially between government and churches.

Conclusion

The ISARC Social Audit in Huron County identified many barriers to breaking the cycle of poverty. As one service provider remarked, “What I always find amazing, is that we make programs, but they are just band aids. We are all enabling this to continue, this poverty. If the parent is in poverty, the kids fall into this cycle and find a way into the system.” Clearly any solutions that are proposed to break the cycle of poverty need to address the cyclical nature and intergenerational experiences of poverty.

Over and over again we heard about the lack of relationships. People receiving government assistance did not have one worker but rather reported to and were served by a team. When individuals make inquiries about assistance, they are greeted with an automated voicemail system. This lack of relationship is contributing to a sense of disenfranchisement and loss of dignity. Solutions will need to include treating people living in poverty with dignity and realizing that they are our neighbours and valuable members of our community.

Addressing poverty will mean a coordinated effort between different levels of government, government and non-governmental agencies, and the people themselves: relationships will be key. As one rapporteur reflected, “We have stopped seeing people and instead see problems and we will never have enough money to solve it all. And so, I looked around the room and saw that it is people, working together, inspired by faith, hope, and love in a God who hears the cry of the oppressed that will continue to be the place where new life emerges for communities (and specifically rural communities in this case) facing enormous and increasing challenges.”

Building relationships begins with listening. Another rapporteur shared, “After considering the comments of the individuals who attended, I would remark that even in the midst of their stories which were sad by any measure of the word, they were hopeful that from this some help would come, that someone with authority would actually listen.” When we pause long enough to see the humanity reflected in the eyes of people who live in poverty, it is then that we can all be part of creating solutions and advocating for change.

Finally, in the words of one of the young recorders, “We live in a very developed, wealthy country where there are great opportunities, far more opportunities than in the world’s countless impoverished countries and yet people are not able to access these opportunities because of disabilities they can’t heal or help. In such a medically advanced country known for its universal healthcare, those with disabilities should be able to gain access to the medications they need, regardless of their income. In such a developed country, they should not have to beg for decent shelter. They should not have to decide between keeping their son or daughter at home and receiving the support they need to get healthy.”