

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC e-Newsletter, April 2010

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Emailing, as opposed to mailing, saves us time and resources, and allows you to use the various links we put in the e-newsletter version.

You can email us at info@isarc.ca to let us know if you can receive our newsletter by email.

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Prayer Vigil: still persisting one year later

by Susan Eagle, ISARC Chair

Greetings to all our ISARC partners.

We are so blessed to have so many friends who have enthusiastically come forward to participate in our Social Audit. It is our hope that as we gather stories we will renew the provincial momentum for social change that is at the centre and heart of our work as a faith based coalition.



A year ago, at our 2009 Prayer Vigil (<http://isarc.ca/prayervigil.html>), as we stood in sub zero weather and shared prayers and spiritual readings with our multi faith family, we reminded ourselves of our foundation as faith communities. It was and is a spiritual space that allows us to see the “long view” as Archbishop Oscar Romera wrote in his prayer for the future of his country. It is that perspective that reminds us that we must be persistent and enduring in our work.

Yet, the immediate view tells us that we must be ever more vigilant in our call to our political decisions makers that more needs to be done now. The Poverty Reduction strategy is lagging and seems to be drifting from its initial enthusiast beginning.

A recent study by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that, “Canada spends less on cash benefits, such as unemployment benefits and family benefits than most OECD countries and that, partly as a result of this, taxes and transfers do not reduce inequality by as much as in most other countries.”

And, although some low income families are doing better, the National Council of Welfare found that welfare incomes have continued to decline since 1994, with some of the losses described as “staggering”.

As we hear the stories of struggle and perseverance in our communities may we be moved to find new ways to walk with those who are willing to share those stories with us.

And may we continue to keep the “long view” before us as we remember that we “plant seeds that one day will grow, and water seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.” Thus we become “prophets of a future not our own.”

Blessings on you as you continue this important work.

Social Audit update

ISARC’s Social Audits across the province are well under way.

You can go to www.isarc.ca/socialaudit2010.html to learn when and where the Hearings have or will take place, and to access the Guidelines and various resources we have put together.



You can read about The Social Audit in the Media at <http://www.isarc.ca/socialaudit2010.html#media>.

There is a new resource available for volunteers involved in organizing local social audits to help organize and compile the stories and data collected. Please read From Data to Report: Compiling the data from your local social audit found at <http://isarc.ca/archives/FromDatatoReport.pdf>.

If you would like to become a part of the Social Audit in your local area, contact ISARC at info@isarc.ca.

Lack of transportation, services, housing

ISARC Social Audit 2010 Southwest Rural Ontario, March 31, 2010

by Alexandra Béasse

Even though about 20% of the Canadian population lives in rural areas, public forums or hearings in rural regions to hear the unique concerns of rural people are rarely held.

A distinction of ISARC's 2010 Social Audits is that it is deliberately seeking input from rural areas to learn what is unique about rural poverty.

One of these took place in Huron County on March 31 and these are some of the initial findings.

The 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 provide transportation out of the County but runs only once a week and then only out of one community. Taxis or rides from friends are often the only options available.

Many government services have centralized offices, requiring people to travel long distances to access these required services. A couple of years ago, all government services such as Ontario Works and housing were relocated from five communities into one regional office. Administrators felt this was a much more economical solution and did not feel that it impeded service delivery.

And even when services such as foodbanks are located in small towns, people are still challenged to get supplies home and may need to rely on costly taxis to get around.

The use of foodbanks is increasing. While there are more and more food banks in more rural communities, many of them run by faith groups, use continues to rise and more and more food is being distributed.

The clientele at the food banks is also changing, with more people accessing service who have experienced layoffs from decent paying industrial jobs. They have exhausted their EI claims and are finding that they can no longer pay the bills. And, often volunteers at the food-bank are the ones who are assisting these people with applying to Ontario Works.

Soup kitchens have also been making an appearance in rural areas. Front line workers report that they have experienced not only an increased in the need for proper nutrition but also a need for learning how to eat healthy on a small budget. Often people do not know the basics of cooking for themselves and their families and how to prepare foods from scratch.

Housing is an issue in rural areas. Some people choose to find market rent accommodations after finding the subsidized housing was either unsafe because of poor quality, mold, or for neighbourhood factors. Others saw subsidized housing as finally giving them a safe place to live. This disparity suggests that there is an inconsistency in housing quality.

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 access to the education, support or medical services they needed to maintain better quality lives. A case in point was a county project for assisted housing units being planned in a central location where land was available. However, anyone wishing to move into those units would need to leave friends and community behind, not to mention absorbing the cost of moving from one community to another.

It is clear that people living in poverty in the rural areas share many things with their urban counterparts, they worry about how poverty affects their children, the low amounts provided by government services, and the increasing impersonalization of services.

But people living in poverty are also resilient and want to be able to provide for themselves. As one rural resident said, “I know something has to be done, and so here I am.”

Religious Leader's Forum on 2010 ISARC Social Audit Wednesday, June 2 in Toronto

... a provincial gathering to hear and discuss our initial findings

Mark your calendars!

Sam Sorbara Auditorium in Brennan Hall
University of St. Michael's College
In The University of Toronto, 81 St.Mary Street

Cost is \$40 and includes lunch. You must register by May 26 (form on last page).
Space is limited.



ISARC is providing opportunities for the most vulnerable of our society to tell their stories of living in poverty. During March and April, Hearings are taking place across Ontario as part of ISARC's Social Audit. This Social Audit seeks to communicate the social effects of the current Ontario government's policies and actions towards people living in poverty and our society as a whole.

At our Religious Leaders' Forum on June 2, we will share our initial findings from the Social Audit. You will hear from hearing participants, service providers, and people who live in poverty and told us their stories. There will also be some theological reflection on the issue of living with poverty in our society.

Agenda for the day still to be determined.

All Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPP) will also be invited as our guests for lunch. Contact your MPP to say you are attending. Perhaps you can meet him or her at noon?

Still Can't Pay the Rent and Eat Healthy: Response to Ontario's 2010 Budget

by Brice Balmer, ISARC Director

The Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy did not receive significant financial support in the province's 2010 budget. Increase to Basic Needs and Housing Allowances was only 1%, which meant an increase of 11% since 2003 - increases that are less than the inflation rate over the seven years.

Families receiving Ontario Child Benefit income over the past three years had additional increases, but single adults were poorer than seven years ago. And, affordable housing did not receive funding in this budget.

The province did provide money for childcare to replace the monies (\$6.5 million) previously provided by the federal government. This was a welcome relief to municipalities, many of which already had waiting lists for childcare. The budget also provided additional monies for re-training and post secondary education. Both essential during this recession.

As ISARC travels around the province with the Social Audit, local rapporteurs and recorders are hearing how difficult it is for people on social assistance and low wages to survive. One woman reported re-using toilet paper because she does not have enough money for foods and other essentials. "It's an indignity," she states.

Many people coming to the Social Audits said they want a job but cannot find one. A single father with two children is trying his hardest to complete his high school so that he can get a decent job. He talked about his problems with transportation, food costs, and housing. He wants his children to do well in school and he needs to be an example.

Others had trouble accessing medical care. People on social assistance or low wages do not have the money for transportation. This is especially true for rural people because medical services are in the cities. Sometimes doctors prescribe a drug not covered by Ontario Drug Plan. Then people with low incomes have a difficult decision: pay for the drug or buy food.

Parents are struggling to pay course fees at high schools or the uniform, which need to be purchased if their son is to play on the high school team. These difficult choices affect their ability to purchase good food for their family.

Rapporteurs and recorders are surprised by the difficulties faced by people on social assistance. And they were also surprised by the resilience. When some people at the hearings wondered why there was such poverty in this wealthy nation, the rapporteurs and reporters agreed. Why homelessness? Children living in poverty? Lack of food and other essentials? Problems with transportation to jobs or to school (especially for those in high school where the system does not provide transportation)?

One person who lost a job 18 months ago said that he did not know how to survive. He never expected to lose everything and then live on such a low income. He described himself as the "new poor" who previously had a good job in manufacturing. He used up all his assets and then finally was able to receive Ontario Works monthly payments. "There was no social safety net. I thought we had some protection in Canada. I didn't. We don't."

The Ontario 2010 budget will not relieve the pain and struggle of people on the lowest incomes. There will not be additional housing dollars.

Hopefully the province's Social Assistance Review will provide a road map, so that people with lowest incomes can at least have housing, food and other essentials for themselves and their children.

Perhaps increasing asset levels will mean that individuals and families do not need to sell everything before receiving social assistance.

Perhaps after the review, the social safety net might be put up again, even better than before.

70% of Budget for Health Care is a Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Response to Ontario's 2010 Budget

by Brice Balmer, ISARC Director

Announcing the cancellation of the Special Diet and its transfer to the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care has unsettled many people on social assistance.

How are they going to have the nutritious food they need to stay healthy? Analysts and advocates see another program going into this mega-ministry.

The provincial government is predicting 70% of the budget will be health care and is worried about the effect of the “baby boomers” aging. The government’s alarm is that the population is growing older and will need more health care.

But there are other reasons this mega-ministry has grown. Does the Special Diet belong in this ministry and is a medical model needed to determine who qualifies?

During the Harris years, mental health, addiction services, and homes for the aged were transferred to Health and Long Term Care, which also began to fund many support services for a variety of people with special needs. These were previously in the Ministry of Community and Social Services. But it was not only that these services were transferred, it was also that the medical model was increasingly used. A model with expensive and highly trained staff added to funding needs. Recent news confirmed high salaries in the medical community – many were deserved, but their annual increases were higher than many other professions.



Many homes for the aged were not pleased with the transfer to the new Ministry. There were more rules and regulations. If there was a problem, new rules and regulations were brought forward. In Ministry of Community and Social Services, there were other ways of negotiating changes where incidents had occurred. Where services could continue to improve without new systemic regulations.

Addiction services do not need medical oversight or medically trained staff. A doctor needs to be available and withdrawal management centres should be close to a hospital in case of an emergency, but social workers, counselors, and para-professionals are very capable of helping men and women recover and begin living sane and sober lives.

Individuals struggling with addiction need time to work through the abuse and shame that has caused the addiction. They need support groups and counselling. Many re-experience the pain of relationships in the past and learn to understand themselves and their addiction. This process leads to health but does not need to be a medical route.

Addiction is the issue with which I am familiar. Other issues can be solved with non-medical models. I have been excited with the creation of a Ministry of Health Promotion but have not seen the province spend significant dollars to prevent illness and disability. The emphasis has been on obesity, smoking, and drinking – all legitimate. But what about nutrition, exercise, safe housing, and good childcare?

Even the province expounds on the long-term benefit of a healthy beginning for children from conception through 6 years old. Good programs are being instituted for babies, preschoolers, and kindergarten students. There are many social determinants of health which need to be emphasized and could reduce the budget of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care.

Special Diet is an example of a service going to this mega-ministry. The transfer is medicalizing essential funding for food. The medical officers of health across Ontario have found in their studies that it is no longer possible to pay for safe housing and nutritious food within the dollar limits of Minimum Wage, Ontario Works, or Ontario Disability Support Program. Special Diet is not a medical issue, but becomes one as people visit the doctor or go to the hospital more often.

Advocates, including ISARC, are promoting the Healthy Food Supplement of \$100 a month. This would allow people to purchase the food that they cannot otherwise afford and would build up their nutritional assets so that they would not get sick and need to go to the doctor, urgent care clinic or emergency room of the hospital as often. I personally do not know the cost of a visit to the doctor, but I know that one trip to the hospital emergency room could pay for several months of Healthy Food Supplement for an adult. For further information, go to Do the Math - <http://www.dothemath.thestop.org/> or Put Food in the Budget - <http://putfoodinthebudget.ca/>.

Recently a person living on Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) talked to me because he was upset about losing the Special Diet Allowance, which he needed because of his diabetes and his mental health issues. I assured him that the allowance was not yet cancelled; that it was being transferred to Health and Long Term Care; that the Ministry of Community and Social Services was doing a Social Assistance Review, which may bring improved benefits and income; and, that many groups were advocating the Healthy Food Benefit. He receives \$41 a month Special Diet plus his ODSP income, but he runs out of money on the 20th of the month. The food hamper program did not have enough vegetables, fruits and meat for his diet, a number of the foods in the hamper had high sugar, starch, and salt, which had to be minimized in his diet. "What can I do?" His anxiety was increasing. He gives the foods he shouldn't eat to his neighbours.

The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care budget does not need to be 70% of the provincial budget.

Ontarians and the Provincial Government can promote healthy living, but we need to emphasize the social determinants of health.

People on social assistance and working for minimum wage need more money per month to care for themselves and children. It is not medical acute care and the medical model that will increase our health. It is exercise, nutritious food, less stress, safety, affordable housing, income security, education, quality childcare, and good relationships with other people.

Let's increase Health Promotion! And let's see attention paid to the social determinants of health for everyone in the next provincial budget.

The Clawback of Spousal Support for Recipients of Social Assistance

This presentation by Ontario Campaign 2000 will examine the clawback of spousal support for those on social assistance in Ontario, lessons from the other provinces and lobbying opportunities going forward.

Thursday, April 22 from 1:30-2:30pm in the Wellesley Room at 355 Church, Toronto.
Refreshments will be provided.



The presentation will be by Thomas Granofsky, student intern at Campaign 2000 completing Bachelor of Social Work program at Ryerson University.

Special Diet Allowance Program

The Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) reports that the provincial government intends to replace Special Diet with a new "nutritional supplement" program for people on Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. Few details have yet been announced.

ISAC has posted materials for people who are currently receiving Special Diet, groups and organizations who work with people on OW and ODSP, and, to all those who are concerned about the inadequacy of social assistance benefits and the health problems that result from having a poor diet.

These materials are [<http://www.incomesecurity.org/specialdiet.htm>]:

- 1) A basic one-page handout that describes what the government has decided to do.
- 2) A two-page handout that analyzes what the decision to eliminate the Special Diet program means.

Spread the Net



Spread the Net is an interfaith grassroots campaign to fight malaria, a global, life-threatening disease. Malaria is a preventable and treatable disease, yet it kills over 1 million people every year, most deaths occurring in children under the age of 5. A simple \$10 bed net can help prevent these deaths.

Religious communities are asked to include an educational announcement in worship bulletins in the week of April 25th to May 1st, and consider raising \$100 for 10 life saving bed nets.

This initiative is being supported by Faiths Act Canada a coalition of various Canadian religious communities including the Canadian Council of Imams, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal, the Hindu Canadian Alliance, Ve'ahavta - the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Organization, the Multi-Faith Centre of the University of Toronto, and more.

Read more here ... www.congregationsact.com

Watch here ... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfqYxibuNOI>

Our diverse religious traditions have different approaches to how we pray for our politicians and government. This series explores the question from the perspective of our various religious communities. Our latest response is from a Christian perspective.

How do we pray for our politicians and government? - a Christian Perspective

by Mardi Tindal, Moderator of The United Church of Canada

<http://www.united-church.ca/organization/moderator/tindal>

This represents my personal perspective as a Christian lay woman who is currently serving as the Moderator of The United Church of Canada.

I am a member and leader of a church known for its diversity, and expect that each of us would answer differently about how and why we pray for our



politicians and government.

Both how and why I pray begins with the example of Jesus who taught his friends to pray what is best known as The Lord's Prayer. Jesus modeled the spiritual, communal and justice-seeking practices, which Christians are called to follow. He acted in accordance with his Jewish spiritual formation as he prayed, modeling the importance of remembering, through daily prayer, that God is the source of transformation, and that we are called to remain connected on a regular basis, with the source of our being.

Each morning I pray a variant of the Lord's Prayer, both found in scripture and also Jim Cotter's paraphrase, which rests on my heart with both comfort and challenge. It can be found on page 916 of The United Church of Canada's hymnbook Voices United, though I have memorized it so as never to be without it.

My morning practice follows the advice of John Main of the Christian Meditation Movement, by which I commit myself to be silent, still and simple for the sake of focused prayer, normally with a lit Christ candle. My evening practice tends to follow the Ignatian examen, opening myself to God's grace as it flows through events of the day for which I am most grateful and least grateful. Politicians move in and out of my prayers, as they come to my heart and mind, during both morning and evening prayer.

In the morning, I hold politicians in God's Light especially as I pray these lines from Cotter's paraphrase:

The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

I pray that God's way will be made known to others and to myself, and that we would receive the grace to recognize and the courage to follow God's way.

In the evening, when I pray with memory of gratitude and ingratitude, my attitudes toward politicians and political decisions tends to come into clearer focus, along with blessings of how I might more faithfully engage with them according to God's way. In other words, the person who's changed the most through my prayer life is me, and prayer helps me to see more clearly what my call is in relation to political challenges. At least that's a description of the good days.

Being a leader in anxious times is a difficult task. We tend to project the best and worst of ourselves on leaders, including politicians. It's a heavy load, and it tends to help all kinds of leaders - politicians included - to know that they are prayed for. The very knowledge of this sacred connection can be both comfort and challenge, a reminder of our call to faithfulness to God and to one another.

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INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION

ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum

2010 Social Audit

a provincial gathering to hear and discuss our initial findings



Wednesday, June 2, 2010, 9:30 am - 3:00 pm

Sam Sorbara Auditorium in Brennan Hall

University of St. Michael's College

In The University of Toronto, 81 St. Mary Street

Cost is \$40 and includes lunch. You must register before May 26. Space is limited.

REGISTRATION - ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum June 2/10

Name: _____

Faith Community: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____ Email: _____

Please make cheques payable to WLS—ISARC. Cost: \$40 (includes lunch)

Mail to: Religious Leaders' Forum Registrar
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