

ISARC

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

"Faith Communities In Action Against Poverty"

ISARC e-Newsletter, Summer 2009

How about receiving this newsletter by email?

We hope you find our latest ISARC e-newsletter to be a stimulating read! If you are able to receive this newsletter by email we would love to send it to you that way. 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. If you do not have access to email or would prefer to receive a paper version of our e-newsletter, we are more than happy to continue to send it to you in this way.



Mark Your Calendars - Upcoming Isarc Events

Here are two key dates to look forward to this Fall:

ISARC Multifaith Forum, working on faith groups' roles as advocates with government
10:00 - 2:30 on Thursday, October 29, at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (Bricker & Albert), in Waterloo.

ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum focusing on affordable housing
9:30 - 3:00 on Thursday, November 5, at Queen's Park in Toronto – Rooms 228-230.

More information on these events will be available soon. Check out our web site at www.isarc.ca to keep updated.

The Year Ahead

This past year has been a time to sow important seeds towards the elimination of poverty and homelessness in Ontario. ISARC does this with our constituency, many partners and coalitions. Though the 2009 Ontario budget contained monies to increase Ontario Child Benefit and affordable housing, ISARC did not feel it was a substantial down payment toward the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy. Yet seeds have been planted and nurtured by growing coalitions, on-going dialogue with the provincial government, the inter-faith prayer vigil, analyses of poverty elimination measures, participating in the Poverty Reduction Legislation that was

recently passed, and holding meetings with many people throughout the province. The seeds are sprouting.

2009-2010 will be an important year for ISARC as faith communities along with other coalitions address the provincial affordable housing strategy and social assistance review. ISARC plans to go into neighbourhoods and listen to individuals and families affected by social assistance and homelessness. Plans are developing to complete a provincial Social Audit in 2010, which will be the result of many local hearings where faith communities, municipal governments, and persons living in poverty will be consulted. Lives Still in the Balance (2007) is still relevant, but ISARC plans to listen again and report our new findings and recommendations broadly.

Organizing and local support from our constituency are needed when ISARC holds these hearings. ISARC also needs financial support for minimal staff and expenses. Much is being accomplished with a minimal budget – the usual way faith communities work.

Remember ISARC in your prayers, planning and finances in the coming year! Feel free to forward our e-newsletter to friends and co-workers. Keep Hope Alive! Especially for those who struggle financially.

Do The Math. What Kind of Life Can You Afford on Social Assistance?

Poverty in Ontario is at an all time high. As the economic crisis grows, so does the number of people relying on social assistance and food banks. Does a single person on social assistance receive enough income to live with health and dignity? What kind of life can you afford on social assistance? Do the Math to find out!

Find out if the rates add up with an interactive budgeting exercise at:
www.dothemath.thestop.org.

Then contact your MPP and encourage him or her to also Do the Math. How much do they think it costs to live? How much do they think social assistance and minimum wage should increase? How would they or their family survive on social assistance?

Time for a Bold Review: Making Social Assistance Meet the Poverty Reduction Test

On June 23, 2009, the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) held a forum on the government's upcoming review of the provincial social assistance system. This review is part of Ontario's new Poverty Reduction Strategy and was restated in the 2009 budget.

Currently 765,000 people rely on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Thousands of newly unemployed Ontarians will soon be forced to turn to these programs. Will they have to use up all of their assets before they are eligible and then be without a nest egg as older persons? Will Ontario make OW and ODSP more accessible so people can more readily get back on their feet financially?

ISAC's Sarah Blackstock introduced the morning session by stating that Ontario needs a Social Assistance Review that leads to transformation – so that the programs of support promote dignity and a poverty-free Ontario. Four panelists then discussed why we need a Review and how significant change can take place.

Crystal Chin, a current recipient of ODSP and an active advocate on the Barrier Free Council at the Ann Johnston Health Station, spoke of how, when she turned eighteen and became eligible for ODSP, she faced the reality of the same needs and expenses, without the same level of financial support she received previously. “How we treat those on ODSP is a reflection of society's attitudes”, she concluded.

Angela Robertson, Executive Director of Sistering - A Woman's Place, stated that income security programs in Ontario are failing and that the ODSP and OW rates are below the poverty line. An effective poverty reduction strategy has to include a meaningful social assistance review. The challenge is whether there is the political will to do this, because there is enough evidence and reports already that support the need for substantial change. From her experience working with women in poverty, she relayed that health status increases as you move up the income ladder, that women are often re-victimized by the social support systems because of high staff turn-over and changing of rules (which discourages building relationships), and that the goals of assistance programs are often at odds with the goals of recipients because they cannot be tailored to particular needs. Her suggestions for improvement include: tying eligibility to human rights, developing a client centred approach that allows people to leave the system, increasing access points by increasing language accessibility, and allowing for flexibility in the delivery of services in terms of hours and portability.

Marion Overholt, Staff Lawyer at Legal Assistance of Windsor, said that assistance has to be changed so it is no longer a poverty trap, but a safety net. She suggested three changes to OW that could happen immediately: we should not strip people of their RRSPs, vehicles, and homes; we need to loosen up the rules so that people can accept help from family and friends; and, we need to allow people on OW to have access to education and training so that we do not recycle OW recipients by disallowing them to transition out through training. Today people in Ontario are losing their lives to chronic illness due to poverty and unemployment. If we want justice we have to walk together so no one gets left behind.

Judy Rebeck, well-known social justice activist and holder of the Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University, said the problem is not one of policy but of vision. A society must have a vision that allows every person to become what he or she wants to be. The punitive poverty policies have to go and people living on the margins have to have a voice in the process because they know better than anyone else what they need to get out of poverty.

Mary Marrone of ISAC concluded the forum by reminding the participants that currently there are no terms of reference for the government's Social Assistance Review. When it begins it must be an open and transparent process; be collaborative and draw on the expertise of academics, service providers, and people who experience poverty; and, it must ensure that we make changes that can happen quickly.

ISAC has a new website www.sareview.ca where people can share their experience of living on assistance and give their suggestion on how the system could work better.

ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum - Revisited

At our religious leaders' forum in April, presentations were given both on how the 2009 budget affects the most marginalized in Ontario and on the current status and future hopes for the upcoming social assistance reform. Some of these are now available on our website and also can be read by clicking on their name.

Zaineb Zimmerman, from the Kingston Round Table on Poverty, and Michael Creek, from Voices on the Street in Toronto, described how their dignity had been stripped away while on social assistance.

Marvyn Novick, from Social Planning Network of Ontario (SNPO), suggested we should focus our energy to increase rates for social assistance (not only OW and ODSP, but also EI and minimum wage).

Sarah Blackstock, from Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC), updated ISARC on the upcoming provincial Social Assistance Review. Little information is available about starting times, who will be appointed to the Review Committee, or what topics will be discussed. Yet this Review is important, especially if the changes include asset rates, transition to employment, health and dental benefits, and addresses the amount of money deducted from social assistance when a recipient earns money.

ISARC Staff Changes

As of June 1st, Bruce Voogd is working for ISARC half time as Coordinator. Many will know Bruce as the Coordinator of the March interfaith prayer vigil at Queen's Park. Bruce is coordinating events, participating in anti-poverty coalitions for ISARC, and working on funding for the coming year.

Brice Balmer will continue halftime, with the new title of Director, concentrating on contacts with faith groups, continuing with the anti-poverty coalitions, and doing more writing, reflecting on ISARC events and our work together. Because ISARC is a project of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Brice will be spending his other half time teaching, advising students, and working at the seminary. Brice was on a six-week health leave after surgery in mid-June and is now back at work. He is recovering well and is thankful that the prostate cancer had been discovered early.

Murat Ortanca, who worked with ISARC from September 2008 through May 2009, will continue his Doctoral Studies in Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University. He has been in Turkey for a good part of the summer and will be in New York City for a month this Fall investigating how faith communities are involved at the United Nations.

Change in ISARC Contact Information

Due to the post office closing the outlet with our mailbox, our address has changed. Please change our contact information to:

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