

**Submission to the Standing Committee**  
**Regarding Bill 152**  
**An Act Respecting a Long-term Strategy**  
**To**  
**Reduce Poverty**  
**In**  
**Ontario**

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I am Pauline Lally, a Sister of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul from Kingston.

We, Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul of Kingston trace our roots to a group of dedicated women religious who began our mission in the mid-nineteenth century. Back then, our Sisters, like so many other religious orders of women, set about working on behalf of the orphaned, the sick and the aged. **This was the service, the work of Charity. And Charity is a handout.** This **NOT** why we are here today. We are **not looking** for a hand out. Of late we Sisters have moved from a service of Charity to the work of Justice, and even set up an Office of Justice and Peace and Integrity of Creation.

One of my earliest learnings when I was asked to be Director of that Office was that Poverty is Political. It is not by chance that people are poor. Poverty is not necessarily the result of individual moral failure or poor life choices, but of governmental policies. **AND POVERTY IS A NIGHTMARE!**

So we sisters learned that we have to be political. We have to be attentive to what is going on, think critically and be responsible by learning to be a voice for the voiceless. A society is judged – as you know -- by how it treats its most vulnerable. A society is as strong as its weakest link. What affects one person in Ontario affects all people in Ontario.

We congratulate this government for taking poverty in our land seriously. Bill 152 is a good beginning.

In 1995 our Justice and Peace Office started a vigil soon after the government of that day cut social assistance payments by over 22%. We felt compelled to claim public space in front of City Hall. We made this public statement because we believe that targeting our most vulnerable neighbours is unjust. It is a serious mistake to base social policy on blaming the weak for the problems we face. The most attractive places to live and invest are places that are socially inclusive.

We have continued our vigil for over 13 years now. That's because the incomes of our weakest and economically marginal neighbors have never recovered from the loss they suffered in 1995. We have also continued our support for the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition and its lobbying efforts here at Queen's Park. In the weeks before the budget, the Kingston vigil keepers chartered a bus to join ISARC's prayer vigil. Together we prayed that you and your fellow legislators would have the strength and courage to finally do something serious about social justice in Ontario

This is not the first time we have appeared before a Committee of the Legislature. We have made regular submissions to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. Our appearances before that Standing Committee have of course focused on the need to make more significant investments in measures proven to be effective in poverty

reduction. Child care and early childhood education. Higher minimum wages. A comprehensive affordable housing program. Dental care accessible to all. These are among the measures that we had in mind when we stood outside this building on a cold March day this winter praying for you and your colleagues, in hope that serious investments in poverty reduction would be included in the Budget.

But today we are not urging that Ontario's government make a decision to allocate significant funding for social justice. Though we might not stop that. On the contrary, we simply request some important changes to this important law.

We are asking that you change the proposed Poverty Reduction Act so that ANY future government -- no matter what its political stripe -- will be accountable to the people of Ontario with respect to poverty reduction.

How to do this?

**Firstly**, we believe that Ontario's poverty reduction efforts must be as inclusive as the society that we hope to help build. This inclusivity means that the Bill must go beyond promoting strong communities, families and children. Poor children have poor parents. Indeed, adults make up 3 of every 4 people living in poverty in Ontario. We believe that making a distinction between poor children and poor adults is the same as the old Victorian distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor. Such an approach is morally bankrupt.

We, Sisters of Providence arrived in Kingston in the middle of the Victorian era. We began exhausting and humiliating "begging tours" to raise money for the poor. We made no distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" in the 1870s. Why should we do so now?

**Secondly**, Bill 152 needs to go beyond noble sentiments. It must be enforceable. Remember in 1989 the Federal Government unanimously resolved to end child poverty by 2000. It was a sweeping statement, a noble sentiment with few teeth. ...and we have more poverty today than when that statement was made.

At this point you may be thinking that I'm a well intentioned, but naïve, nun who thinks that we can end poverty with the stroke of a pen. By passing a law. Far from it.

Our community has made common cause with many of the other groups that are appearing before you. We know that it is only through sustained, organized public pressure that governments make real changes in policy. Including social policy. How did women get the vote? How did workers get the right to organize and bargain collectively? How did Ontario secure laws that protect our natural environment? We achieved these important gains through long, hard organizing efforts.

How did Ontario move towards a Poverty Reduction Strategy? Why are you now deliberating about a Poverty Reduction Act? In part, because legislators summoned the political will to begin to address the savage inequalities that rend our communities. But we have also come this far because of a sustained public awareness campaign. Our community has made its own modest, local contribution by standing outside Kingston City Hall every week for 13 years. We attend ISARC's Religious Leaders' Forums' in this building. We stood with others in ISARC's interfaith prayer vigil this winter.

Such education, lobby and organizing efforts can be helped by laws like Bill 152 -- if they include what we believe are "friendly amendments" such as those being proposed today by the 25 in 5 Network and by ISARC, among others.

In the end, it will be up to groups like those appearing before you today and tomorrow to hold future governments accountable. If future governments are to continue the work of poverty reduction, groups like our Kingston vigil keepers need regular and reliable yardsticks by which Ontario's progress in the area of poverty reduction can be measured.

Ontario has an Auditor General so that we can assess how well public moneys are spent. We have an Environmental Commissioner to give us report cards on the state of the natural environment.

We need an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly who can report on the state of the SOCIAL environment. We need this "social ombudsman" who can prepare the annual reports on progress in poverty reduction already stipulated in Bill 152. These reports must be independent from the government of the day. They must be delivered to the Legislature every year. This will allow groups like ourselves to praise and pressure future governments. This, as you know better than I, is the stuff of politics.

**Thirdly**, Bill 152 stipulates that the government of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy be evaluated every five years and a new strategy put in place. This is a laudable measure. These strategies are crucial. We need goals and measurements, benchmarks against which we can measure progress. But we think that Bill 152 should be amended so that an arm's length body -- not the Government of the day -- conducts the 5-year reviews that will shape the poverty reduction strategy over the course of the subsequent five years.

We hear a lot these days about two words. They inform public discussion of government policy, including social policy. Those two words are **Accountability** and **Transparency**. They are repeated so often that sometimes it seems that we lose sight of their importance.

We believe that our suggestions for improving Bill 152 reflect the need for future governments to be accountable with respect to poverty reduction. And transparent in measuring progress towards that important goal.

Finally, a word about poverty reduction. Our goal should go well beyond poverty reduction. It should be **poverty eradication**. Persistent poverty in a place as rich as our own is a moral and ethical stain on our social fabric.

The other night at prayer I read from Psalm 41. It reads in part,

*“Blessed are they who consider the poor ...they are called blessed in the land.”* The psalm even goes on to say that *“You sustain them on their sickbeds.”*

What a wonderful promise to you who are about the serious consideration of the poor in our land.

In closing, I will simply repeat something that a woman far wiser than I said many years ago. Jane Addams was the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her words adorn the little pamphlet we hand to passersby each Friday noon.

*The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.*