

**Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition**  
***ISARC***

**Submission to Legislative Standing Committee on Social Policy**  
**Concerning Bill 152: The Poverty Reduction Act**

From Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC)

Monday, April 20, 2009, at Queen's Park

When Minister Deb Matthews tabled the Poverty Reduction Act, she stated "...the only way we're ever going to succeed in the fight against poverty is for it to become a core responsibility of governments now and in the future."

ISARC agrees wholeheartedly with Minister Matthews' statement. It is time to "make poverty history" in Ontario for all people, not just children and parents. ISARC believes that the Poverty Reduction Act is an important piece of legislation, because it lays out a process and a framework requiring the Ontario government to continue the fight against poverty. However, it is not strong enough and does not have enough vision to eliminate poverty in Ontario within the next 15 years.

Faith communities can work to enrich and enable healthy neighbourhoods and communities. Unfortunately too much of our time, too many of our volunteers, too much money and building space is currently used for charity and survival programs, such as food banks, emergency shelter, and soup kitchens. As peoples of compassion, we must reach out to those who suffer. It is immoral to allow 10% of the population to live in dire poverty because of loss of jobs, mental health issues, illness, or struggles with current and past trauma and abuse. Today it is time to move to poverty elimination so that all Ontarians can have dignity, be safe, and maintain health. The faith community wishes to play significant roles in the nurture of children and parents, developing vital community centres, and bringing people together to solve personal and/or neighbourhood problems.

Over the past several months, ISARC has participated with dozens of other groups and many individuals – through the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction -- in thinking about what is needed for strong poverty reduction legislation. We support these measures and ask the standing committee and the legislature to consider even stronger measures than in Bill 152 and within the 25 in 5 Network recommendations. It is time to eliminate poverty. Let us challenge Ontarians to eliminate poverty in the province within 15 years! It's time for vision, not slight incremental changes.

ISARC began in 1986 when the then Liberal Government under Premier David Peterson called together the Social Assistance Review Committee. This was a vision document!

Since being called into being by the provincial committee, ISARC has worked not only within the faith communities, but also with the provincial government, local communities, provincial coalitions, and other partners to uphold the dignity of economically and marginalized peoples. Poverty destroys human dignity.

ISARC board sees today this as an important moment, especially during a recession when more and more people in the province are aware of economic vulnerability and would support the elimination of poverty. The consultations of Hon. Deb Matthews, 25 in 5 Coalition, the Social Planning Network of Ontario, the labour unions, and others have changed the landscape. John Stapleton through his work with the Metcalf Foundation has shown that positive significant changes to social assistance and government programs for vulnerable populations have happened during times of economic difficulty. Now is the time to put forth vision!

We would like to speak to a few of those recommendations, in particular.

### **A Poverty-Free Ontario**

ISARC holds to a vision of a province where everyone can live free of poverty. The vision behind Bill 152 speaks of opportunity for every person to achieve his or her full potential and participate in their communities. Bill 152 needs to include the vision of a poverty-free Ontario.

Compare Ontario's vision to the vision from Newfoundland and Labrador's poverty reduction strategy. "The vision is of a province where poverty has been eliminated." Newfoundland and Labrador's vision goes on to talk about a prosperous province where people are valued, can develop to their full potential and can participate fully in society. But it is crucial to recognize that poverty stands in the way of all of those things.

Quebec's law to combat poverty and social exclusion, the first of its kind in Canada we should recall, talks about "striving towards a poverty-free Quebec." The Quebec act also understands that poverty constitutes an obstacle to the respect for human dignity and impedes economic and social development.

Last week, an important study on hunger in Toronto was published. It reported that families in Toronto are going hungry, literally not eating some days of the week, for lack of income and lack of food. Would our vision for Ontario be one where those families only had to do without food one day a week instead of three days a week?

Of course not.

Our vision for Ontario should be one where all people can live free of poverty. The Poverty Reduction Act should state as clearly as Newfoundland and Labrador's poverty reduction strategy and as Quebec's legislation to combat poverty and social exclusion, that the Ontario Government and society is striving for a poverty-free province. That is the vision that drives our efforts. It should be stated clearly in the Poverty Reduction Act.

## **Making substantial progress at reducing poverty**

To move towards realizing that vision, each poverty reduction strategy needs to set a target for *substantially* reducing poverty during the life of that strategy. It needs to be on the order of a 25% or 30% or 50% reduction in poverty with the five years of the strategy – just as Ontario’s first poverty reduction strategy aimed for a 25 % reduction in child poverty within five years. As Section 2(3)1 reads, it is not clear that the specific target needs to represent a significant reduction in poverty.

## **A poverty-free Ontario for everyone**

Breaking the Cycle focused primarily on reducing child and family poverty. While that is laudable, ISARC is only too aware that there are many adults living in poverty. Bill 152 should be clear and consistent in stating that we are striving toward a poverty-free Ontario for *everyone*, adults as well as children.

## **An independent review**

ISARC also wants to underscore the importance of having an independent review of the poverty reduction strategy, with clear timelines for when the review short start and be completed and for when a report from the review needs to be tabled in the legislature. The review needs to be a step removed from political considerations, so that Ontarians can participate in a frank and honest assessment of what has worked and what next steps need to be taken to progress in making substantive and lasting reductions in poverty

## **Consultation to include people living in poverty and other key stakeholders**

Section 5, on regular consultations, states that the Minister shall consult with key stakeholders, including individuals living in poverty. Section 6(2)(b) should also specify that the consultation for the review of the poverty reduction strategy include the list of stakeholders, groups and individuals named in Section 5.

## **Conclusion**

Based on a serious study of the “cost of poverty” in Ontario by the Ontario Association of Food Banks with endorsement from Don Drummond, John Stapleton, and other Ontario leaders, each Ontarian pays \$2500 to \$3000 to have poverty in Ontario.

We now have studies showing that reducing poverty is one way of stabilizing our economy and reducing the recessionary pressures.

But more than this, it is important for all people in Ontario to be healthy, safe, and productive. In order to be creative, working, and community-involved, all Ontarians need a sense of dignity and respect. Poverty destroys self-esteem and dignity. It’s time to “make poverty history.”

Can Bill 152 create the vision so that we can all work together for the elimination of poverty?

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