



**Submission to
The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development
and the Status of Persons with Disabilities
On the Poverty Reduction Strategy**

The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC)

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March 2, 2017

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The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition welcomes the opportunity to provide input for your Committee to make recommendations for legislative and executive action in relation to the first three of the four main areas of your study of poverty reduction strategies.

As communities of faith, we are concerned about the slow rate of progress of the government's efforts to lift Ontarians and all Canadians out of poverty. Working for justice and ensuring that the poor and marginalized are not left in an endless cycle of poverty is a tenet of all our faith traditions.

As faith organizations we have done and continue to do our part to serve the poor and show compassion to those in need. But we cannot fix the systemic issues that keep people in poverty. That is the work and moral obligation of a good and conscientious government.

Many thousands of working families are struggling to make ends meet. They are recent immigrants, workers of colour, women, youth and workers in precarious jobs. Most of them do not belong to unions because they work in small workplaces, work as temps, are on contract, independent contractors or unemployed. One week they may be juggling 2 or 3 jobs while next month there is no work or income. When they are able to find full-time work, there is little protection on the job if they are facing unfair conditions or not being paid what they should be paid.

Your study focuses on improving the delivery of federal resources and services for the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy. In relation to the 3rd area - Income Support Entitlement Programs, we support the concept of a Basic Income provided it is designed to enable every Canadian to live in dignity.

In relation to the 1st area Housing, we make the following comments:

A National Housing Strategy must be implemented with clearly outlined timelines and benchmarks, and regular monitoring supported by legislation and sufficient funding.

Working with provincial, territorial and municipal partners, the national housing strategy must be viewed as an integral part of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. There is an urgent need to increase and substantially renovate the supply of rental housing across Canada. Additional financing should be made available to provide for the construction of affordable rental housing for middle- and low-income Canadians.

Access to safe, decent and affordable housing is fundamental to ensure a good quality of life for Ontario residents. Housing advocates, Ontario municipalities, planners, community organizations, and faith communities across Ontario have been calling for the policy change for a long time both at the provincial level but most notably at the federal level with a National Housing Strategy.

More than two decades have passed since the end of the last national affordable housing program. That must change and we need to see reflected in the Budget the first steps toward implementing a renewed national housing policy. With such a policy firmly in place, we could expect the unremitting elimination of waiting lists for affordable housing; a reduction in the cost of housing for middle and lower income earners; and a robust housing infrastructure and more stable economy.

As regards providing for more affordable housing, the Budget should reflect a 'Housing First' policy approach wherein the federal government and other levels of provincial and municipal government should inventory land that can be declared surplus to their needs and can be designated for affordable housing, making it available at low cost in communities where there is a pressing need.

The federal commitment to invest \$2.3 billion in affordable housing must be part of a long-term strategy and not only over the next two years as initially planned. The funding would be matched by provinces and territories should be marked first for improvements to existing affordable housing and then to the development of more affordable housing.

This investment is essential if we are to end the high levels of chronic homelessness that plague our large urban centres. There must be investment of significant resources to construct social, supportive and affordable housing units across Canada.

Finally the 3rd of your four main areas is "Education, Training and Employment: studying school based poverty reduction strategies, access to higher education, skills training/re-training, English as a Second Language/French as a Second Language (ESL/FSL), apprenticeship, financial literacy, and other new and or innovative approaches."

While your 3rd area title includes Employment issues, we believe it is not specific enough to cover an examination of the adequacy of employment legislation governing the working poor. We strongly urge you to take action expressly to update the Canada Labour Code to address changing workplaces practices that create low-waged and precarious work - key features of poverty in Canada.

Providing persons with the means to become self-sufficient is the best way out of poverty. However it is insufficient to merely secure a job. The working conditions attached to a job must allow the worker to live in dignity. As was stated by former Chief Justice Dickson of the Supreme Court of Canada

"Work is one of the most fundamental aspects in a person's life, providing the individual with a means of financial support and, as

importantly, a contributory role in society. A person's employment is an essential component of his or her sense of identity, self-worth and emotional well-being. Accordingly the conditions in which a person works are highly significant in shaping the whole compendium of psychological, emotional and physical elements of a person's dignity and self-respect." ¹

The Canada Labour Code, like most labour legislation across Canada was enacted when the norm was permanent full-time jobs. Today the majority of new jobs created are part-time, casual, temporary or agency jobs. Far too many employees are categorized by their employer as independent contractors, and thus excluded from the protections of the legislation. As well, the current requirements for workers who wish to be represented collectively contain barriers that are almost insurmountable, such as the absence of a "voters" list" until after the application for the vote is submitted with the required number of voter signatures. Not being able to unionize deprives these workers of the tools needed to improve their financial situation. Together these inadequacies in the conditions of work for precarious workers do not allow them to live with dignity and self-respect.

In 2004, the federal government recognized that the Canada Labour Code was out of date. It commissioned Harry Arthurs to conduct a comprehensive Federal Labour Standards Review. The Commissioner tabled a comprehensive set of principles and recommendations to guide legislative changes to the Canada Labour Code, `Fairness at Work: Federal Labour Standards for the 21st Century` ². Key among the recommendations is a guiding principle for reform that states:

"Labour Standards should ensure that no matter how limited his or her bargaining power, no worker in the federal jurisdiction is

¹ Reference re Public Service Employee Relations Act (Alta.), [1987] 1 S.C.R. 313.

² Harry Arthurs, (2006) Fairness at Work: Federal Labour Standards for the 21st Century. Federal Labour Standards Review online:

<http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1166&context=reports>

offered, accepts or works under conditions that Canadians would not regard as `decent`. No worker should therefore receive a wage that is insufficient to live on; be deprived of the payment of wages or benefits to which they are entitled; be subject to coercion, discrimination, indignity or unwarranted danger in the workplace; or be required to work so many hours that he or she is effectively denied a personal or civic life." (page x)

Unfortunately that report has yet to be acted upon

The current Prime Minister, in his mandate letter to the Labour Minister, instructed her to update:

- "the Canada Labour Code to address emerging issues such as unpaid internships, and to ensure that Canadians continue to have a robust and modern set of federal employment standards. This can build on the federal report, *Fairness at Work: Federal Labour Standards for the 21st Century*."³

The need for modernization is not restricted to internships. The entire range of precarious work situations needs to be addressed. We are not seeking an end to variations in employment statuses where they make business sense. What we are seeking is an end to the economic incentive on Employers to shift work away from full-time positions because such workers have lower standards and can be paid less.

Now is the time to move forward in creating "Fairness at Work" by updating Federal Labour Standards for the 21st Century. The Federal government can draw from the current Ontario Changing Workplaces Review of the Employment Standards Act and Labour Relations Act. Consistent with calls for action in other jurisdictions, the government should reinstate the federal minimum wage and set its level this year at \$15 an hour.

³ <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-employment-workforce-development-and-labour-mandate-letter>

If the government is truly committed to addressing poverty reduction in Canada, then it must modernize our Labour Code and build upon the important work that has been done. We urge you to bring together federally regulated workers in precarious work and their advocates and unions to prioritize key changes that are needed to address precarious work and low wages.

Respectfully submitted.

Rev. Dr. Susan Eagle - Chair - ISARC

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ISARC represents Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other faith communities across Ontario, including the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, the Anglican Provincial Synod of Ontario, the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, the Canadian Unitarian Council, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Toronto, the Council of Imams, the Council of Canadian Hindus, the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Eastern Ontario District of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the Islamic Humanitarian Service, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Toronto Board of Rabbis, and the United Church of Canada.