

The logo for ISARC (Faith Communities in Action Against Poverty) is located in the top left. It consists of the lowercase letters 'isarc' in white on a black rectangular background. To the right of this, the full name of the organization is written in black, uppercase letters on a white background. The entire report cover is framed by a light orange border. The background of the cover is a light blue-grey color, decorated with a pattern of green leaves and brown branches, some of which are in sharp focus while others are blurred.

isarc

FAITH COMMUNITIES IN
ACTION AGAINST POVERTY

Bi-Annual Report

2021-2022

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Approved by ISARC Executive Committee

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Chair's Report

Rev. Susan Eagle
Chair, ISARC

Greetings to you from ISARC, an interfaith advocacy coalition that for over 35 years has sought to offer faithful witness to changing economic and social conditions affecting the most vulnerable of Ontario's citizens.

Unfortunately, that witness has often been the naming of further attacks on the poor by governments indifferent to the deplorable living and working conditions in which many Ontarians already struggle to survive.

The initial rhetoric of the pandemic crisis offered the hopeful possibility that "being in this together" would open up some avenues for more sensitive awareness of poverty as well as some economic relief.

However, as well documented by many, including ISARC, those already struggling were further isolated and ostracized as offices closed, support programs were frozen or reduced and the provincial government stopped holding pre-budget public hearings. Additionally, lack of access to politicians and policy staff who were working from home made it even more difficult to monitor decision making.

As a consequence, we emerged from the pandemic cocoon as a province facing an unprecedented housing crisis and even more dire living conditions for our most vulnerable neighbours.

During the covid shutdown, ISARC managed with the use of technology to continue to meet and to use whatever avenues were available, to offer analysis and advocacy. In addition to homelessness and income insecurity issues, ISARC also used its voice, along with others, to raise concerns about the well-being of long-term care residents and the degradation of the environment.

Bill 23 was an especially odious initiative that tried to assuage public concern by suggesting that Greenbelt land might be used to address the housing crisis. Nothing could be further from the truth as both housing and environment experts were quick to point out. Nothing in the Bill requires developers to create affordable units, and there is already much potential and properly zoned land in other locations.

We thank you for your commitment to these issues and for your support of ISARC as we work to ensure the faith perspective is represented and heard by politicians and policy makers.

Moving forward we will continue to make use of technology to broaden our faith group participation at the ISARC table and to engage politicians again in a more personal style of meetings and consultations.

We look forward to your feedback on the issues we have identified as urgent and report to you on efforts we have made to address them.

We commend to you our ISARC Report for 2021 -2022.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Eagle", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rev. Susan Eagle
ISARC Chair

2021-2022 In Review

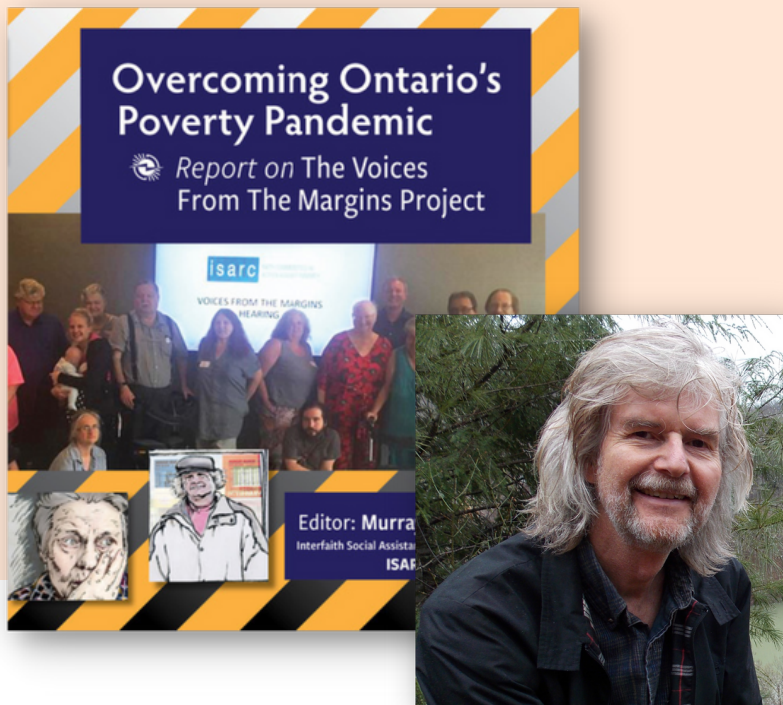
As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact Ontario, ISARC maintained its commitment to advocacy on behalf of people living on low incomes throughout the province.

2021 HIGHLIGHTS

Many of our advocacy efforts highlighted the increased vulnerability of low-income Ontarians to the pandemic. In our 2021 provincial pre-budget submission, ISARC urged the government to support workers struggling due to COVID-19, improve long-term care, provide more affordable and supportive housing, and raise income supports for those on social assistance.

Spring 2021 also saw the launch of *Overcoming Ontario's Poverty Pandemic*, a report on of the Voices from the Margins Community Hearings in 2019-2020

compiled and edited by long-time ISARC member, Murray MacAdam, who had previously edited ISARC publications “*Lives in the Balance*” and “*Lives Still in the Balance*.” The book featured the voices of participants in hearings in Kingston, Brockville, Peterborough, Toronto, Kitchener, Hamilton, and Orillia, and included a section on how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the already crushing circumstances of living in poverty in Ontario.



The full report of the project, edited by Murray MacAdam, was published as *Overcoming Ontario's Poverty Pandemic* in early 2021 and is available for purchase as a PDF from ISARC's website:
<https://isarc.ca/bookstore/>

Over 80 people attended the virtual book launch event on March 16, which featured comments from several of the people whose lived experience was recorded in the volume, as well as remarks from religious leaders. Roman Catholic Bishop Doug Crosby of Hamilton praised ISARC for "shining a light on this perennial pandemic." More than 150 hard copies of *Overcoming Ontario's Poverty Pandemic* have been sold.

In April 2021, ISARC released an open letter warning of the impacts of predatory moneylending on low-income communities and joining calls from ACORN and Democracy Watch urging the federal and provincial governments to review the excessive fees and interest rates charged to low-income people by both banks and payday loan companies.

One of the actions ISARC took in advocacy for improved conditions for workers in precarious situations occurred in May, shortly after the provincial government introduced its

temporary program of three paid sick days for COVID-related illness, ISARC sent a letter urging them to legislate ten permanent, employer-paid sick days for all illnesses, as advocated by Ontario's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table.

2021 ISARC Retreat

ISARC's annual retreat, which was held virtually in June 2021, featured a conversation with Brendan Steven, who has worked as a speechwriter for several Conservative politicians as well as volunteering with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Brendan shared helpful insights on strategies for advocacy, including building relationships with key MPPs and focusing on a smaller number of targeted asks.

On November 1, 2021, ISARC issued a press release calling on the provincial government to offer adequate opportunity for input into Bill 37, the "Providing More Care, Protecting Seniors, and Building More Beds Act, 2021."

RELIGIOUS LEADERS FORUM 2021

Housing: The Key to Health

Also in November, ISARC held its annual Fall Religious Leaders' Forum online, attended by over 70 people from across the province. The theme of the 2021 Forum was "Housing: The Key to Health." Rabbi Yael Splansky of Holy Blossom Temple delivered the theological reflection, while Ricardo Tranjan, Senior Researcher of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, gave the keynote address. Tranjan provocatively argued that while tenants and those experiencing homelessness or risk of homelessness are in a housing crisis, for most homeowners and real estate investors in Canada, the system is stable and financially rewarding.

After hearing greetings from representatives of three of Ontario's four political parties, participants had the option of joining one of three breakout sessions led by different presenters. Doug Kwan,



Rabbi Yael Splansky



Natalie Mehra



Laura Cattari



Jennifer van Gennip



Douglas Kwan



"To solve a crisis which is not a crisis for those with economic and political power is a daunting task which requires bold policy changes, not merely tinkering around the edges."



- Ricardo Tranjan

director of the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO) highlighted the major pressures on low-income renters as key areas for advocacy. Laura Cattari, of the Hamilton Round Table on Poverty Reduction, and Jennifer van Gennip of the Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness, focused on the connection between inadequate social assistance rates and housing insecurity. In the third breakout session, Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition and Sandra Caleta from Advocates for Long-Term Care Reform, spoke about long-term care as a dimension of housing. The working conditions of long-term care home workers are the living conditions and care of the residents – when the former suffer, the latter suffer as well. Lively discussion following the breakout sessions focused on making housing a key issue in the 2022 provincial election.

2022 HIGHLIGHTS

ISARC's annual pre-budget submission continued to focus on income security, affordable housing, and long-term care. With inflation rising rapidly after dropping to near zero in 2020, ISARC's first recommendation was to index social assistance rates to inflation, as well as to gradually bring social assistance up to or above the poverty line as defined by the Market Basket Measure.

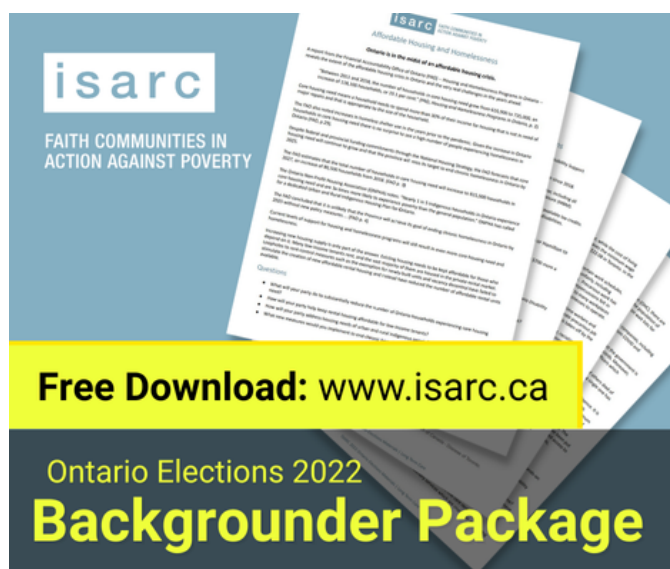
ISARC also participated in the provincial Housing Affordability Survey in January 2022, highlighting the importance of building and maintaining permanently affordable rental housing within existing urban boundaries, closing rent control loopholes, and improving income supports for low-income tenants.

In February, ISARC submitted comments on proposed provincial regulations under Bill 37, the Providing More Care, Protecting Seniors, and Building More Beds Act, 2021

Leading up to the June 2022 provincial election, ISARC produced a series of backgrounders on the issues of social assistance, justice for workers, affordable housing, and long-term care. These backgrounders were made

available for download on the website, and promoted on social media and through ISARC's member communities' networks.

During the election campaign, the provincial Conservatives announced that they would, if re-elected, raise ODSP rates by 5% and index them to inflation – a measure which had not been announced in the spring budget. After the government was returned with an increased majority in June, it announced plans to raise ODSP in September 2022 and implement indexation by July 2023. This represented the first raise to social assistance rates since September 2018, and the largest increase in over a decade. It was also the first time a provincial government had committed to tying social assistance to inflation.



The graphic features a stack of ISARC backgrounders on a blue background. The top document is titled "Affordable Housing and Homelessness" and includes the ISARC logo and the text "FAITH COMMUNITIES IN ACTION AGAINST POVERTY". Below the stack, a yellow banner contains the text "Free Download: www.isarc.ca". At the bottom, a dark blue banner displays "Ontario Elections 2022" in yellow, followed by "Backgrounder Package" in large, bold, yellow letters.

After the Ford government was re-elected, ISARC sent letters of congratulation to Premier Ford and Minister of Children, Community and Social Services Merilee Fullerton. The letters commended both the Premier and the Minister for raising ODSP and indexing it to inflation. However, ISARC pointed out that a 5% increase still left ODSP recipients behind where they were in 2018, while recipients of Ontario Works were left without any increase at all. Instead of offering stabilization for people in crisis, as the program is intended, its supports are so low as to push people into deep poverty and homelessness. The letter to the Premier also outlined other areas of concern around housing, workers' rights and long-term care, as had been raised in ISARC's pre-budget submission and election backgrounders.

In late September 2022, the provincial government introduced Bill 23, the More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022. ISARC was

disappointed to find that many of the suggestions we had included in the Housing Affordability Survey in January were disregarded in the new legislation. In November 2022, ISARC made a submission to the Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure, and Cultural Policy outlining our concerns with the bill. Specifically, the Bill offers major incentives to developers without requiring them to build housing that is in fact affordable to middle and low-income Ontarians; undermines municipal policies on rental replacement and inclusionary zoning, proposes eliminating development charges even for market units, depriving municipalities of funds for their own housing affordability programs, and allows the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to impose urban sprawl on formerly protected lands, even against municipalities' wishes.

Federal Advocacy

In September 2022, ISARC engaged in advocacy with the federal government around two issues: changes to Employment Insurance accessibility and the prospect of regularizing status for migrant and undocumented persons. While ISARC's advocacy activities are primarily focused at the provincial level, we believe that the federal government has an important role to play in protecting the rights of the most vulnerable.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS FORUM 2022

It's Time to Raise the Rates

ISARC returned to a focus on social assistance for its 2022 Fall Religious Leaders' Forum. During November 14-18, the week before the Forum, ISARC's diverse faith communities encouraged their members to engage in a period of fasting and prayer in solidarity with Ontarians on social assistance. Prayers from different faith traditions were posted on ISARC's social media to inspire participants. After hearing greetings from representatives of three of Ontario's four political parties, participants had the option of joining one of three breakout sessions led by different presenters.

At the "Raise the Rates" Religious Leaders' Forum, held online on November 23, 2022, a theological reflection from Dr. Brice Balmer of the Mennonite Church was followed by a presentation from Devorah Kobluk, Policy Analyst with the Income



Dr. Brice Balmer



Devorah Kobluk

Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC). In her presentation, Kobluk outlined the increasingly deep poverty of social assistance recipients, trapping them in legislated destitution, while the province enjoys cost savings related to reduced caseloads. Kobluk also discussed the government modernization of social assistance, a process begun before the pandemic. This includes both Social Assistance Renewal, a process of centralizing and automating applications for social assistance, and moving employment services for social assistance workers to the Ministry of Labour. Kobluk pointed out several concerns with both of these aspects of modernization, from the reduced interactions of recipients with caseworkers, the potential for additional barriers for clients (including lack of digital access and digital literacy), and greater likelihood of falling through the cracks in

IT'S TIME TO RAISE THE RATES!

Religious Leaders Forum 2022 - ONLINE

With Special Keynote by Devorah Kobluk

Senior Policy Analyst for ISAC (Income Security Advocacy Centre)

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an automated process, to an employment services model that emphasizes placing clients into low-wage, precarious work as quickly as possible.

In breakout groups following the presentation, Forum participants were asked about their experience (or lack thereof) with the Interfaith Solidarity Fast and the value of fasting as part of advocacy work, how we could help educate our own constituencies and faith communities, focus our advocacy, and “pray with our feet”.

Participants liked the idea of using fasting as part of our advocacy work but asked for more promotion in advance. The importance of meeting people in need where they are, supporting and amplifying the voices of those with lived experience of poverty, and creating opportunities for working together on advocacy was stressed in all breakout groups, as was the need for educating one’s own faith community on the issues.

Financial Summary

2021

Opening Balance	\$44,321.88
Revenue	\$53,369.44
Expenses	\$58,416.29
Closing Balance	\$39,275.03

2022

Opening Balance	\$39,275.03
Revenue	\$15,147.83
Expenses	\$8,725.39
Closing Balance	\$45,697.47

About ISARC

The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) is a non-partisan provincial network of faith groups working together for greater social justice and to eliminate poverty in Ontario through education, advocacy and work with low-income people. ISARC was born out of the hope that faith groups working together can contribute to new public policies based upon greater justice and dignity for Ontarians marginalized by poverty. We work with faith communities, other social justice partners and with government and politicians from all parties.

Learn more: www.isarc.ca

Our Values

Human Dignity - The right of all people and their communities to be treated with justice, love, compassion, and respect, and their responsibility to treat others likewise.

Social Equity - The right of all people to adequate access to basic resources, to full participation in the life and decision-making of their communities.

Mutual Responsibility - The obligation of communities to care and share with their people, ensuring that basic needs are met.

Fiscal Fairness - The right of all people, communities, and institutions to fair fiscal treatment and the responsibility of all to contribute fairly for the well-being of all.

Ecological Sustainability - The obligation of communities to practice responsible stewardship of the earth and its environment, so that creation might be preserved for generations to come.

Economic Equity - The right of all people and communities to adequate access to the resources necessary for full lives, including access to worthwhile work, fair employment considerations, and our communal responsibilities to use such resources responsibly.

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ISARC - Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

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