



Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

**Submission to
Subcommittee on Cities
of the Standing Senate Committee on
Social Affairs, Science and Technology**

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**Chair
The Honourable Art Eggleton, P. C.**

Poverty, Housing and Homelessness
Subcommittee on Cities
Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1200 professional social workers in this province. The mandate is to ensure excellence in social work. As a profession, social work is committed to improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through intervention and counselling, social policy analysis, collaboration, research, health promotion, and community capacity-building.

Introduction

Poverty is an issue that all Canadian citizens should be concerned about. Poverty runs deep through our social fabric and is having a huge impact on the lives of children, families, and communities in every province and territory throughout Canada.

Social workers see daily the negative impacts of poverty on children, individuals, and families. They see families who struggle to find affordable child care, young people who don't have a 'fixed' home address, and individuals and families who cannot afford to buy nutritious food. Through their practices, social workers are committed to ensuring social justice, informing public policies that affect all citizens, and working with individuals, families and communities who experience poverty.

The Issues

When one thinks of poverty, there is often a stereotypical image that comes to mind; that of the homeless person living on the streets. While many people experience extreme poverty, this is not reflective of the entire picture of poverty. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2006), 49% of Canadians agree that they are always just a missed pay cheque or two away from being poor.

According to the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) (2006) “precarious forms of employment are increasing, with more temporary work, part-time, contract, and seasonal jobs” (p. 17). Essentially this means that individuals are not able to find employment with full time hours, adequate pay, or benefits to allow families to meet their basic needs. However, it is important to note, that access to full time employment is not the only solution. The CCSD noted that “almost one-quarter (24%) of children living in poverty in 1993 had at least one family member who worked full-time all year. By 2003, the proportion was 31%” (p. 17). Canadians need a living wage that will allow them to meet their daily needs and to participate fully in society.

Housing, nutrition, medical, education, and child care costs are increasing, and many Canadian families are struggling to meet these demands. We know that food insecurity is an issue, and eating healthy is not an affordable option for many people. According to Campaign 2000 (2007), 720,230 people in Canada used food banks in 2007. We know that there is a lack of affordable, accessible and quality housing. We know low

income families struggle with affordable and high quality childcare. The impact of these health gradients need to be taken into consideration from an inclusive framework when addressing poverty reduction.

It is discerning that the economic gap between the rich and poor continues to widen and social inequality is increasing. According to the National Council of Welfare (2006 a), between 1980 and 2003, the average income after taxes and accounting for inflation of the poorest 20 percent went up by four per cent, while average income for those earning from \$92,500 to \$105,800 increased by 14 per cent. For those living on income assistance, the situation is dire with these individuals living well below the poverty line (National Council of Welfare, 2006 b).

The cost of poverty runs deep. Research shows poverty is linked to poorer health outcomes (Raphael, 2001; 2003; 2007) and a shorter lifespan (Pohlmann, 2002). Income is also an indicator in housing, education and employment choices, and the inclusion of children in mainstream activities.

Claw-backs in social programs and social and health transfers have a direct impact upon the health of our population. Poverty increases as social safety nets are removed or limited by restrictive policies. Tax cuts do little to directly help those who are living in poverty; with the greatest benefit going to those with higher incomes. In general, reductions in tax rates leave less funding for social programs and benefits. Research shows that people who live in countries with higher taxes experience less poverty and enjoy more economic and social benefits (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006).

Recommendations

Research demonstrates that poverty can be eliminated through public policy decisions. This requires a multi-faceted approach and a commitment to social and economic development. While each determinant of health as outlined by the Public Health Agency of Canada needs to be addressed in the development of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy (i.e. income and social status, employment/working conditions, education, social environments, and healthy child development), economic equality lays the foundation for a healthy population.

The NLASW supports the recommendations put forward by Campaign 2000 (2007) in eradicating child and family poverty in Canada. These recommendations include:

- finance a universally accessible system for early learning and child care,
- increase child benefits to \$5,100 (2007 dollars),
- raise the minimum wage to at least \$10 per hour with annual indexing to reflect the cost of living,
- implement national income program for persons with (dis)Abilities,
- restore employment insurance benefits with 360 hour qualifying period, benefit levels based on best 12 weeks, and increased benefit rates to 60% of average earnings,
- develop and implement a National Poverty Reduction Strategy,

Other recommendations put forth by the NLASW include:

- increase funding for post secondary education and grants for students
- expand education options for youth who struggle in the traditional K-12 system and support for organizations who implement these programs
- invest in literacy programs
- increase funding for seniors
- renew funding to address homelessness in Canada and increase social housing
- enhance investments in rural communities
- apply gender analysis to policy development

Clearly, investments in public spending are necessary in building a strong social economy. Prosperity leads to greater responsibility to address the needs of the citizens of our population who require additional support to avail of all of the benefits that our province and country has to offer. The implementation of these recommendations will help keep children and families out of poverty and support healthy child development.

When examining any policy recommendation, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Social Policy Principles (2003) is a useful benchmark. These principles include, but are not limited to, dignity and respect, equity, and comprehensiveness. The principle of equity is of particular importance. This principle states that “individuals and families are to be treated equally if they are in like circumstances; social inequalities are considered just to the extent that they result in compensating benefits for the least advantaged person in society” (CASW, 2004, p.4).

Therefore, policy decisions and investments that directly target those who are living in or experiencing poverty and address social exclusion are just and fair (i.e. investments in social housing, targeted programs for Aboriginal children and families, and increased child care benefits for low income families etc). While there are numerous recommendations outlined in the report from the Subcommittee on Cities entitled “Poverty, Housing and Homelessness: Issues and Options”, government must continue to apply the principle of equity in considering these recommendations and in evaluating and developing policies and social programs.

The NLASW urges the Federal Government to develop and implement a National Poverty Reduction Strategy, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, immediately. Child poverty is a federal and provincial responsibility and we must continue to work collaboratively in eradicating poverty through investments in social programming and social inclusion. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is already making great strides in addressing poverty through the implementation of the province’s Poverty Reduction Strategy. The development of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy is also in keeping with the Federal governments’ commitment to the development of national public health goals and the primary health care framework.

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