

December 8, 2008

The Honourable Susan Sullivan
Human Resources, Labour and Employment
P. O. Box 8700
St. John's, NL
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Minister Sullivan,

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the consultative process of the review of the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy.

While the NLASW has participated in several of the roundtable discussions facilitated by your department, the enclosed report provides a written response to each of the questions outlined in the consultation booklet for 2008. The NLASW looks forward to working collaboratively with government in addressing these issues.

If you have any questions, or require additional information, please feel free to contact the undersigned below. Thanking you in advance for your support.

Sincerely,

Annette Johns, MSW, RSW
Social Work Consultant
Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers.

Poverty Reduction Strategy

2008 Consultation

Question 1: Do the key themes provide enough direction to guide the Poverty Reduction Strategy? Please comment.

Overall, the key themes identified provide a framework for addressing poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is important that a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach be used, and it is positive to note that the current framework does address elements that cross the social determinants of health.

In addition to the themes and initiatives outlined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation Booklet, there is a need for greater emphasis on early childhood education and the need for accessible, affordable, high quality childcare.

Continued investments in social policy and programming are integral to the implementation of a successful poverty reduction strategy. All policies and decisions of government need to be viewed through a poverty lens.

Question 2: Consider the investment in Poverty Reduction Strategy initiatives and the effort to achieve the 10 year goal. Should any themes receive priority?

Investments to strengthen social programs, such as the Income Support Program, are currently needed. It is also important that individuals have access to an adequate living wage that allows them to meet their basic needs, while saving and planning for the future. Again additional investments in early childhood learning and childcare are crucial to a provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy, as well as investments in social housing, and literacy programs.

According to the Canadian Council for Policy Alternatives (2006), 49% of Canadians agree that they are always just a missed pay cheque or two away from being poor. The economic gap between the rich and poor continues to increase. According to the Canadian Public Health Association (2008), this gap in Canada, a country viewed for its' prosperity and wealth, has grown by 37% from 1980 – 2005. The World Health Organization identifies this economic gap as a significant health concern. It is recommended that government explore why the economic gap continues to widen and the implication this had for poverty reduction in this province.

Tax policy is social policy. It is important for government to continue to review and enhance tax policies to meet the needs of those living in poverty and those who experience poverty. Research shows that lower personal income taxes benefit those with high incomes more than those individuals within a low income tax bracket. Broad reductions in taxes leave less funding

for social programming. We have already witnessed this at the Federal level with reductions in the GST. Research also shows that countries with higher taxes experience less poverty.

Question 3: What are the main challenges that people of low income face as they try to overcome poverty?

Employment insecurity is one of the challenges that people face. There is a trend towards more precarious forms of employment (i.e., seasonal, contract) with limited benefits. However, full time employment is not the only issue. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2006) 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). People need access to a living wage that will allow them to meet their daily needs and to participate fully in society.

The lack of affordable, accessible, and quality childcare services is also a barrier for many women in returning to work, as well as the lack of social housing.

Social exclusion is also an issue that many people face. The stigma associated with poverty can be quite harmful. Research shows that when people feel connected and supported by their communities change is possible.

Question 4: Will the Poverty Reduction Strategy goals and objectives allow us to reach the ten year goal to be a province with the least poverty?

The goals and objectives outlined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy do address some of the systematic changes needed to reduce and alleviate poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador. The key to the success of this strategy will be in how these goals and objectives are operationalized. It is important, that in the development of any policy directions, we need to look at some of the root causes of poverty, and to build partnerships with the community. To say that we want a better educated population, we need to look at some of the barriers to examine why many individuals don't do well in the traditional education system. There needs to be greater flexibility and support for non-traditional, community based programs that keep youth connected to education and to their community. The Choices for Youth program is a great model of how this can work. Vibrant Communities is another community organization that works closely with individuals living in poverty and has done some innovative programming to address poverty.

The Federal Government also has a key role in addressing poverty. This includes funding for social programs, early childhood learning and childcare, and social housing which will have a great impact on the province.

Question 5: Consider current changes in the social and economic life of this province. Do any goals or objectives need to be added? Modified? Dropped?

The Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy needs to be connected with the Poverty Reduction Strategy in a coordinated way. The key to keeping our province vibrant and prosperous is by ensuring that young people stay in NL and contribute to the social fabric.

In last few years, our province has enjoyed great prosperity. It is important that government maintain commitment to the development of social programs on the same level of importance as economic development. This is crucial to the success of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Question 6: Is the Poverty Reduction Strategy making a difference? How? If not, why?

Yes, there are certainly a lot of positive changes happening through the Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the NLASW commends government on the policy initiatives and changes that have occurred. These changes include: commitment to raise the minimum wage to \$10 an hour by 2010; expansion of the drug prescription program; investments in community; and investments in the Income Support Program to name a few. While there is still a lot to do in preventing and reducing poverty, government is moving in the right direction.

Question 7: Can you describe a successful poverty reduction initiative within your community? Why was it successful?

St. John's is one of the areas leading the way in poverty reduction through Vibrant Communities. Vibrant Communities is a great example of how community partners have joined together to look at addressing poverty in the St. John's region. Words that describe the success of Vibrant Communities include: collaboration, community-focused, partnerships, innovation, and leadership.

Question 8: How could we improve the way programs are promoted?

Enhanced media coverage and education on the programs available to assist people who experience or are living in poverty is needed. As a society, we need to dispel the myth that the only people who experience poverty are those living on income support. We need to create an environment where people can speak to the realities of poverty and to identify solutions.

By looking at poverty from a health perspective, people can gain greater insight into the issues that are impacting on the health of our population. Poverty is a health issue, and government needs to maintain and enhance its' commitment to primary health care.

Question 9: How can we improve current programs and services?

It is important that government continue to enhance and increase investments in social programming. These services and programs need to be user friendly, and with less bureaucracy. People need access to services that are available at the right time and in the right place. It also is important to consider expanding the qualifications for many of these programs and services so that these programs are available to those who need them.

Research is also a crucial component. While quantitative data is important (i.e., the number of people who leave income support), the qualitative piece needs to be there as well. It is important that government explore how people's lives have improved through the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, what barriers might still exist, and how these barriers can be addressed. People often make reference to doing a "social audit" and this is an important part of the evaluation process that needs to be captured. The evaluation piece is key to moving the strategy forward.

Question 10: What roles do stakeholders need to play? Who else needs to be involved?

Community stakeholders certainly need to play a consultative role. Having public consultations on the Poverty Reduction Strategy is very positive, and giving people plenty of advance notice to attend these consultations is crucial.

There are also key roles for the municipal government sectors through the economic development councils, to provide leadership and direction on how poverty can be addressed in the regions and what might need to be done differently.

The Federal Government needs to provide national leadership to ensure that policies are directed to reducing and alleviating poverty throughout Canada through the development and implementation of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy. The NLASW supports the recommendations put forth by Campaign 2000 (2007).

Question 11: What suggestions do you have to ensure on-going dialogue with the Provincial Government regarding the Poverty Reduction Strategy?

- Advance notice of consultations to ensure all key stakeholders are involved.
- Regular updates on the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy – barriers, successes and opportunities.
- Minister of HRLE to attend pre-budget consultations where issues relating to poverty are discussed and presented.

Other Comments:

Many of the following points have been raised throughout the enclosed document. In summary, many of the key recommendations to government include:

- Maintain a strong commitment to the development of social policies and programs with the same level of importance as economic development.
- Continue to address the “economic gap” – why is this happening and what policies are needed to address this widening gap.
- Increase and enhance funding for literacy, early childhood learning and quality, affordable, accessible childcare, and social housing.
- Maintain and enhance commitment to primary health care. A poverty reduction strategy can only be successful if all of the social determinants of health are addressed.
- Increase investments in northern and rural communities.
- Enhance and increase investments in early intervention and prevention programming. People need to feel included and supported by their communities.

References:

Campaign 2000 (2007). It Takes a Nation to Raise a Generation: Time for a National poverty Reduction Strategy. Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada. Retrieved July 14, 2008 from website <http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/index.html>

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