

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

Poverty Reduction Strategy

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers

Written Submission

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Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW)

The NLASW is the professional association and regulatory body for over 1300 professional social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). The mandate of the NLASW 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, collaboration, research, health promotion, policy and program development, and community capacity building.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the profession of social work is diverse with social workers practicing in various settings. Social workers practice within hospitals, community care, seniors' homes, adult and youth corrections, child welfare, addictions, mental health, community based centres, government departments and universities. Social workers are also self-employed in private practice and consulting businesses.

In the pursuit of excellence in social work, the NLASW is actively engaged in social policy analysis. In this submission, it is our intention to provide input and recommendations on the next phase of the poverty reduction strategy.

Background

In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously signed a resolution to eliminate child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. According to Campaign 2000 (2009), 1 in 10 children continue to live in poverty in Canada. The reality is that children live in poverty because families continue to live in poverty. Currently Canada does not have a national poverty reduction strategy. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2009) continues to advocate for a national strategy with dedicated resources.

In 2006, the government of NL took a leadership role and launched a Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy. Social workers and the community applauded this decision. The only other province at that time to have a poverty reduction strategy was

Quebec. Since 2006, other provinces have also developed poverty reduction strategies.

Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy: A Social Work Perspective

Social workers were pleased when the government of NL launched this strategy in 2006 and with the subsequent commitments and investments that have been made. The NLASW has been actively involved in informing each stage of the strategy. Government is moving in the right direction with its commitment to alleviating, preventing and eradicating poverty in this province.

This direction is also consistent with the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) as outlined in the following excerpts:

- *Social workers respect the unique worth and dignity of all people and uphold human rights,*
- *Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic needs,*
- *Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.*

While there have been significant investments made over the past four years, a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy with dedicated financial resources is still needed. Social workers understand the impact that poverty has on the lives of individuals and families who experience poverty; both in terms of quality of life and overall health. According to the World Health Organization (2003) people who live in poverty, even in the most affluent countries, have “substantially shorter life expectancies and more illnesses than the rich”.

Horizontal policy analysis is also necessary. It is imperative that the poverty reduction strategy support and intersect with other provincial strategies that impact on

poverty reduction (e.g., long term care and community support services strategy, early childhood learning strategy, strategy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, early childcare and learning strategy, youth retention and attraction strategy, provincial wellness plan, immigration strategy, etc). The NLASW has participated in the consultation process for many of these strategies.

When examining policy directions to address poverty reduction, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Social Policy Principles (2003) is a useful tool. These principles include: dignity and respect, equality, equity, comprehensiveness, quality of services, constitutional integrity, subsidiarity, and social dialogue. These principles can be used in the development of all policies and programs to ensure economic and social equality for everyone.

The five goals outlined in the 2010 Consultation Guide for the Poverty Reduction Strategy do capture the direction in which government must continue. However, in this written submission, several areas are identified that need to be considered in moving this strategy forward and addressing the system gaps. These areas include: the importance of addressing the widening economic gap, the need for a focus on food security, the significance of investments to address homelessness, the importance of regulated child care, the need to focus on persons living with a disability and low income seniors, and the value of focusing on the „lived experiences“ of those living in or experiencing poverty. While discussed separately, it is important to acknowledge that each of these areas overlap with each other. Investments in each of these areas will make significant improvements in the lives of individuals who experience poverty (seniors, persons living with a disability, single parents, low income earners, etc) as we work toward the goal of having a province with the lowest rate of poverty.

Issues and Recommendations – The Next Four Years

The Economic Gap

The economic gap between the rich and the poor continues to increase. According to the Canadian Public Health Association (2008), the median income for the top 20% of earners in Canada increased significantly (16.4%) from 1980-2005; while the median income for Canada's poorest dropped dramatically (20.6%). This is a gap of 37%. In a 2006 study, 49% of Canadians agreed that they were always a missed pay cheque or two away from being poor (Canadian Council for Policy Alternatives, 2006). These statistics are quite significant from a social policy perspective.

The Alberta College of Social Workers (2010) discusses the disparity gap which speaks to the "economic and social distance between the richest and poorest incomes." The Alberta College recognizes that inequality in terms of income and quality of life is creating issues in Alberta and is largely due to this widening economic or disparity gap. We know that income and social status is a determinant of health (Public Health Agency of Canada), and that people who live in or experience poverty generally experience more health problems and exclusion.

The William's government made a commitment to address this economic gap by raising the minimum wage to \$10 per hour in July 2010. Social workers and the community applauded this decision. Now that we have reached this goal, it is recommended that government continue to evaluate and index the minimum wage to ensure that individuals receive an appropriate living wage that is also competitive.

It is also recommended that government continue to focus on this economic gap (or disparity gap) within the poverty reduction strategy over the next four years. Is the economic gap widening in Newfoundland and Labrador? What policies need to be put in place to ensure that this gap doesn't continue to widen? Are there areas or regions in

the province where this gap is more pronounced? These questions warrant consideration as we move forward with the strategy.

A review of tax policy also is warranted under this strategy. Broad tax cuts are of greater benefit to those earning higher incomes than to those with low incomes. Campaign 2000 (2009) argues that governments must “*avoid across the board tax measures that disproportionately benefit wealthier Canadian families and entrench inequality*”. This is also supported by the CASW (2008).

As we work towards building a society where people are fully engaged in the workforce and adequately paid, a fundamental shift must happen. Our communities, organizations, towns, regions, cities and province cannot function without a mix in the workforce (e.g., professionals, service industry employees, domestic workers, home support workers, child care providers, and blue collar workers to name a few). Therefore, we need to revamp the value we place on the work performed by all citizens that contribute to economic and social growth to ensure adequate pay and inclusion.

When discussing the economic gap between high income earners and low income earners, it is also important to address issues relating to income support. Government has made significant improvements to increase access to services for persons who receive income assistance and removing barriers to employment, and it is recommended that these investments continue (e.g., raising income level thresholds in accessing services and supports, expanding the NL Drug Prescription Program, expanding the NL Dental Program, etc).

Food Security

It is recognized that a number of provincial investments were made to increase access to nutritional food through the poverty reduction strategy. These investments included: increase of the mother baby nutritional supplement, increase in the air food lift subsidy program, support for the KIDS Eat Smart Foundation to further the expansion of

the school breakfast program, and increased funding to healthy baby clubs to name a few. It is recommended that these initiatives continue to move forward and that increased funding be adequately directed.

While investments have been made, food insecurity continues to be an issue for many individuals and families in NL. According to Food Banks Canada (2010), food bank use in NL increased by 2.6% from March 2009 to March 2010. McIntyre (in Raphael, 2004) discusses food security as a determinant of health. Factors impacting on a person's ability to achieve food security include access to employment, an adequate living wage, cost of housing and child care (McIntyre). It is therefore important that all of these areas be addressed through the poverty reduction strategy.

In 2006, government released a document entitled "*Eating Healthier in Newfoundland and Labrador: Provincial Food and Nutrition Framework and Action Plan.*" While this report highlighted the connection between healthy eating and the poverty reduction strategy, access to nutritious food has not been significantly addressed in the strategy. According to a 2009 report from the Heart and Stroke Foundation on the health of Canadians "accessibility to healthy foods is not the same in all communities." This is true within Newfoundland and Labrador. In some rural and remote communities, access to fresh food and fruits and vegetables is limited and healthy eating is not affordable (e.g., \$6.00 or more for a 2 liter of milk on the Labrador coast).

It is therefore recommended that food security, with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention, become a focus of the poverty reduction strategy within the next four years. This will require a commitment to working with industry and community in exploring ways to increase access to healthy food. The cost of food transportation is also an issue that will need to be addressed to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food.

Homelessness and Housing

Carter and Polevychok (2004), in their discussion of housing and social policy, highlight the connection between housing and the impact on health, education, employment, and economic development to name a few. They indicate that “inequalities in housing and housing markets also have the potential to shape inequalities in health.”

The lack of safe, affordable and accessible housing continues to be an issue for individuals and families in NL. Even in times of economic success, homelessness and housing challenges exist. In some regions of the province, housing properties are being purchased by larger corporations. This leaves limited housing options for those in most need of social housing. Increasing rental rates is also a barrier for many individuals and families in accessing safe and affordable housing.

While government has made significant investments in social housing through the poverty reduction strategy, it is critical that these investments continue, particularly as it relates to seniors with low incomes, individuals living with a disability, individuals with complex needs, and low wage earners. Raphael (2004) describes social exclusion as a determinant of health. From an inclusion framework, access to affordable and safe housing is critical. According to the Alberta Association of Social Workers (2010) “safe and affordable housing creates a more positive feeling of neighbourhood and contributes in important ways to community cohesion and security”.

One recommendation to address housing for low income earners is to increase funding for the Rent Subsidy Program through Newfoundland and Labrador Housing. The NLASW also supports recommendations put forth by the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing and Homelessness Network (2010) to address housing and homelessness. It is important that the poverty reduction strategy address housing and homelessness as a primary focus over the next four years. According to the Housing and Homelessness Network (2010) “*the development of affordable housing and tailored*

support services.....provide a platform upon which education, training, job creation, health, justice, community development and rural renewal initiatives can be creatively fashioned to achieve lasting outcomes that reduce poverty”.

Early Child Care and Learning

In October 2010, the NLASW provided a written submission to inform the Early Childhood Learning Strategy. Of concern to social workers, is the lack of affordable, accessible, and high quality regulated child care. Statistics from the Canadian Council on Social Development (2006) showed that in 2003/2004, only 15.5% of children in Canada aged 0-12 years had access to regulated child care.

The lack of affordable, accessible, and high quality childcare is a barrier for many individuals in entering or returning to the workforce. While the number of regulated child care spaces has increased, the supply is not meeting the current demand in this province. Child care subsidy programs do provide support for many low income earners to access child care. It is recommended that the eligibility criteria for accessing subsidies be expanded to reach more low income families (e.g., for individuals looking for employment). It is also recommended that affordable, high quality, and accessible early child care learning and child care programs be increased to promote inclusion and healthy child development. This includes the creation of additional regulated child care spaces.

There is a direct connection between increasing access to affordable, accessible and high quality childcare programs and enhancing social and economic development. According to a report by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (2009) to inform the NL Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy of NL, youth see access to child care and early child development services as integral in supporting families in this province. Therefore, if we want youth to stay in NL and contribute to the social and economic development of our province, essential services and programs such as regulated child

care need to be enhanced. This speaks directly to goal number 2 of the poverty reduction strategy (a stronger social safety net).

Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

According to the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (2010), individuals living with a disability in Canada are more than two times likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. On November 1, 2010, the NLASW submitted a written brief to inform the Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. Poverty was one of the key issues addressed in this brief. The NLASW discussed the importance of education, employment and housing options for persons living with a disability within an inclusive framework. It is recommended that recommendations put forth in the NLASW written brief to inform the Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, also be included and addressed within the poverty reduction strategy.

Seniors and Poverty

In October 2010, the NLASW provided a written submission to inform the provincial long-term care and community support services strategy. One of the issues identified was poverty among seniors. While we know that seniors today are more financially stable than in previous years because of programs such as Old Age Security, Guaranteed Income Supplement, and Canada Pension Plan, it is important to note that many seniors, and in particular senior women, continue to live in poverty or have incomes that are below the low income level.

A 2005 report from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women stated that “almost half of single, widowed or divorced women over the age of 65 are poor.” A report by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2007) indicates that the low income rate among senior women is double that of senior men. This is concerning given that 55% of the province’s seniors are female. It is therefore timely

that the poverty reduction strategy addresses the needs of low income seniors given our aging population.

Policies must be continuously analyzed through a gender inclusive lens. Areas where investments are necessary, from a poverty reduction framework, in addition to the areas addressed in this brief include 1) more affordable assisted living options for seniors, 2) expanded health services for low income seniors (dental and medication coverage, 3) increase in portable subsidies, and 4) increase in the personal allowance for seniors living in long term care facilities.

Aboriginal Populations

According to Campaign 2000 (2009), many Aboriginal children and families continue to experience poverty. It is important that government maintain on-going collaborative relationships with Aboriginal governments and groups to address issues such as food security, housing, and access to employment and education that is culturally responsive.

Lived Experiences

Raphael (2007) discusses the value of exploring the lived experience of poverty, and discusses five key areas in his analysis of the experience of poverty. These areas include a) material and social deprivation, b) stress, c) stigma and degradation, d) impact on health and e) impact on quality of life.

Measuring success, as it relates to these five key areas, and in addition to numerical and statistical measurements, will give a more comprehensive view of the impact of the poverty reduction strategy and the impact it has had on people's lives. A guiding question for this evaluation should include "How has people's „lived experiences“ changed as a result of initiatives and programs facilitated through the poverty reduction strategy?"

Qualitative data needs to be collected to measure success and improvements across all of the social determinants of health that have been outlined by Raphael (2004). These social determinants of health include education, employment and working conditions, social exclusion, housing, food security, and employment security to name a few. Community collaboration in collecting this data is important. It is recommended that this qualitative data be included to a greater extent in the poverty reduction strategy progress reports.

Conclusion

The NLASW commends government on the commitment to reduce, alleviate and prevent poverty, and in taking this leadership position. While coordinated through the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment, the poverty reduction strategy must support and intersect with other on-going strategies and initiatives. In recent months, the NLASW participated in the consultation process for many of these strategies, and poverty reduction is a central theme. It is therefore important that all policies, programs and services be continuously evaluated through a “poverty reduction lens”.

To achieve the ultimate goal of alleviating, eradicating and preventing poverty, federal, provincial, and territorial governments must move forward together. This direction is supported by the National Council of Welfare (2007). The Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and Status of Persons with Disabilities (2010) recently called on the Federal Government to implement a national poverty reduction strategy. It is imperative that the Federal Government make poverty reduction a priority for the country. It is recommended that NL keep poverty reduction on the federal agenda through its communication and work across all government departments.

As a profession, social workers look forward to continuing to work with government in informing policy and program development in meeting the needs of individuals who lives in or experiences poverty.

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