



**Roundtable with Minister Matthews
Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy**

January 23, 2015

George Street United Church/ Seeds of Change

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Some Background and Context:

Ontario's new Poverty Reduction Strategy, *Realizing Our Potential*, was released on September 3, 2014 (<http://www.ontario.ca/home-and-community/realizing-our-potential-poverty-reduction-strategy-2014-2019>)

It is built around four key pillars:

1. A Long-Term Goal to End Homelessness in Ontario

Ontario has released its' plan to set a new goal of ending homelessness. The province will seek expert advice to:

- help define the problem,
- understand how to measure it and
- set targets related to ending homelessness.

The report emphasized that Ontario will place a special emphasis on housing supports for those who are homeless or at high risk of losing their homes. As part of the new strategy, the province is enhancing funding for the **Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative** by \$42 million starting in 2014-15, to a total of almost \$294 million per year.

The province will continue working with the federal government to improve access to affordable housing by building and improving more units. The province will update its 2010 **Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy** to reflect lessons learned and new research on best practices related to housing and homelessness.

2. Continuing to Break the Cycle of Poverty

Historically, Ontario's first Poverty Reduction Strategy, *Breaking the Cycle*, focused on children and youth. The province has continued to attempt to meet the target of reducing child poverty by 25 per cent. Data from the province indicates that between 2008 and 2011, Ontario assisted 47,000 children and their families in an attempt to address poverty.

The province has state that through the new strategy, "Ontario will continue to reduce child poverty through initiatives that will give kids the best possible start. The province is increasing and enhancing the **Ontario Child Benefit** to keep pace with inflation. It is offering access to early learning through **Full-Day Kindergarten**, which is now available to every four- and five-year-old across the province."

The report also states that the province is" investing \$32 million over the next three years to expand the **Student Nutrition Program** to serve about 56,000 more school-aged children and youth."

According to data in the report "during the 2012-13 school year, the program served more than 695,000 school-aged kids."

The province has also included a strategy addressed at improving children's long-term health by "expanding access to health and **dental programs**, such as prescription drugs and vision care."

The report states that Ontario is committed to “enhancing wellness among children and youth with earlier identification and treatment of **mental health issues.**”

3. Moving Toward Employment and Income Security

The province has recognized that employment is critical to reducing poverty. In addition to raising the minimum wage to \$11 per hour, the province plans to re-introduce legislation to tie its growth to inflation.

As part of the commitment to reducing poverty, the report states that “through initiatives such as the **Youth Jobs Strategy** and the **Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program**, the province will boost youth employment by removing obstacles, enhancing work experience and promoting entrepreneurship.”

The plan identifies the need for collaborative approaches to addressing poverty. The plan reflects the importance of work that is underway in a community such as Peterborough and the plan’s intent supports the need for community partners and their networks such as the:

- Affordable Housing Action Committee
- Peterborough Drug Strategy
- Peterborough Social Planning Council
- Peterborough County City Health Unit
- City and County of Peterborough
- Peterborough Partnership Council on Immigrant Integration
- Sustainable Peterborough
- Peterborough Poverty Reduction Network
- United Way

“Ontario will support collaborations and partnerships that remove obstacles to employment for vulnerable groups including Aboriginal people, newcomers and persons with disabilities...” Continued work will be done by the province to transform social assistance to “maintain an effective social safety net for those in need and to help people access jobs and achieve greater financial independence.”

4. Investing in What Works

According to the newly released plan, the province is committed to funding programs based on evidence.

“Ontario will work with community partners to focus on evidence-building, and fund programs and interventions that work for people. For a better understanding of where attention is needed, and which investments are working, Ontario will continue to track existing indicators and expand its focus by looking at three additional indicators:

- youth not in education,
- employment or training; long-term unemployment; and
- poverty rates among certain vulnerable populations.”

The consultation

A meeting was held on January 23, 2015 whereby Minister Mathews participated. In attendance:

- Warden J Murray Jones
- Counsellor Keith Riel on behalf of Mayor Bennett

- Minister Jeff Leal

Attendees were asked to participate in one of the topic groups. What follows is an overview of the conversations that took place.

Remarks from the Community:

Text of remarks from Teresa Daw

I want to thank Minister Matthews and Minister Leal for holding this roundtable on the second phase of the province's poverty reduction plan.

In my remarks, I will look at the larger picture of disability and poverty relative to the poverty reduction strategy. I ask your indulgence for my use of Canadian rather than Ontario statistics, as my research is primarily national in scope.

What do we know and what does it mean for poverty reduction among people with disabilities in Ontario?

We know that Stats Can reported the rate of disability at 14.3% in 2006 (13.7% using the 2012 survey method)

We know from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability that rates of disability increase with age (not to mention that our population is aging). Disability rates are:

- 4.4% for people aged 15 to 24
- 6.5% for 25 to 44
- 16.1% for 45 to 64
- 26.3% for 65 to 74
- 42.5% for 75 and older.

Considering these numbers, are the poverty reduction strategies for people with disabilities appropriately targeted?

Does the Poverty Reduction Strategy adequately and appropriately address people with multiple vulnerabilities? Do the indicators and evaluations cross-reference vulnerabilities?

We know from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability that the (age standardized) labour market participation rate for people with disabilities is 55.6% compared to 79.2% for people without disabilities.

Ontario's poverty reduction strategy for people with disabilities focuses almost exclusively on getting people to participate in work. I believe one of the most serious gaps in the plan, is the

failure to examine and uncover all of the variables as to why people with disabilities are not participating in labour market activities.

I believe that it is both faulty and harmful to set policy and programs without knowing why 44.6% of a vulnerable group is neither employed nor unemployed. What are the factors in play in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) indicator for people with disabilities and how should these factors be addressed?

Relatedly, the Ontario plan does not come to terms with how to deal with the poverty of people with disabilities who are unable to work or who can manage part time or occasional work.

Nor does the plan address the scarring effect of disability on income. This scarring looks different depending on the nature of the disability, for example if the disability is episodic, or severe, or carries a social stigma.

We know from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability that the (age standardized) employment rate for people with disabilities is 47.9% compared to 73.6% for the population without disabilities while the unemployment rate is 13.8% for people with disabilities compared to 7.1% for people without disabilities. Joe Dale of the Ontario Disability Employment Network reports that the unemployment rate of people with disabilities in Ontario is 25%.

While the poverty reduction plan rightly commits to reducing barriers to employment for people with disabilities, a more robust examination and remediation needs to be put into place. Additionally, the policies and programs that are put in place must not penalize individuals for systemic problems.

The 2012 Stats Can data also demonstrated that people with disabilities are:

- Less educated
- Concentrated in personal service, customer service and sales (lower wage employment)
- Less likely to work in management occupations
- Earn less than their non-disabled counterparts

What measures are in place to ensure that the work requirements for social assistance aren't simply reducing the depth of poverty for people with disabilities rather than raising people out of poverty?

Finally, I would like to address the clear and growing trend of the welfare-ization of disability. The recently concluded 5-year SHERK-funded community-university study on disability and poverty under the Council of Canadians with Disabilities is compelling. The Ontario situation is well documented by John Stapleton of the Metcalfe Foundation. The points of note are:

- the increasing unavailability of employment-triggered income support programs such as EI, CPPD, WSIB, Veterans pensions and private insurance which are available only to those with regular, salaried or wage-paid work,
- the limits of the disability tax credit as a method to reduce tax payable but not to increase income
- the time delay before the RDSP will become a meaningful element of income support for those who have the means to save

As a result, more and more Ontarians with disabilities end up on ODSP, a program that, by its very nature, demands that a recipient must live in poverty, and other than the 11% of recipients who are currently able to supplement that income with work, this means deep poverty.

Therein, two main points arise for Ontario poverty reduction plan. First, is the plan measuring and providing solutions to the depth of poverty of people with disabilities who have no choice but to resort to social assistance?

And the second point is that I believe the poverty reduction plan fails to do the necessary analysis around the broader disability income system in Ontario. As Stapleton points out, the need for reform is desperate. Such reform is likely the only way to truly lift people with disabilities out of poverty and restore dignity. Ontario has an opportunity to provide leadership and transformative solutions to the convergence of disability and poverty. I urge you to begin exploring this option.

Remarks from Sandra Dueck, Chamber of Commerce

Comments on Realizing Our Potential –Provincial Policy Statement on Poverty

Goals of Policy Statement	Chamber Response
<p>Overall Employment</p> <p>☑ Moving toward employment and income security</p> <p>☑ Employment income key to reducing poverty</p>	<p>Overall, the role of government is to provide the framework to foster job growth, but the actual creation of jobs falls to the private sector. Therefore the challenge lies in making it easier for business to do business and therefore create more opportunities for employment.</p> <p>Make it easy for employers to access programs this applies to youth and adult workers.</p> <p>Businesses do not operate in a bubble, they are facing pressures higher electricity prices, high WSIB premiums, slower predicted growth</p> <p>Several policy pushes from the Chamber Network</p> <p>Financial Literacy – asking the provincial government to make a designated business course with a financial literacy a requirement of high school graduation, just as every student must complete 40 hours of volunteer work to graduation</p> <p>Homelessness – this resolution calls for continued and coordinated efforts between the federal/provincial/territorial and municipal governments to stimulate new affordable housing construction</p> <p>*attached is a list of Policy resolutions at the provincial level</p>
<p>Minimum wage legislation now tied to Consumer Price Index</p> <p>Promoting Entrepreneurship</p> <p>Government-wide employment and training programs</p> <p>Right supports to become and stay employed</p>	<p>Same as above, create the atmosphere for business to create well paying jobs for all ages.</p>
<p>Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program</p>	<p>Great idea but the challenge becomes making the transition to continue adult apprenticeship easy – Businesses are concerned about the structure and effectiveness of the Ontario College of Trades – this is a mandate</p>

Persons with disabilities	
Limit barriers to achieving full potential	http://www.occ.ca/programs/accessibility-works/enabling-change-workshops/
Collaborations and partnerships that identify and remove obstacles	Lunchbox Learning in the past on AODA rules and changes, Changes posted on website
Modernizing childcare	
Economic impact	Child care – At the Canadian Chamber AGM, a policy resolution asked: Work with the provinces and territories to fully examine the potential impact on productivity and the Canadian GDP of a countrywide system of child care with possible implications for child care rates and spaces. Affordable and available child care identified as a major economic factor in Toronto, the same can be said for other Ontario communities such as Peterborough

Results of Small Group Work

Moving Towards Employment and Income Security: Transitioning to the Workplace

- There should be more opportunities for apprenticeships. Not everyone wants to/can afford to go to college, it would be good if employers would take students from high school and help them develop their skills.
- There should be more government support for businesses to provide employees with skills training and professional development.
- There should be financial incentives for students to go well in high school. It might help motivate students who are from low income backgrounds.
- Employers should help people with disabilities work – need to be more flexible and understanding of what people can do, and what they are unable to do.
- However, we also need to shift the focus away from employment being the only valuable way of contributing to society.
- Everyone should have income security, regardless of employment status.
- Need to connect the dots – a registry of people who want to work, and their availability, and connecting them to people who need employees.
- The current job market – part time, temporary work – is not worth the difficulty of going off the system and having to go back on after the contract is over.
- Chronic unemployment is a problem.
- People know their own abilities and limitations, employers and caseworkers need to understand and be accommodating of that.
- We need to focus on people's abilities and what they can achieve.
- Dealing with mental health and depression, it only gets worse for people if they are seen as/called useless by society.
- Help people believe in themselves.
- Idea = create a botanical garden in Peterborough and help people become employed taking care of it. Green space and mental health are closely correlated.
- Income security for the working poor.
- We need tax reform! Progressive taxation!
- We are in a rich agricultural area; there are many farms that need workers. People should learn how to grow their own food.
- For support for local food strategies and abilities.
- Need to sustain ourselves!
- Canada jobs grant – businesses put \$5000 in and the feds and province match it for training. However, some small businesses might not have the necessary funds to invest in this.
- 80% of new jobs comes from small business. We need to support this. We also need to encourage entrepreneurship.
- Interdependence and teams – we should join up artists with people who can help with the selling or the financial part of the transactions.

- We need to stop focussing on welfare fraud, and talk about how limiting it is to be on the system in the first place. It is a disincentive to transition off the system if people lose their health benefits and are stuck with a part time job.
- We should value the work that people do in non-monetary terms. Celebrate volunteerism and community engagement.
- Provide financial supports for people – financial literacy should be a requirement to graduate high school.
- Problem – the way income is dealt with – the changes to your income when you are on the system and begin working.
- Income should be examined on an annual basis, not monthly.
- Changes to the OSDP work related benefit are doing more harm than good.
- The province needs to simplify the OW system. There are hundreds of rules and it is confusing and complicated.
- The system should be streamlined and supports should be increased.
- Fixing the system – the SA system operates on another system – the economic system! It is not just the government that is responsible; it is the structure of the capitalist state.
- Local businesses are the best source of good employment.
- We need a greater range of flexible employment opportunities. How do we do this?
- Lots of opportunities for economic development in the food system. We should increase our local food production – jobs available in growing, packaging, marketing, selling, distributing.
- Think in terms of systems working together.
- More collaborative efforts!
- Don't tell people they are permanently disabled – everyone has abilities! Need to support people in finding and developing theirs.
- Increased recognition for organizations that operate between non-profit and charities – make a small profit but instead of hoarding it, use it to provide something back to the community.

Diane Therrien, Peterborough Poverty Reduction Network

- Long-Term Goal to End Homelessness in Ontario: **(John Martyn to facilitate, Su Musclow to take notes)**
 - **Affordable Housing**

Main messages:

- there is no consistent acceptable definition of affordable housing
- housing must be stable, consistent, & safe
- need for federal government to become involved
- proximity to public transportation

Using Evidence-Based Social Policy and Measuring Success

- There are some excellent local initiatives that could be strengthened, documented and more widely disseminated with funding made available through the proposed “Local Poverty Reduction Fund”. These include:
 - A variety of HUB models being developed in Peterborough City and County (Prince of Wales School, Seeds of Change, Peterborough Family Resource Centre, the Mount Community Centre, etc...)
 - Rent Supplement initiatives
 - The Dental Treatment Assistance Fund
 - COIN (Community Opportunities and Innovation Network) Social Enterprise non-profit
 - Peterborough LETS Exchange for goods and services
- In order to contribute to provincial evidence-building, our local community would benefit from assistance with obtaining, analyzing and sharing detailed local data. Having open, shared data across the province, and community-based data sharing through a data consortium, would be a huge help. Sometimes it is very difficult to get data at the local level, other times there is data, but no staff time or support to carry out local analysis.
- It would be helpful to have a venue to collect and communicate success stories. There is lots of local information on crime, but not much on new businesses or creative local solutions being developed.

- There was a lot of interest in the Social Enterprise Demonstration Fund, but participants felt they needed more information, skills and support to implement many local ideas for social enterprises.
- We could use help to determine why we consistently have high unemployment from April – May each year in the Peterborough area. There seem to be a variety of micro and macro factors at work, but it is not really understood.
- There was a discussion of the need for local control and flexibility in implementing poverty reduction programs. There is a need for core service funding, and also the ability to target specific populations. Sometimes there are unnecessary restrictions on how dollars are spent for employment training or housing supports, and as a result important needs are going unmet.
- It was noted that it is very difficult to track the success of programs for people after they leave social assistance.
- The new indicators for tracking poverty rates in specific vulnerable groups were welcome. It was suggested that the poverty rates of female lone parents with children under 6 should also be added. According to the 2006 census, **62%** of female lone parents with children under 6 years of age in Peterborough were living in poverty.

Facilitator and Recorder: Christine Post (cpost@pcchu.ca), Peterborough County-City Health Unit

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children and Youth: Mental Health, Child Benefits

- Table: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children and Youth – Education, Nutrition and Vulnerable Youth.
- Facilitator: Nauni Parkinson, note taker, Laura Keresztesi
- Discussion NUTRITION:
- Breakfast Program offered in some schools by Rotary, they are looking at expending.
- Food for Kids: Happy to see that the Prov. Plan identifies additional funding for student nutrition programs however there are still shortages in funding for other programs which affect the current Food for Kids programing.
- We'd like to see a budget line in the Ministry of Education's budget that is specifically for student nutrition (and even specifically food purchase?) and not just general 'poverty reduction'. We'd like to see increased resources for actual food purchase (ideally local food too!)

- Food for Kids has done some great work partnering with local farmers to be able to provide local nutritious food to the Food for Kids programs. We'd like to be able to continue along this path. (In Report Back session of meeting, Min. Leal talked about the 'Local Food Fund' that his dept. administers).
- We could learn from B.C.'s "Farm to Fork". A universal Student Nutrition program is very important.
- Idea to link each Peterborough School to a farm.
- We could use the \$50 million to run a program that would demonstrate the benefits of linking schools to local agriculture.
- Discussion EDUCATION:
- Education must remain a priority. It is great that we have full-day kindergarden, but we must continue and make sure that children are getting the Best Start they can: invest in quality early childhood care that is both available to those who need it and affordable (through universally funded program or subsidies).
- Commitment to investing in former Crown Wards and youth leaving care is good but there is a question as to why only some universities and colleges are participating. Should their participation not be mandatory? What is the rationale for it being voluntary?
- The plan to have Family Centres connected to highschoools was an excellent idea when it came out 3-4 years ago. This idea should be looked at again. The Early Years Centres are great, but we need something similar at the highschool level.
- We should invest more in promoting better after hour use of our public school space.
- Session 2: 2:30 -3:00
- Table: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children and Youth: Mental Health, Child Benefits
- Discussion MENTAL HEALTH:
- About 50% of students in any class are dealing with some sort of mental health challenge. Majority are likely related to domestic issues (usually some type of violence).
- It would be great to do more studies connecting poverty indicators with levels of abuse – something measurable.
- Stressed that we really need to take mental health seriously and work hard at initiatives that will lessen the current stigma related to mental health issues.
- Example: If every child had to routinely see a counsellor, just like they see a dentist through school, perhaps there would not be such a stigma.
- We should also make mental health literacy part of the educational curriculum.
- Much more needs to be done to ameliorate the relationship between the Children's Aid Society and the School system. To start we need to build trust and improve communications. Currently they do not boast a good relationship and this causes lots of problems at school and families are not supported in constructive, empowering ways.
- How can the province help facilitate better relationships?
- Ex. Teachers are legally obligated to report issues to CAS which causes some children to hesitate before talking to a trusted teacher about troubles at home.

- We should have more of a culture of openness at schools. We should have support groups at schools.
- Would be great to have a monitoring process for mental health issues in schools.
- Would also be great to have mental health mentors in schools.

Nauni Parkinson facilitator, Laura Keresztesi recorder

How can the province and Peterborough collaborate to meet the targets they share?

Highlights from what the Minister said:

- Minister Matthews believes that we need to be strategic and we will make change,
- the Province has set aside \$50 million for a local poverty reduction fund, details of which will come forward in the spring, but it will focus on Ontario based evidence and measurable outcomes,
- homelessness is a failure of government and society, we should be focusing on a housing first strategy,
- income inequality is the key context, and this needs to be addressed.