



Community and Health Services Department
Office of the Commissioner

Memorandum

TO: Members of Committee of the Whole
FROM: Adelina Urbanski, Commissioner of Community and Health Services
DATE: January 8, 2015
RE: **Realizing our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy**

On September 3, 2014, the province released [Realizing our Potential](#): Ontario's second poverty reduction strategy. The Strategy continues to focus on reducing child poverty and includes new targets to eliminate homelessness and expand health and dental care to low income residents.

The Strategy is led by Minister Matthews, Deputy Premier and President of the Treasury Board. This broad oversight will ensure coordination and alignment across ministries and portfolios on provincial government priorities.

The Strategy is built around the following four pillars:

1. Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children and Youth
2. Improved Access to Employment and Income Security
3. Ending Homelessness and Renewing the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy
4. Using Evidence Based Social Policy

The actions to be taken under these four pillars and their potential implications for York Region are described below.

Pillar 1: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Children and Youth

The Strategy renews its focus on helping children and youth out of poverty through:

- Continued investments in the Ontario Child Benefit by raising the maximum annual benefit from \$1,210 to \$1,310 per child as of July 2014. The increase will provide additional support to eligible York Region families and ensure benefits will not erode over time due to inflation. The increase may also pull some recipients out of the social assistance system.

- Benefits for children and youth in low-income families to ensure they have access to services outside of publicly funded health care, such as prescription drugs, vision care and mental health services. These additional benefits will reduce the pressure of residents relying on social assistance benefits and may support residents' stability in their homes as less of their income will be spent on health related costs.
- Additional training, funding and supports for mental health and addiction services. York Region with its partners is exploring its role in addressing mental health issues for clients.
- The allocation of \$16 million over three years to support the creation of 1,000 new supportive housing spaces to help Ontarians living with mental illness and addictions issues. While this is welcome news, the new supportive housing spaces are likely to be provided by way of rent supplements, which may be challenging given York Region's tight rental market.
- Continued commitment to implement full day kindergarten gives children a stronger start through early learning and may improve employment prospects for Ontario Works recipients who need child care to access skill development or employment. However, full day kindergarten may negatively impact the revenue streams of child care providers. The Region's child care fee assistance program may see an increase in families seeking assistance if child care costs increase.

Pillar 2: Improved Access to Employment and Income Security

The Strategy builds on employment opportunities for youth and initiatives aimed at improving access and opportunities to employment by:

- Integrating employment and training supports for Ontario Works recipients to provide targeted and individualized supports to gain work experience and help secure employment.
- Continuing to support youth employment programs which help youth develop skills to become economically independent and stably housed.
- Improving employment prospects and focusing greater supports and opportunities for:
 - People with disabilities and aboriginal people
 - Providing greater access to child care
 - Increases to the minimum wage
 - Raising social assistance rates for singles and people living in remote communities

Pillar 3: Ending Homelessness and Renewing the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy

The Strategy includes a commitment to ending homelessness and providing stable housing, along with the right services and supports to improve wellness for people through:

- Renewing the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy. This provides an opportunity for the Region to address key policy and program issues, particularly with respect to sustainability of the existing social housing portfolio.
- Extending the Investment in Affordable Housing program for five more years which supports the Region's goal of increasing the rental housing supply, specifically the supply of government funded units and rent subsidies.
- Continued funding to the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, which is cited as an important tool to create local solutions. The Region will continue to support and enhance homelessness programs through the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative, such as Belinda's Place and the Richmond Hill Hub.

Pillar 4: Using Evidence Based Social Policy

The Strategy ensures investments in poverty reduction are effective and produce good outcomes by:

- Providing funding contingent on outcomes being achieved by programs.
- Committing \$50 million over five years for a new Local Poverty Reduction Fund designed to reward local solutions that demonstrate they are helping to lift people out of poverty. Details regarding the funding have not been released, however the province has said that funding could support locally sustainable projects and grassroots initiatives provided by community agencies.

Next steps

A number of critical legislative changes are underway which staff are monitoring; these include social assistance reform, child care modernization and renewal of the Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy. How all of these pieces will come together and the implication to York Region is yet to emerge.

The Strategy recognizes the important role of local government and municipalities in affordable housing and homelessness prevention efforts. It also affirms that reducing poverty is beyond any one order of government to address alone. It is a collaborative effort and there is an opportunity to build and enhance partnerships.

Adelina Urbanski
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

AU/ml