

Bill Fisch, B.Com., LLB, J.D.
Chairman and CEO



The Regional Municipality of York
17250 Yonge Street, Box 147
Newmarket, Ontario L3Y 6Z1

Tel: 905-895-1231
905-731-0201

email: bill.fisch@york.ca

Thursday, October 3, 2013

The Honourable Teresa Piruzza, MPP
Ministry of Children and Youth Services
14th Floor
56 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S3

Dear Minister Piruzza:

Re: York Region's Submission for Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy

On behalf of The Regional Municipality of York, we are encouraged to see the Province of Ontario renewing its commitment to reducing poverty through the development of a second five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy focused on breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty by helping children and their families living in poverty. Since the strategy was launched in 2008, the Province has committed to addressing poverty through:

- Investments in affordable housing – connecting people to their community and economy, and improving general well-being and social inclusion
- A social assistance reform supporting a client-centred and locally-driven system
- Increased investments for ancillary supports – child care, mental health, employment and financial services

A long-term poverty reduction strategy will need to draw upon municipal expertise to understand regional variations in poverty, learn from local strategies and integrate more client-centred approaches to providing services. In York Region, this means federal and provincial funding commitments to support affordable housing development, child care, employment supports and effective local strategies connecting families to the community-based services and supports they need to succeed.

York Region welcomes the Province's commitment to consult with governments and communities to hear how we can continue to work together to break the cycle of poverty. A new Poverty Reduction Strategy should work towards solutions benefiting our residents, our communities and our economy.

We submit York Region's response, as attached, to the Province's consultation questions as we work together towards the development of the next Poverty Reduction Strategy. If you have any questions about the Region's submission, please contact Adelina Urbanski, Commissioner of Community and Health Services, at 905-830-4444 ext. 2023 or by email at adelina.urbanski@york.ca

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Fisch".

Bill Fisch
Chairman and CEO

Attachment

Question 1:

Looking back over the last five years of Ontario's first Poverty Reduction Strategy, what worked well? What can we do differently moving forward?

- Increases to the Ontario Child Benefit increased income support for low income households in York Region.
- Increases to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program's basic allowance and maximum shelter allowance increased the number of eligible residents and helped clients meet actual costs of basic needs, transportation, housing and increased earnings exemptions.
- Funding for social housing repairs allowed housing providers to complete energy upgrades that reduced energy costs for low-income tenants.
- Both the Housing Allowance program and the Short-Term Rent Support Program were successful, cost-effective methods of providing low-income families with rent supports.
- Implementation of full day kindergarten provided financial assistance to low-income parents who would otherwise need child care.
 - At a Regional level, the provision of transportation and child care at our parenting and mental health (Transition to Parenting) groups for low-income families ensures access to our programs.
- Although the demand for child care fee subsidy continues to increase in York Region, the wait-list for fee subsidy decreased in 2013 primarily due to increased provincial funding. However, we must keep in mind that as the economy continues to recover and more people enter or return to the workforce, the demand for child care will grow.
- Expansion of the Children in Need of Treatment (CINOT) in 2009 to include 14 to 17 year olds as well as general anesthetic for five to 13 year olds. In York Region, 1,392 clients were treated since 2009.
- Implementation of the Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program which provides oral health care for children 17 years and under for families without access to dental coverage and an adjusted family net income of \$20,000 or less. In York Region, 2,860 clients enrolled and 2,236 clients received treatment since 2010.
- Implementation of the Breast Pump Discretionary Benefit Program, which is a joint program run by York Region Community and Health Services, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), to ensure participants receiving financial assistance through OW and ODSP have adequate funds to obtain a breast pump when necessary to protect breastfeeding.

Moving forward the Province can help reduce poverty through:

- Addressing the root cause of poverty
 - Increasing the basic needs allowance for social assistance
 - Strengthening the social assistance system to become client focused
 - Increasing the supply of social and affordable housing
 - Creating employment opportunities
 - Income security
 - Access to adequate nutrition

- Sustained funding for:
 - New supply of affordable housing and rent subsidies
 - Capital repairs for existing social housing
 - Home renovations for low- to moderate-income households

- Clarifying the existing poverty measure

- Investing in targeted supports to low-income families to help them avoid slipping into crisis. This should be provided within an integrated system that is outcome focused and supports municipalities to find community-based solutions to meet their unique needs.

- Developing and delivering programs with a more holistic approach

- Linking minimum wage increases to Ontario's economic performance, labour market outcomes and earnings distribution so minimum wage can be used as an appropriate 'reference wage'

- Increasing the level of supports provided outside the social assistance system to assist OW and ODSP recipients in transitioning off assistance to employment (i.e. access to basic dental supports and prescription medication)

- Investing in collaboration opportunities that address the social determinants of health and the impact on young children and families in York Region

- Increasing income eligibility threshold for the Healthy Smiles Ontario program

- Consolidation of provincial children's oral health funding programs

- Creation of oral health funding assistance for adults in need of treatment such as essential emergency care, dentures and employment readiness

Questions 2:

The first strategy focused on children. Going forward, should there continue to be a specific focus? If so, who or what should be the focus?

In York Region, we are experiencing an increased need for services and programs that serve seniors and children. In addition, we are developing a broader range of service delivery options to meet accessibility requirements and the needs of newcomers to Canada.

A number of demographic, economic and social trends have contributed to a steady increase in demand for children services in York Region. The number of children living in low-income families continues to grow. Over the past decade, the number of one parent families experienced the highest growth rate of all family types in York Region, increasing by almost 74 per cent. The gap is widening around funding, particularly for fee assistance and services for children with special needs, and there are growing wait-lists for these services.

A key component of a poverty reduction strategy should include access to child care, early intervention and recreation programs and other children's services. Having access to universal and publicly funded child care programs supports the developmental skills and school readiness of children of all socio-economic circumstances, as well as providing parents the support they need to seek and keep employment or participate in skills training and upgrading.

A long-term poverty reduction strategy will also need to plan for an increasingly aging population. In York Region, the baby boomers (aged 45 to 64) are the fastest growing age group, and this group will exceed the number of children in the Region within the next 10 to 15 years. Key approaches to reducing seniors' poverty should be towards improving health benefits (i.e. affordable and accessible dental care), providing 100 per cent provincial subsidies for assistive devices, and funding to address the long wait times for affordable and supportive housing. The strategy should target programs and services helping to maintain seniors' health, well-being, safety and independence.

Local strategies meeting community needs, connecting people to supports and services and enhancing local networks and awareness of poverty issues are essential for a successful provincial poverty reduction strategy. In York Region, several local strategies have proven effective in allocating provincial and federal funding to improve outcomes for lower income populations (i.e. single parents, newcomers, those homeless or at risk of homelessness and children and youth). These include the Community Investment Strategy, Family Strengthening Programs, Homelessness Prevention Program, the Community Plan to Address Homelessness, the Making Ends Meet initiative and the Immigration Settlement Strategy. The Province should look toward funding local models of service delivery, including targeted supports to prevent poverty and enabling municipalities to find community-based solutions that meet their unique needs.

Question 3:

What is the most important thing the Government of Ontario can do to help reduce poverty? Is there an initiative that was implemented as part of the first Strategy that should be revisited?

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 15 per cent of the population in Canada is living in poverty – that is, struggling to pay rent, find decent employment and access nutritious and adequate food. The survey showed people living in the poorest neighbourhoods are disproportionately visible minorities, immigrants and single-parents and that women continue to earn less than men, even though they achieve higher levels of education. In York Region, low-income residents are experiencing a lack of affordable housing options, a relatively stagnant rental market and increasing housing prices. Most low-income residents working in York Region cannot afford to live in the Region.

York Region's housing market has the lowest percentage of rental housing in the GTA. In 2006, approximately, 11.7 per cent of the Region's residential units were rented which is well below the national average of 31.6 per cent, the provincial average of 29 per cent and lower than any other region in the GTA. As of October 2012, York Region's vacancy rate was the lowest in the GTA at 1.6 per cent, which is below the 3 per cent vacancy rate that indicates a healthy rental market where sufficient choice in the market prevents rents from increasing too quickly. A long-term poverty reduction strategy needs to increase housing choices for all ages and stages of a person's life; people need housing options in their communities. The Province needs to make changes to housing policy and funding that includes incentives for private sector development of rental housing.

Approaches to a successful poverty reduction strategy should also include sustained funding for social and affordable housing, housing stability programs and adequate shelter allowances for social assistance recipients. Social housing program rules are poorly integrated with other income support programs, which can create disincentives for lower-income residents to improve their circumstances. There is also a lack of support services to help vulnerable populations to live independently – social housing communities are particularly impacted when these supports are lacking for residents who have special needs.

Providing support for low-income workers and residents struggling to make ends meet is a critical element for poverty reduction. It helps people who are new to or re-entering the labour market to succeed when they find employment (i.e. post-employment retention supports). It also gives people, who are likely to remain in lower paid work, the additional resources they need to sustain themselves and their families and stay employed. More integrated policy and supports helping families transition to employment or post-secondary education can be a route out of poverty. A successful poverty reduction strategy should provide small and medium size employers with an understanding of the obstacles they may face in attracting and retaining labour, help raise awareness of the hidden labour market, support job development and placement.

For some Ontario Works clients, the transition to employment is complicated by significant social and personal barriers. If not addressed through sustained and intensive supports, this leads

to social isolation and long-term unemployment. An effective approach is providing social assistance services to higher need clients, including singles and families, to help negotiate program silos when accessing supports and to build capacity toward employment. Currently, Municipal Service Managers are not funded by the Province sufficiently to sustain these supports. Other clients living in poverty face the loss of critical supports and social benefits as they try to exit social assistance, such as families who receive rent-geared-to-income housing, child care fee assistance and student loans.

There are significant health inequities among low-income families; families living in poverty generally lack access to affordable, timely health care. A poverty reduction strategy should support health benefits such as programs for early mental health identification and supports, investing in oral health funding for emergency care, dentures and healthy baby programs.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy should build on the successes of the first strategy and continue to put resources into the Ontario Child Benefit, affordable and social housing investments, increasing income eligibility threshold for the Healthy Smiles Ontario program and other health initiatives. In addition, the Province should consider recommendations raised by the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario to improve the system including income adequacy and employment supports for social assistance recipients, as well as broader supports to low-income residents regardless of their income.

Question 4:

How can all levels of government, community groups, the private sector, and other stakeholders work together to better address the barriers that keep people from getting out of poverty (e.g. access to employment, education, child care, supports)?

Co-ordinating all levels of government, community groups, the private sector and stakeholders is crucial especially where investments are required. The government should promote human services integration so that information is shared between ministries, service managers and programs. In York Region, some collaborative partnerships have developed over time in attempts to better serve clients. However, low-income residents and residents at risk of falling into long-term poverty would benefit more from a co-ordinated systems approach that is people-centred and provides stability, housing options, employment, family and health supports.

An example of how all levels of government, community groups and other stakeholders can work together to better address the barriers faced by a marginalized group is the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP). LIP is an initiative of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and was established to use a local approach to immigration settlement and integration. LIPs collaborate with a wide variety of local stakeholders to bring about awareness of the immigration integration process, support community-level research, improve labour market outcome and increase co-ordination of effective services. There are 35 LIPs across Ontario. Many of the LIPs, including York Region, have identified economic integration of newcomers as a strategic priority in their work plans. These partnerships can be leveraged to address poverty and economic integration in newcomer communities.

Other effective approaches at working together include investing in physical or virtual Community Hubs to serve low-income neighbourhoods. The Community Hub model should include a range of community partners that identify and provide social, community and educational supports. This helps ensure programs are more accessible by those 'hard to serve'. For example, it could utilize the enhanced 18-month well-baby visit and other critical early childhood development milestones including immunization provision, to establish an ongoing relationship with children and families visiting the Community Hubs in low-income neighbourhoods.

Affordable transit is another key component of a long-term poverty reduction strategy and one that requires a coordinated approach. Affordable transit is essential to the health of people living on low income, it gives them access to employment, education, health services, food and child care. In York Region the basic needs allowance does not adequately address the cost of living, in response the Region introduced additional supports to assist clients with making ends meet through the Transit Fare Subsidy Program. The program consists of a partnership between the Region, YRT/Viva, the provincial Ontario Disability Support Program office, Ontario Works, local municipalities and community agencies. It focuses on helping Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program clients with transit costs related to employment for those who do not receive existing supports. Although access to affordable transit is only one factor in helping clients maintain employment, the Transit Fare Subsidy Program fills an ever growing gap and is

an example of an 'out of the box' approach at addressing barriers that keep people from getting out of poverty.

Existing partnerships and collaborations with municipal sector and municipal associations, such as Association of Municipalities Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, the Housing Services Corporation and the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association are critical for policy development and program support. Local municipalities in Ontario play an important role as convenors of community roundtables or as part of advocacy initiatives. They also promote the social inclusion of people living in poverty through recreation, library and cultural services provided to all residents.

Question 5:

When it comes to reducing poverty in Ontario, what would success look like in 15 years from now?

York Region has experienced a rise in low and moderate-income residents, one parent families and precarious employment, increasing Ontario Works case loads and rising housing prices. A growing number of individuals are struggling to make ends meet. There is also an influx of immigrants settling directly in the Region who find it hard to find jobs commensurate with their skills. It has become a challenge for the social infrastructure to keep pace.

A successful strategy that reduces poverty would include:

- Consistent provincial funding for community-based agencies providing services to low- and moderate-income residents. Funding amounts from the Province have not increased to keep pace with population growth and changing population demographics. As a result, agencies have long wait-lists and face financial pressures, core funding for programs would help agencies.
- Investments in affordable housing, including rental options, so low and moderate-income residents would have housing options through all stages of life
- Performance indicators for each community based on existing health indicators and social return on investment research
- A social assistance system that includes integrating local services and a simplified benefit structure. The system would remove disability, children's and health benefits from social assistance and make them available entirely outside the system to all low-income Ontarians. Providing these benefits to all low-income individuals and families would eliminate structural barriers for people trying to exit social assistance for work.
- A disability benefit outside social assistance would be introduced as a priority to help combat the high level of unemployment among people with disabilities and to improve the financial incentive to work. This would recognize there can be additional costs of living with a disability and employment opportunities and earnings may be constrained for people with disabilities.
- A tax and income transfer system that integrates benefits and tax transfers, lowers administrative costs and improves incentives for employment through lower marginal effective tax rates
- Initiatives and supports to assist internationally educated professionals in moving to employment in their sector or a related sector (e.g. mentoring, volunteering, job shadowing)
- A decline in the Region's unemployment rate and an increase in the overall number of earners in the municipality
- Reduced social assistance caseload
- A 10 per cent decrease in the number of families financially eligible for income dependent oral health program
- A decline in the number of families with 'Financial Stability', 'Housing', and/or 'Employment' as identified goals within the Healthy Babies Healthy Children Program (reduced need for support in these areas)