

# – Solutions Start with Us – Voices of Low-Income People in Ontario



Photo by James Master, The Sun Times

**A report from the “Ending Poverty Project” led by  
Campaign 2000 and the Income Security Advocacy Centre**

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END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY IN CANADA

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## Introduction

In early 2008, in response to the Ontario Government's announcement that it would develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy by year's end, the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) and Campaign 2000 embarked on a two-year project that in just one year has already changed the discussion around poverty reduction.

In early spring, just as the Provincial Government's Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction began holding consultations across the province, ISAC and Campaign 2000 partnered with legal clinics, community agencies and organizations in Toronto and across the province to ensure the voices of low-income people were included in the consultations and that low-income people would continue being supported to work actively on ending poverty in their communities. [See Appendix II for a list of project partners].

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, the Ontario Government announced its long-awaited and much-anticipated poverty reduction strategy. In the strategy, the government commits to reduce child poverty by 25% within the next five years and publicly report on its progress. Concrete initiatives included the creation of a Community Opportunities Fund to support local communities who have ideas on reducing poverty, additional funding for the Youth Opportunities Strategy to give kids in priority neighbourhoods more access to jobs and training, sustained funding for the Provincial Rent Bank Program to help people facing eviction, and new legislation to regulate temp agencies and hire more investigators to enforce employment standards. The Government also committed to a review of welfare and disability programs to reduce the many barriers people face and build in more opportunities for moving from social assistance into the workforce.

The strategy marks a pivotal moment in the discussion around poverty. In releasing the strategy, the Ontario Government has recognized that tackling poverty is complex and requires a plan. For the first time, it sets a target and establishes a timeline for getting there. Just as significantly, it outlines a role for governments and takes some responsibility for the increasing poverty evident in Ontario, instead of blaming people themselves.

What it lacks is a lot of specifics on how it will meet its goals of reducing child poverty within five years and how much money it will invest. It also doesn't address how it will reduce poverty for people without children and communities disproportionately likely to be living in poverty, like people with disabilities, single moms, Aboriginal people, racialized communities, and new immigrants. This is where we see our project making a difference.

Our partnership with people living in poverty is what makes this project unique. Between May and September, 2008, ISAC and Campaign 2000 met with 290 low-income people in Windsor, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste Marie and Owen Sound as well as women in Rexdale, Scarborough youth, Somali and South Asian families in Scarborough, people with disabilities, and Aboriginal youth and families living in Toronto. [See Appendix III for more information about project goals and methodology.]

Rather than asking people to share their stories and then leave it to policy think tanks and governments to figure out what to do, we asked people to share their ideas for ending poverty, decide what changes were needed most in their communities, and work with us and local

organizations and groups to push for action from all levels of government and from their local communities.

This report looks at the first year of our project. In it we share the experiences and ideas we heard from low-income people across the province, framed in the context of broader discussions happening at policy tables across the province, and offer our collective reflections on the direction we all need to move in to build – and deliver - an effective poverty reduction strategy in Ontario.

It is the beginning of a discussion we plan to continue having with people living in poverty and urge others to join us. Whether you are a politician, a teacher, a faith leader, an employer, a frontline worker, a policy analyst, a court worker, a journalist, a civil servant – whoever you are – we hope that something in this report will touch you as it did us, make you think about how you can help, and spur you to get involved in ending poverty in your community, together with low-income people.

## **Report Highlights**

*This report identifies several key themes that emerged in ISAC and Campaign 2000's discussions with low-income people across Ontario. The following are highlights of what we heard and are expanded upon more fully later in the report:*

### **Act Now with Real Change**

The Ontario Government's announcement of a Poverty Reduction Strategy is a milestone in Ontario's history but we need tangible change now, not years down the road. Announcing a poverty reduction plan but putting little money into it or putting off changes and programs years into the future won't measure up for low-income people. People living in poverty told us that they will judge the Poverty Reduction Strategy for the impact it has on their lives, whether they have children or are single, live in a city or a small town, are on social assistance or working, are youth, seniors, men, women, Aboriginal people, people of colour, newcomers or people with disabilities.

### **Money Matters**

Whether people were working, unemployed or on disability, we heard loud and clear that low-income people can't afford to wait any longer. For people living in poverty, having more money is an obvious component of any successful poverty reduction strategy. What mattered most to the people we talked to was not how it happens but "How much?", "How Soon?" and "For whom?"

### **Jobs, Jobs, Jobs**

Full-time jobs at livable wages, with benefits and job security need to be a key component of any poverty reduction strategy. Low-income people told us that tackling racism and discrimination in the workplace and reducing barriers to the labour market, particularly for people of colour, Aboriginal people, newcomers, people with disabilities, youth and single parents also need to be part of any jobs strategy.

### **Education and Training Open Doors**

Finishing high school and being able to access additional education and training was seen as an important strategy in reducing poverty. Youth, people with disabilities, unemployed workers and newcomers suggested that education and training opportunities had to be individualized to address the different barriers people faced in their lives and the kind of work they hoped to get following their course. Having the flexibility and support to complete schooling or training was also mentioned often.

### **Transform Social Assistance**

Social assistance isn't working for either people who are unemployed or for people with disabilities. Those on Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program told us that they were demoralized by the dizzying number of punitive rules that pushed them deeper into poverty, rather than helping them get ahead. They suggested that both programs need to be transformed so that they are more supportive and individualized to assist people in overcoming the different barriers they face in their lives.

## **Invest in Children**

Parents talked proudly about their children but wished they could afford to do more to help them grow and thrive. Single moms, in particular, talked about how difficult it is to work if you can't find affordable child care. They said they relied on governments benefits like the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the Ontario Child Benefit but still struggled to afford "extras" like after-school programs and summer camps, if they were even available in their communities. They wanted more daycare spots and daycare subsidies, increases to government child benefits, more after-school and early-learning programs, and more recreational opportunities for their kids.

## **Don't Forget Transportation**

Transportation is incredibly important to people living in poverty, whether it is for appointments, work, school, groceries, laundry or visiting family and friends. In the city, people suggested expanding public transportation, improving around-the-clock service for shift workers and reducing the cost of bus passes. In rural areas, people felt that eliminating bus fares during off-peak hours and assisting municipalities to set-up car pools or volunteer drivers would work better. People with disabilities felt that making public transportation more accessible needed to be a bigger priority and happen much more quickly.

## **Homes, not just Housing**

Government help in dealing with the high cost of rents and utilities was considered crucial. But having a home – and not just housing – was also important to the people we talked to. Being able to feel warm and safe in their homes and their communities came up often in our discussions. People felt governments need to invest in building more affordable and supportive housing, repairing subsidized housing, funding rent subsidies and addressing overcrowded shelters.

## **Poverty makes you Sick.**

People living in poverty were acutely aware that their diets weren't, for the most part, very healthy and could lead to serious health problems. Many were already dealing with health problems and worried that their diets were literally killing them because they couldn't afford to eat better, or eat at all. They suggested that community gardens, local food co-ops, community kitchens and children's breakfast programs are all ways local communities could help. More government assistance with drug costs, medical supports and supplies, addictions treatment programs, and access to chiropractic and naturopathic health care was also considered important. In rural areas, the biggest issue was the lack of family doctors and the long wait time to see specialists.

## **Recognizing Diversity and Taking Action**

People with disabilities, Aboriginal people, youth, single moms and people of colour are much more likely to be living in poverty. While they share many of the same barriers as other people living in poverty, they also face racism and numerous stereotypes, both in the workforce and in broader society. In its poverty reduction strategy, the Ontario Government needs to address inequality by developing targeted programs aimed at marginalized groups, along with specific anti-poverty targets and timelines that measure who has benefited and who has not.

## **Nothing About Us, Without Us**

Don't leave low-income people out of the conversation. That was the message we heard. People living in poverty want to be part of the solution. They want to be involved, not just consulted. They want a voice that's heard and respected. They want to share their ideas and contribute their passion, creativity and many skills to ending poverty.

## **It starts with a dream...**

Poverty is a complex issue that will require many different solutions. As we begin to put our heads together, to talk ideas, hammer out solutions, consider longer term initiatives and first steps, it will be important to think about not only reducing poverty but the kind of society we would all like. Ending poverty is about much more than money. It is about dreams, hope and opportunity. We asked low-income people to tell us what their lives would be like if they were no longer living in poverty. Some of their dreams are painfully modest. Others we might all hold for ourselves and our families. Their answers provided us with a stark picture of the costs of poverty and a vision of the future, of the kind of society we could be, if we seized the opportunity before us to significantly reduce poverty.

*I would have a place in society and be valued.  
I would have access, choice, and opportunity.  
I would be able to have a partner, a relationship.  
I would not be judged because of my situation.  
I would live without fear or worry.*

*I would have a permanent job with benefits.  
I would have a job in my field, like I did at home.  
I would own my own business.  
I would not have any debts. I would have savings.  
I would pay off my parents' debts.*

*Everyone would have enough to eat – no one would go hungry.  
We would live in attractive buildings that don't look like Toronto Community Housing.  
I would have a safe, affordable place to live for me and my child.  
I would have my own bedroom.  
There would be grocery stores nearby.  
I would buy my mom a house.*

*I wouldn't have to worry about how my kids are being taken care of.  
Children would be happy, have confidence and succeed.  
There would be a creative art space for youth.  
There would be safe, affordable child care in my community.  
I could afford university for all members of my family.*

*People with learning disabilities would have the opportunity to learn in their own way.  
I would have my own accessible vehicle.  
An end to violence and discrimination against people with disabilities, seniors and women.  
Equality for Aboriginal People – to be treated as equal to the person behind the desk.  
Women's equality – we'd be on equal scale with men.*

*I could take a vacation.  
I could visit my mother in Sault Ste Marie.  
I could afford a hobby.  
I could afford for my son to play hockey.*

## Act Now with Real Change

When the provincial government announced its poverty reduction strategy on Dec. 4th, with a target, real timelines and concrete measures, it felt like a big step forward for Campaign 2000 and ISAC, who had been pushing for a commitment for a very long time. There wasn't the same optimism in a lot of the workshops we held.

People told us bluntly that when you've struggled to pay your rent for years and stared into an empty fridge too many times to remember, your faith in governments drops pretty low. They told us that they will judge the plan for the impact it has on their lives, whether they have children or are single, live in a city or a small town, are on social assistance or working, are youth, seniors, men, women, Aboriginal people, newcomers or people with disabilities.

Do they think it's all up to government? No. The people we talked to thought there were lots of ways individuals and communities could work together to end poverty. In fact, since the project began some of the people we talked to are already part of local poverty reduction roundtables and events that have been organized in their communities. But they can't do it alone. We need all levels of government at the table.

***“We need government to play their role addressing poverty, so that communities and individuals can then take steps to decrease poverty”***

**-- Participant at Rexdale workshop with women**

## Money Matters

***“Poverty is... too much month at the end of the money”***

**- Participant at Thunder Bay workshop**

That’s the response we got in one of the first workshops we held, in Thunder Bay, when we asked people to share their experiences of poverty. In every one of the 10 workshops we held, money – or the lack of it - came up over and over again.

A senior in Ottawa talked about how little money she lives on.

***“After paying my rent I can’t afford my medications sometimes”***

**-- Participant at Ottawa workshop**

In Toronto, a woman who uses a scooter and has a personal support worker to assist her in her daily life talked passionately about struggling to pay rent, eat and get the supports she needs on only \$999 a month, the amount she gets on her disability allowance. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s Spring 2008 Ontario Rental Market Report, the average rent for a bachelor apartment in Toronto is \$752 leaving little left over for eating nutritiously, getting to medical appointments or purchasing other necessities.

People on welfare struggled on even less. Single people on Ontario Works wondered out loud how they were supposed to be able to get back on their feet with just \$560 per month.

***“If you’re single on social assistance, you only get \$560. You have to pay the bills. Rent takes \$500 leaving \$60. How are you going to get ahead?”***

**-- Participant at Toronto workshop with youth**

One mom in Sault Ste. Marie talked about trying to raise her daughter on the \$904 she gets a month from her welfare cheque. She has to avoid needles outside the front door of her building every day but can’t afford to move. Another mom wondered why the provincial government would clawback her child support off of her welfare cheque.

Even working full-time was no guarantee out of poverty. In Owen Sound, a young mom talked about how difficult it is to take maternity leave when you work a minimum wage job at \$8.75 per hour and only get 55 per cent of your wages while you’re struggling to raise a newborn. She pointed out that she was living in poverty when she worked full-time, let alone on Employment Insurance.

Whether people were working or on social assistance, having more money seemed obvious to them as an essential component of any poverty reduction strategy. With the rising cost of rent, utilities and staples like rice, oil and milk, compared with how little social assistance rates and

the minimum wage had increased in the last decade, people were finding it tougher and tougher to survive. We could hear the stress and urgency in their voices.

Government promises to increase the minimum wage are not moving fast enough for the people we talked to. The minimum wage is currently \$8.75/hour and is scheduled to increase gradually to \$10.25 by 2010. At those rates, even in 2010, someone working 35 hours a week would only make \$15,925 before taxes, leaving them \$3011 below the current poverty line. It doesn't make sense to the people who attended our workshops, especially with governments promoting jobs as the key to ending poverty.

They wanted to see the minimum wage increased to \$10/hour immediately and then adjusted annually to the cost of living. They also had a number of other interesting and creative suggestions:

- Increasing Employment Insurance and making it easier for more workers to qualify
- Increasing Workers Safety Insurance Board (WSIB) benefits
- Increasing government pension benefits for seniors
- Making it easier for anyone to open a bank account so they don't have to rely on cheque cashing businesses with high fees
- Getting rid of service charges to withdraw money and cash cheques
- Overhauling pay day loan company practices and insurance companies that prey on people's desperation and charge exorbitant interest rates
- Lowering income taxes and GST for the poor and raising taxes on corporations
- Lowering taxes for necessities like utilities and toiletries
- Allowing children to receive the Canada Child Tax Benefit up to age 21
- Increasing child benefits

They also passionately called for increases to social assistance rates. In the past, politicians have argued that there is no public support for increasing welfare (Ontario Works) and disability (Ontario Disability Support Program) rates, despite the fact recipients are living thousands of dollars below the poverty line. The amount of money people get on OW now is the same as it was in 1988, and that doesn't even take inflation into account. Disability rates were frozen for 10 years and then increased by 9 per cent over the last four years – barely enough to account for the rising cost of living let alone make up the ground lost over the last decade.

***“People have to realize that not everyone can work. My disability is invisible but I can't hold down a job because of it. Don't I deserve to live a decent life?”***

**-- Participant at Ottawa workshop**

Campaign 2000 and ISAC heard loud and clear that money matters. We were surprised that it didn't matter much to them how they got more money. What mattered was “How much?”, “How soon?” and “For whom?” It's an important distinction that we have taken to heart.

The Income Security Advocacy Centre, for example, is very involved in efforts to reform social assistance and are currently exploring ways of getting more money to people on OW and ODSP. Hearing from low-income people across the province helped us realize that we

don't need to focus on only one strategy but should pursue a range of possibilities. As a first step, we have suggested that rates should be tied to the cost of living in the next provincial budget and social assistance and disability rules should be revised so recipients can keep more of their savings and earnings if they have work, even if it is only a few hours a week.

Over the longer term, we have begun calling for a complete transformation of social assistance to a program that alleviates poverty, rather than being purposely inadequate as an incentive to get people into the workforce. Taking our cue from the low-income people we talked to, we are asking the provincial government to increase people's incomes so that they can meet their basic needs, regardless of where they live. We are pursuing the idea of an independent Social Assistance Rate Board that could define "adequacy" using rational criteria and then recommend what rates should be to achieve it. But we are also looking at other options, such as a new housing allowance that would go to all low-income people, whether they are on social assistance or working, to help people afford market rents.

Having listened to people living in poverty, we have realized that, in this case, the path forward isn't as important as the end result. Whether money flows through social assistance rates, better wages, a new housing allowance or the Ontario Child Benefit isn't as important to people living in poverty. It's the amount that matters, how soon before they will get the money and whether they will be eligible under any new programs or benefits that are announced.

Whether people were working, on welfare, or on disability, they told us they can't wait anymore. For a poverty reduction strategy to have any legitimacy in their eyes, they made it clear that they are going to have to see some tangible changes in the short-term, not years down the road. What matters at the end of the day is whether people have more money in their pocket.

## **Jobs, jobs, jobs**

Everyone wants a job – a full-time job that pays well and has good benefits. Only problem is that those jobs are getting harder to find, and the situation is only likely to worsen as layoffs continue in Ontario’s manufacturing sector and the province slides toward a recession.

In Windsor, the participants we talked to were concerned about the layoffs in the auto industry and the spiraling effect that would have on local businesses. People were frustrated and angry that companies could get taxpayer dollars to create jobs and then just close their doors or pick-up and move off-shore to countries where environmental regulations are much more lax and workers rights aren’t protected. In Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay, participants talked about the effect of living in one-industry towns where layoffs happen regularly according to the prices of goods on the world market.

***“The reality is that it can hit anybody. I have friends who are losing their homes and filing for bankruptcy... they never thought it could happen to them.”***

**- Participant at Windsor workshop**

In Rexdale and Scarborough, where many of the participants were women of colour and newcomers, underemployment was a huge issue. Many of the women had degrees from their countries of origin but hadn’t been able to find work in their field here. Several worked casual or part-time shifts in factories or retail or babysat in their homes.

***“Canadian companies won’t give me a chance of a job because I don’t have Canadian work experience.”***

**-- Participant at Rexdale workshop with women**

One woman in Scarborough had lived in Canada for several years and had only ever been able to find temporary contracts. Everyone in the room nodded in agreement as she talked about how difficult it is to live when you’re only making minimum wage and going from one temporary job to another. If anything happens, you have no savings to fall back on. One woman in Rexdale experienced that first hand. She broke down in tears as she recounted what happened when her husband was injured in the factory where he worked. After using up his sick time and short-term disability, he still wasn’t well enough to work and they were struggling to pay their bills.

The experiences of Aboriginal youth and youth in Scarborough were different but just as troubling. Youth as young as 12 talked about wanting to get a part-time job to help out their moms. The older youth talked about the racism and stereotypes they came up against because of the addresses on their resumes or the colour of their skin.

***“You apply for some jobs and they don’t give it to you because you’re living in community housing”***

**-- Participant at Toronto workshop with youth**

***“Racial profiling – they ask what your background is. You know you’re not going to get that job.”***

**-- Aboriginal youth participant**

In the workshop we held with people with disabilities, yet another perspective arose. Many of the people who attended were receiving disability (Ontario Disability Support Program). The frustration in the room was palpable as they talked about trying to access employment supports to help them get jobs, being offered only low-wage jobs and, if they did manage to get work, losing half of every dollar they made because the provincial government claws it off of their disability cheque. Some explained that, because of the nature of their disability or the fact that most employers would never accommodate their needs, working simply wasn’t a reality for them.

***“My brother cannot even imagine people living in poverty, even though he has a sister with a disability who lives way below the poverty line. He makes \$30/hour. If you make good money, you just cannot understand why other people cannot do the same”.***

**-- Participant at Toronto workshop with people with disabilities**

Clearly full-time jobs at livable wages, with benefits and job security need to be a key component of any poverty reduction strategy. People we talked to called for an immediate \$10 minimum wage, changes to Employment Insurance so more people qualify, changes to provincial employment standards, which currently provide little protection to temp workers, and access to better educational and training opportunities so people can move from dead-end jobs to good jobs.

Equally important to them was addressing the racism and discrimination that they face when they look for work. Considerable research has shown that people of colour, Aboriginal people, newcomers, people with disabilities, youth and single moms are all more likely to be living in poverty than others and more likely to be in precarious work. Newcomers wanted employers to recognize their international credentials and work experience instead of requiring them to get retraining in Canada or get Canadian work experience. Often the only way of getting that is volunteering, which many new immigrants can’t afford to do. Participants in Rexdale, where a new retail/entertainment development is underway, wanted to ensure local people got the jobs. Women wanted pay equity, so that they make the same wages as men doing the same or equivalent jobs. And people with disabilities wanted access to employment supports that could help them get jobs suited to their skills and interests, rather than minimum wage jobs. They also wanted employers to do more to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities and ensure that workplaces are fully accessible.

## Education and Training

Research and innovation, lifelong learning, investing in people; they may be buzzwords but they reflect a growing consensus that education and training are key not only to ending poverty but to building a sound economy that will carry Ontario into the future.

Many of the Aboriginal youth we talked to weren't in school or were struggling to pass. One young man was staying in a shelter. In Scarborough, a 12-year-old girl talked about wanting a job so she could help out her mom. Older youth talked about not being able to afford to go to college or university without taking out huge student loans and how afraid they were of not being able to get out of debt.

***“If you can't afford school, you have to take out OSAP. Then you graduate and can't find work. So now you're in debt and owing interest too.”***

**-- Participant at youth workshop in Scarborough**

Participants in the Aboriginal workshop also felt it was important to point out that university isn't free for Aboriginal students, as is commonly thought. Native band councils have limited funding to subsidize college and university tuitions and priority goes to those living on First Nations. There's no guarantee students will be funded through their entire academic program or if they want to pursue a Masters or PhD. Many Aboriginal students also find the transition from their tiny communities to high school, college or university in the city very isolating and foreign, increasing the chances they will drop out.

Both of the youth workshops we held were centred around youth programs, one through Toronto Community Housing Corporation and the other through Native Child and Family Services. Mentoring was at the heart of both programs, where staff and older youth were role models for younger youth, and keeping kids in school – or getting them back in school – was a key goal. They felt that programs like this, as well as the elimination of school fees, more after school programs, education and training programs in youth shelters and youth detention centres, recreation programming, high school programs for mature students, post-secondary scholarships, bursaries and grants, lower tuition, lower interest rates on OSAP loans, and more flexibility in paying them back, would help more kids from low-income families get the kind of education and training needed to get a better job.

People with disabilities also felt that targeted measures would help them overcome the barriers they face in accessing post-secondary education and training programs.

***“I was told (by my ODSP worker) that if I had marks high enough to get an educational scholarship then I was likely not disabled enough to need ODSP.”***

**- Participant at Toronto workshop for people with disabilities**

The 2001 Census reported that only 38.3 percent of men with disabilities and 24.8 per cent of women with disabilities in Ontario work full-time, full-year. 244,000 people with disabilities in Ontario currently rely on the Ontario Disability Support Program for income support. Many of the people who attended our workshops were on ODSP and either were not working or working very little, despite their desire to be in the labour market. With half of every dollar they make clawed back off their ODSP cheque every month, some felt it wasn't worth working, especially with the additional toll it takes on their health. They also felt the employment programs they were able to access through ODSP were very limited in scope and mostly aimed at helping people get low-wage jobs. Some suggested workplace mentoring and job placements in the fields where they want to work - and have the education and training to do - would be more helpful. They also felt that governments needed to do more to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities and make their workplaces more accessible. They suggested that people with disabilities should be hired to do these presentations and work with employers.

People on Ontario Works also felt more individualized support and access to better educational and training opportunities would help. Under OW, recipients must be actively searching for work, volunteering, improving their education or engaged in training or risk losing their benefits. As a result, OW recipients felt they had to take the first available job they were offered, even if it only paid minimum wage and wouldn't put them any further ahead. They wanted access to the training programs offered through Employment Insurance (EI), where recipients can get funding for post-secondary programs and retraining in careers that pay better. They also felt that if eligibility rules for EI were loosened, they might not have to rely on social assistance at all next time they were laid off. The rules are currently so restrictive that, according to the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, only 29 per cent of unemployed Ontario workers receive EI.

Newcomers to Canada, especially landed immigrants, were frustrated by employers' demands for Canadian training and work experience. They were encouraged by recent government funding to help foreign trained professionals get work in their field. They felt job placements and mentoring would also help them find better paying jobs.

ISAC and Campaign 2000 were excited by the range of possibilities to pursue to help people living in poverty find good paying jobs they could support themselves on. We thought immediately of the \$1.2 billion in new funding that the federal government is flowing to Ontario to assist unemployed workers who are not eligible for EI. The funding is being administered through a Labour Market Agreement being coordinated by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) and will be an opportunity to address some of the problems low-income people experience in the current system.

Based on what we heard in our discussions with people living in poverty, ISAC will be urging the Provincial Government to ensure that people on OW and ODSP and unemployed workers who don't qualify for EI have access to the same individualized and comprehensive training, education and employment supports, while ensuring that vulnerable recipients of social assistance are provided with the supports they need to access those services.

## Transform Social Assistance

With the exception of landed immigrants, who tended to be working in low-wage jobs and some of the youth, who were in school, the majority of people who attended our workshops were on social assistance. Over and over again, we heard how OW and ODSP beat people down. Anne Onesi of Owen Sound showed us a cartoon she had drawn. It sums up how many of the people we talked to felt about being on welfare or disability.



People on OW told us that they are allowed to save very little money. So if they manage to find a job, in the event of a layoff, they will have very few savings to fall back on and will likely end up on social assistance again. Similarly, a young mom told us that when she went on OW she was pressured to go to court for child support. If she wins, her daughter won't see a cent. Every dollar she receives in child support will be clawed back from her cheque.

***“Why does the government deduct child support from my social assistance cheque? It’s not fair to me or my kids.”***

**-- Participant at Toronto workshop for Aboriginal People**

People on ODSP shared similar stories. Some recounted how difficult it was to get on ODSP. Many found the application process confusing and had difficulty getting all of the medical information completed and submitted on time. While people on ODSP are not required to look for work, many said they would like to, even if they only have the strength to work a few hours a week, so they can earn a little extra money and socialize with co-workers. ODSP claws back half of every dollar they make. One woman on ODSP told us that when her two children turned

18, she stopped getting any money for them, even though they were in school and couldn't afford a place of their own.

***“In the Aboriginal community your child is your child forever and we stay living together as families. Yet the government thinks when your child is 18 you should kick them out.”***

**-- Participant at Toronto workshop for Aboriginal People**

As an Aboriginal woman, it didn't make sense to her. As a policy, we don't see how it would encourage any kids to stay in college or university.

OW and ODSP recipients also said that many of the workers they have had over the years weren't interested in what they were going through and offered few supports and resources. Because of the way the programs are set up, workers had little time to spend with them and instead had to focus on collecting proof of their identification, notes from their doctors, receipts for childcare, employment stubs – endless documentation that had to be provided or people would be cut off.

***“Agencies need to be properly trained and respectful of the people receiving these services... We are human beings and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity”***

**--Participant at Sault Ste Marie workshop**

People said being on social assistance made them feel humiliated, angry and frustrated. They felt the program would be much more effective if it focused on supporting them to overcome the barriers and challenges in their lives. In the case of OW, recipients simply wanted the kinds of individualized supports that are outlined in this report, to help them get back on their feet. They suggested that even being able to pick-up pamphlets in the waiting room that outlined various benefits and programs would help.

People with disabilities wanted the ODSP program to be more responsive to the nature of their disabilities and the barriers they face in the labour market and the community. If they found work and left ODSP, they wanted to know they wouldn't have to reapply if they were laid off or had to leave because of their health. They also wanted to live with dignity, even if they couldn't work.

***“I hear all the time that people on welfare are lazy. I'm on disability for a reason – I can't work full time.”***

**--Participant at Sault Ste Marie workshop**

When Ontario Works was introduced in 1998, it was meant to be a program of last resort that people would be on for only a short amount of time while they found work. Rates were cut by 22% and intended to be inadequate. As we heard from the people we talked to, recipients are subjected to a dizzying array of punitive rules and policies, all designed to move people off as quickly as possible. ODSP was created in 1998 to provide long-term income support and

services to people with disabilities. It too was deliberately designed to make it difficult to access and recipients are subjected to many of the same punitive monitoring, rules and policies that OW recipients are.

Our discussions with people on social assistance confirmed what ISAC and Campaign 2000 had heard from community agencies and legal clinics in our networks. OW and ODSP are products of an outdated approach to income security that deepens people's poverty rather than alleviates it. After hearing people's frustrating experiences of OW and ODSP, we knew, more than ever, that it was time for a paradigm shift in how governments approach social assistance. With the government's announcement that it intends to review social assistance, ISAC will be pushing for OW and ODSP programs to be renamed and redesigned around an explicit objective of moving people out of poverty by offering meaningful supports for those who can work and ensuring that those who cannot are able to live with dignity.

## **Invest in children – our future depends on it**

With rising school fees, back-to-school expenses, summer camp and new clothes, raising children takes money. The parents we talked to all had high hopes for their children but felt as if they were raising them on their own, with little support from any level of government.

The parents we talked to wished they could do more for their children. They said that government benefits like the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the Universal Child Care Allowance, the National Child Benefit Supplement and the Ontario Child Benefit weren't enough to help them ensure their children had what they needed to grow and thrive, given how little they received from social assistance or earned with low wages.

***“On hot dog day at the school, half the children don't get any. I see it. It only costs \$1 but it is hard for people”.***

**-- Participant at Scarborough workshop**

Parents felt that government benefits needed to increase and be adjusted annually for inflation. And moms and youth wanted more community supports too, like after-school programs, family drop-in centres and parenting support programs. Free summer camps, recreation centres, free after-school access to school gymnasiums, public parks and playgrounds were also important. The women we talked to in Rexdale, for instance, mentioned how few parks there were and how much they would like a park where there was playground equipment for young kids and open spaces for cricket games and football (soccer) so the whole family could spend the day.

They also recalled talk of a national child care program. The lack of safe, affordable, good quality child care ranked near the top of concerns for many of the women we talked to in our workshops and was one of the biggest barriers they faced in getting work. Whether in Thunder Bay, Ottawa, Sault Ste Marie, Windsor, Owen Sound or Toronto, finding child care was difficult, especially for parents who worked evenings or shift work.

***“Many jobs are shift work but there's no access to 24-hour child care.”***

**-- Participant at Sault Ste. Marie workshop**

Finding affordable child care was even more difficult. The single moms we talked to on welfare felt they didn't have many options. There were long waiting lists for subsidized child care. They couldn't afford to pay the full cost of child care on a minimum wage job, and those were the only jobs they could find.

***“When you have children and you go to work, you have to pay for child care. It is very expensive. And it is a long wait time (for child care subsidies) - one to three years you wait.”***

**-- Participant at Scarborough workshop**

Newcomers were stuck in similar situations. Refugees, like many of the Somali women we talked to in Scarborough using an interpreter, had several young children and didn't speak English. Without affordable child care and access to English courses, literacy training and job training, they were left in deep poverty. In Rexdale, many of the newcomers were landed immigrants and most had post-secondary degrees and training from their countries of origin. But the majority of them were working in low-paying, part-time and casual work because they couldn't get the Canadian work experience they needed to get better paying jobs in their fields. They had been willing to volunteer, but couldn't get subsidized child care unless they were working. So they took low-paying jobs to pay the bills. Or they stayed home, feeling frustrated and isolated, while their husbands worked – sometimes two or three part-time jobs – most at low wages.

The parents we talked to felt that increasing the number of available child care spaces and subsidies would go a long way toward reducing poverty among families, particularly for single moms. Being able to find child care for evening and overnight shifts and being able to access subsidized child care for volunteering would also help.

Ontario needs a national child care strategy that would provide good quality, affordable child care for all women who need and want to work to get out of poverty. An investment in children is an investment that benefits us all.

## **Don't forget Transportation...**

Getting around from one place to another when you're poor is incredibly complicated, exhausting and expensive. ISAC and Campaign 2000 found that out when we held our workshops. In Toronto, we gave out bus tokens so people could afford to come. In Owen Sound, people living in the country had to car pool or get a taxi chit to get to the church where the workshop was held because there is no public transportation between Owen Sound and the surrounding counties. In Rexdale, where there are buses, some participants were late because service is irregular in their neighbourhoods. The opposite happened in our workshops with people with disabilities. Some people in wheelchairs arrived an hour beforehand because that's when they could get WheelTrans, their only option since many subway stations and buses aren't accessible.

Before the workshops even began it was clear to us that transportation was a big issue for people living in poverty. Their stories confirmed it. In Toronto, participants talked about the impact of recent increases in bus fares.

***“TTC fares keep increasing. It is \$109 for a bus pass. If I spend \$400 for bus passes for me and my children, there is not much money left.”***  
**--Participant at Scarborough workshop**

In Owen Sound, bus service was only every half-hour and ended at 5:30 pm on weekdays, didn't start till 10 am on Saturdays and didn't run at all on Sundays. People who did have cars – a real necessity if you live in the country – worried how they were going to afford rising gas prices, insurance costs and repairs. Otherwise, their only option was to rely on family or friends or take taxis they couldn't afford to run errands or get to doctors' appointments.

People with disabilities faced an even more uphill battle. In rural areas, people with physical disabilities depend on families and friends - and taxis - to get to appointments. Two men we talked to – who both have visual impairments and live in rural areas - said the lack of public transportation made it virtually impossible to work. Even in major cities where there are accessible transportation systems in place, like in Toronto and Ottawa, they are under-resourced and unreliable. Getting through to book a ride can be very difficult and there are not always enough buses to pick people up when they want. People talked about being stranded at appointments, unable to get home.

For everyone who attended the workshop, being able to get around was incredibly important – for appointments, work, school, groceries, laundry and visiting family and friends. In larger centres, people felt that expanding public transportation, improving around-the-clock service and reducing the cost of bus passes would help, especially for shift workers and those who have to travel long distances to work. Participants in Owen Sound and Thunder Bay suggested that municipalities let low-income people ride for free during off-peak hours and provide funding or subsidies to help set-up car pools with volunteer drivers to help people in rural areas get to appointments. People with disabilities felt that making public transportation more accessible and ensuring there was enough funding to meet the demand needed to be a much higher priority for all communities.

## A place to call HOME

*“I’m here because I hope that the information gathered gets implemented. We need to do something about homelessness and get started now, before winter starts again.”*

**-- Participant at Sault St Marie workshop**

Despite numerous promises and government funding for affordable housing over the last several years, very little has actually been built. Whether we were in Windsor, Thunder Bay, Owen Sound, Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie or Toronto, people talked about paying most of their money on rent. Many had been on affordable housing waiting lists for years.

*“I applied for public housing. I got a letter back saying they only have space for people with terminal illnesses. What am I supposed to do?”*

**-- Participant at Ottawa workshop**

Having a home – and not just housing - was important to the people we talked to. Housing is a roof over your head. A home is where you feel warm and safe and happy. Living in a house where used needles are scattered around outside doesn’t make you feel safe. Not being able to afford rising gas and electricity costs doesn’t make you warm. Dealing with mice, cockroach and bedbug infestations doesn’t make you happy. Either does fighting with your landlord to get the holes repaired in your ceiling or the stove fixed. Yet this was a reality for many of the people we talked to.

Those who could afford their own homes, like the new immigrants we talked to in Rexdale who had brought their savings with them when they moved to Toronto, constantly worried about losing them. They said they hadn’t expected it to be so difficult to get work in their fields and never dreamed they would still be working at low paying jobs years later. They dreaded unexpected repairs, property tax increases and rising utility costs as they couldn’t afford to pay them on top of their mortgages.

Those paying market rents also worried about how to pay their bills. In Toronto, average rents are much higher than the amount that people on OW and ODSP get for rent. Low-wage workers also struggle to find housing they can afford. The high costs of utilities was also a huge source of stress for many renters, especially in Northern communities like Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie, where the winters are longer and colder.

Those who were lucky enough to be in affordable housing didn’t always feel so lucky. Youth in Scarborough talked about the stigma of living in social housing, where the buildings always seem to be brown and ugly and schoolmates hear terrible things about their neighbourhoods. One young girl talked about wanting to pick up all of the litter in the neighbourhood. Another wanted the buildings to have more colour and look more attractive and less run-down. Another wanted the violence and killings in her neighbourhood to stop. They wanted to feel proud of

where they lived. An Aboriginal woman we talked to also wanted to feel safe. Her son had been beaten up walking home in her neighbourhood near Flemingdon Park.

When we asked participants to think about what would be different about their lives if they woke up one day and were no longer living in poverty, we were surprised that so many people talked about buying a house or feeling safe. Clearly, having a place to call home means as much to people living in poverty as it does to the average middle-class family. That's why immediate action on housing needs to be part of the government's poverty reduction strategy. Here are some ideas we heard in our conversations:

- Start building affordable housing.
- Build accessible housing and supportive housing for people with disabilities.
- Build more co-op housing.
- Require developers to include affordable housing in new condo developments.
- Approach Habitat for Humanity to build on land in our communities
- Ask businesses and volunteers in rural areas to have a "barn-raising" where a house is put up quickly for people who have no where to stay
- Fund shelters to address overcrowding in Toronto and help people on the streets in more rural communities.
- Give out rent subsidies until there is enough affordable housing.
- Repair public housing.
- Fine delinquent landlords.
- Work with us to make our neighbourhoods safer.

There are also currently discussions in policy circles that the government should consider creating a new housing allowance that would go to all low-income people, whether they are on social assistance or working, and help people to afford market rents. This new allowance would top up the inadequate shelter allowance recipients on social assistance currently receive.

## **An apple a day, keeps the doctor away...**

Given the dramatic increase in the cost of staples like milk, bread and corn over the last year, it wasn't surprising that food came up in all of our workshops. Apples and other fresh fruits, whole grains, meat, fish, milk, orange juice – all staples of a healthy diet – are simply out of reach for many of the people we talked to in our workshops, particularly people on social assistance. No matter where we went, most people said they skipped meals and depended on food banks to get through the month because they couldn't afford groceries. Some felt humiliated. One woman from Owen Sound said she refused to go to the food bank because she had to stand in line outside the building where everyone would see her as they drove by. Others were frustrated by rules limiting them to one visit a month, even when they had no food. People said you took what you could get, even when it was a can of something you had no idea what to do with. Even then, you still only got canned goods and had to either buy staples like milk and bread, or do without. In Scarborough, for instance, the high cost of cooking oil, milk and rice was really worrying people.

No one wanted to skip meals or eat Kraft dinner night after night. People were acutely aware that their diets weren't, for the most part, very healthy and could lead to serious health problems, including diabetes, heart attacks and strokes. Many were already dealing with health problems and worried that their diets were literally killing them. People on OW and ODSP complained that their cheques weren't anywhere near being adequate to eat healthily. Some explained that they used to qualify for extra money every month for special dietary items relating to their medical needs. The Special Diet schedule was revised in November, 2005. It now excludes many medical conditions and the amounts for many common conditions have also been drastically reduced.

***“If I have coffee this week I can't afford bread next week”***

**-- Participant at Thunder Bay workshop**

The links between poor diets and ill-health have been well documented, as have the high costs of poverty on Canada's health care system. Like the saying, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” investing in preventive care today, saves millions of dollars tomorrow. There were lots of suggestions on how this could be done.

Community gardens, local food co-ops, community kitchens and children's breakfast programs were suggested as ways communities could help one another and get the kinds of healthy foods they need, at affordable prices. Organizing to get grocery stores in low-income neighbourhoods was another idea.

But people felt that governments needed to play a role too. They suggested working with public health units to encourage municipalities and cities to raise awareness about the links between poverty and ill-health and the costs of doing nothing to reduce poverty.

They were encouraged that the Provincial Government had announced dental benefits for the working poor but wondered when the program will start and why it hadn't been extended to

include health benefits like chiropractic coverage. Some said they struggled to pay for their prescriptions and weren't always able to afford to refill them when they ran out. People on disability talked about the frustration of trying to get ODSP to pay for the medical supports and supplies they need, like repairs to wheelchairs and diabetic supplies.

More doctors and specialists was also seen as essential, especially in rural communities like Owen Sound and in Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie in the North where most people don't have family doctors. People shared horror stories of trying to find a doctor who would take them as a patient and help them fill out the medical paperwork so they could apply for disability. They felt that health professionals should be required to help patients complete medical forms. To get care, many people end up traveling outside their communities, which they can't afford to do. On social assistance, for example, the transportation allowance isn't enough to cover the dramatic increase in gas costs.

In Sault Ste. Marie, one man suggested opening up more addictions treatment centres, especially in rural areas. He talked about friends who had to go down south for treatment and how difficult it was when they came home again. Another man suggested cleaning up people's homes before they came back from treatment so they wouldn't be triggered when they saw a crack pipe or a bottle of booze lying around. In the workshop we held with Aboriginal people, some participants also suggested that traditional Aboriginal healing therapies need to be part of more addictions programs, especially in areas with high Aboriginal populations.

Some people also talked about their struggle with depression and other mental health problems and how little support is available. They felt there weren't enough supports to help people navigate the mental health system and get the kinds of help they need, especially in rural and Northern communities, where options are more limited. People with disabilities talked about the benefits of alternative therapies like acupuncture and naturopathy, which they feel really improves their health but isn't funded.

## Diversity and Difference

Canada is one of the most multicultural countries, and Toronto one of the most diverse cities in the world. It is something many Canadians celebrate, as do our governments. Yet only recently have we begun to acknowledge the increasing gulf between those who have and those who do not. Considerable research shows that people with disabilities, Aboriginal people, youth, single moms and people of colour are much more likely to be living in poverty. Their voices are woven into each section of this report, but it is also important to highlight that their experiences of poverty are unique in some ways from others.

People of colour, youth and Aboriginal people in our workshops talked about their first-hand experiences with racism and stereotypes – from employers, prospective landlords, police, the school system and the courts. They said that addressing discrimination and stereotyping in all its forms needs to be part of any poverty reduction strategy. People with disabilities wanted governments to do more to promote a broader recognition that everyone in our society is important and create stronger human rights laws and stronger penalties for people who break them.

Aboriginal participants in Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie also talked about the unique challenges Aboriginal people face in overcoming poverty. They mentioned their concerns about the number of Aboriginal people being incarcerated and the high drop out rate among Aboriginal youth. Some of the Aboriginal youth we talked to said getting pardons and having access to Aboriginal court diversion programs and mentorship and leadership programs had been helpful for them. In Thunder Bay, one woman felt strongly that it was important for the Ontario Government to consider the impact of historical injustices such as residential school abuses on Aboriginal communities when developing its poverty reduction strategy.

***“I have a dream – that my 2 girls don’t live like I’ve had to.”***

**-- Aboriginal participant at Thunder Bay workshop**

Many women we talked to, especially single moms but also women who were married, told us that the lack of affordable child care was one of the greatest barriers they faced when looking for work. While they welcomed the Provincial Government’s announcement that it plans to expand junior and senior kindergarten to full days, they felt that more affordable child care, especially for shift workers, was extremely important. Women also felt that some OW and ODSP policies particularly hurt women, like forcing parents to go to court for child support, then clawing back every cent off their cheques.

People with disabilities and single people said that many anti-poverty measures leave them out because they are focused on families. Single people in our workshops said they were frustrated when they heard that the government’s poverty reduction strategy would, at least initially, focus on children. According to provincial government statistics, 86 per cent of people with disabilities don’t have children. They said that improving ODSP, making public transportation and workplaces accessible, and providing better workplace supports would be key strategies in helping them escape poverty.

Addressing discrimination and inequity in the workforce was also extremely important to the people we talked to. People of colour, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, youth and women are all disproportionately working in low-wage work. According to statistics in the Colour of Poverty Campaign fact sheets (see Appendix I), racialized workers make up over 40 percent of workers in the sewing, textile and fabric industries, over 36 per cent of taxi and limo drivers and 42 per cent of electronics assemblers. Thirty-eight per cent of women of colour earn poverty wages.

Newcomers wanted employers to recognize their international credentials and work experience instead of requiring them to get retraining in Canada or get Canadian work experience. People of colour in Rexdale, where a new retail/entertainment development is underway, wanted to ensure local people got the jobs. Women wanted pay equity, so that they make the same wages as men doing the same or equivalent jobs. And people with disabilities wanted access to employment supports that could help them get jobs suited to their skills and interests, rather than minimum wage jobs. They also wanted employers to do more to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities and ensure that workplaces are fully accessible.

In developing its poverty reduction strategy, the Ontario Government has a chance to not only acknowledge the faces of poverty, but take steps to address inequality by developing targeted programs aimed at marginalized groups, along with specific anti-poverty targets and timelines that measure who has benefited and who has not.

***Our situations are different so our poverty is different.”***

**--Participant at Scarborough workshop**



## **Nothing about us, without us**

What we heard loud and clear in every one of our workshops is that low-income people want to be part of the solution. They want to be involved, not just consulted. They want a voice - that's heard and respected. They want to share their ideas and contribute their passion, creativity and many skills to ending poverty.

“Nothing about us without us.” It is a quote we heard in Ottawa and Thunder Bay, again in the workshop we held with people with disabilities in Toronto, and a sentiment that was shared by participants in other parts of the province. Sometimes it was said defiantly – a reflection of people’s frustration of not feeling heard or respected. Other times it was said matter-of-factly, as if anyone could doubt that low-income people should be involved in developing the province’s poverty reduction strategy or ensuring it’s implemented in a timely way and does what it’s supposed to do – reduce poverty.

***“We have the capacity to create sustainable communities. We all need to stand together and not be anonymous”***

**--Participant at Sault Ste Marie workshop**

It is advice that people involved in the project have taken to heart. Despite the challenges of living in poverty and the daily isolation and struggle simply to survive, low-income people in the 10 communities we met with this summer and fall have already begun organizing around poverty in their communities.

The youth we met with in Scarborough are learning photography techniques and getting out in their communities to illustrate poverty through photos. In the second year of the project, they hope to launch an exhibit of their work and discuss how to use the photo display to talk about how to reduce poverty in their communities.

In Scarborough, the Somali and South Asian families we met with in our workshop knew little about the government’s commitment to develop a poverty reduction strategy and there was considerable interest in writing letters and meeting with their local MPPs and getting word out in their communities. In December, the Council for Agencies Serving South Asians worked with people in their communities to organize a press conference and a rally to respond to the Ontario Government’s Poverty Reduction Strategy and mobilize people to push for changes that will have a big impact for racialized communities and newcomers.

In Rexdale, the Rexdale Women’s Centre organized a broader discussion in October looking at the impact of poverty in their communities and identified key issues that they want to deal with locally, including transportation, education and employment. They have formed an Advisory Committee to guide the project and have identified people willing to speak to the media.

In Thunder Bay, the Lakehead Social Planning Council is partnering with a local anti-poverty group called the Thunder Bay Economic Justice Committee to move the project forward. This fall, they did a media blitz to raise awareness of the loss of back-to-school and winter clothing

allowances for people on social assistance and urged their municipality to step in with help for families. In November, they participated in the Finance Minister's pre-budget consultations and also responded to media interest following the announcement of the Ontario Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy in December.

In Ottawa, our partners held a second workshop for low-income people in the Francophone community and also held a train-the-trainer workshop with organizations to ensure discussions on poverty reduction happened with low-income people across the city. Following the workshop, many of the people who had been involved joined a new group, called the Ottawa Poverty Reduction Network, that formed shortly after the government announced consultations into its Poverty Reduction Strategy. Together, they organized their own poverty reduction consultation in June, which 200 people attended. The report that was compiled with all of the ideas that emerged was shared with Ottawa MPPs. Ottawa activists also encouraged low-income people to attend an all-party debate on poverty during the federal election campaign and to vote in the federal election in October.

In Toronto, ARCH Disability Law Centre has written an article in their community newsletter inviting low-income people with disabilities to a meeting in January to discuss the government's poverty reduction strategy and how to organize effectively to ensure concrete gains for people with disabilities. In the workshop, people with disabilities said that organizing for improvements to the Ontario Disability Support Program is critical.

In Owen Sound, following the workshop, one man confided in us that he used to be an anti-poverty activist until he became completely disillusioned by the attacks on the poor and people with disabilities during the 1990s. This was the first event he had come out to since and he was eager to have a voice again. Later that spring, the local legal clinic, the United Way, community groups and people living in poverty formed a Poverty Reduction Steering Committee in an attempt to ensure poverty reduction consultations were held in Owen Sound and the surrounding areas. When they were unable to convince their local MPP, they partnered with the local labour council and organizations to organize their own poverty reduction consultation. They also organized low-income people to attend the consultation held by Carol Mitchell, MPP for Huron-Bruce and a member of the government's Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, they organized an anti-poverty march and rally to City Hall and held a Stone Soup lunch with information on available services and the government's poverty reduction strategy. They have received considerable media coverage. In late November, a broader Grey-Bruce anti-poverty coalition was created and will work closely with people living in poverty to heighten public awareness of local poverty issues and develop a long-term anti-poverty strategy for Owen Sound.

In Sault Ste. Marie, following the workshop, low-income people met with MPP David Oraziotti and he is interested in continuing to meet with them regularly. This fall, they formed a new anti-poverty group called "Voices of Action Against Poverty" and have begun holding regular meetings, elected a Steering Committee and identified people willing to speak to the media. Some members of the group attended the taping of a TV Ontario program on the local economy to ensure poverty was discussed. The group will be officially launching this report at

a Christmas lunch in Sault Ste. Marie on Dec. 18<sup>th</sup> and are expecting 150 people, including the local MP, MPP, city council representatives, service providers and low-income people.

In Windsor, following the workshop, the local legal clinic assisted low-income people to form neighbourhood groups to work on local issues and link people to various supports and services. Legal Assistance Windsor has also been very involved in local efforts to develop a poverty reduction framework for Windsor-Essex County, which has been endorsed by both Essex County and the City of Windsor. They are currently in the process of developing a local Poverty Reduction Roundtable and establishing working groups to develop more concrete initiatives in key areas of the strategy. They have already gotten considerable media attention and will continue outreaching to low-income people to be involved.

Low income people, and our organizational partners in the project, are leading by example. There is a sense of urgency in their work. People living in poverty have told us that they cannot afford to wait any longer. We agree. It's time for real change. It's time for concrete action on poverty.



Project participants in Toronto and Ottawa document their experiences and strategies to share with others interested in working with them to tackle poverty in their communities.

## Conclusion

This report reflects the voices of 290 low income people across Ontario on what is needed to end poverty in our province, and is framed in the context of discussions that are happening at policy tables around the province. It is a call to action on poverty - from the Ontario and federal governments, employers, municipalities and communities.

The strength of this report is the first-hand knowledge and experience that it contains and the passion with which low-income people shared their ideas for change. Through long nights spent in shelters, days spent peering into an empty fridge, years of worrying how to pay the rent, low-income people know, more than anyone, the overwhelming weight of poverty. Their experiences, their ideas and their voices, encompassed in this report, are key to an effective poverty reduction strategy.

We release this report in the hope that it will influence the rollout of the Poverty Reduction Strategy that was released by the Ontario Government on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and inspire local communities to include low-income people in any anti-poverty organizing they do. We know this isn't an easy time for governments – and for Ontario, especially – which is dealing with the brunt of the economic slowdown that is affecting countries around the world. But as the Ontario Association of Food Bank's recent report on the costs of poverty in Ontario shows, ignoring poverty would be costlier still.

Together with people living in poverty, ISAC and Campaign 2000 call on politicians to keep their commitment to address poverty, and to listen and act on the experiences, ideas and voices of low-income people involved in our project and in anti-poverty groups across the province. And we ask you, and the policy experts you will be working with, to make low-income people partners in the strategies you develop.

It is a partnership that will benefit everyone involved. ISAC and Campaign 2000 know that from experience. The project has helped our two organizations connect more meaningfully with people living in poverty and get a much broader understanding of how poverty affects different communities. We have learned that ending poverty will look quite different in rural areas like Owen Sound than for a big city like Toronto. Similarly, we were able to confirm what statistics have told us - that poverty looks very different in racialized communities and for Aboriginal people, single moms, youth and people with disabilities. This will be important as we work with governments to develop more detailed strategies to reduce poverty in the coming years.

Our conversations with low-income people have moved and inspired us. In their stories and dreams for a better life, we have found creative solutions for ending poverty that we might never have heard had we not ventured outside government and policy circles. More than that, what we heard has helped ensure our political and policy work is in line with the people we are working for – people living in poverty.

Over the next year, Campaign 2000, the Income Security Advocacy Centre, our project partners in Toronto, Ottawa, Windsor, Owen Sound, Thunder Bay and Sault Ste Marie, and the low-income people involved in our project intend to meet with politicians and other key stakeholders to discuss this report and identify initiatives we could start working on concretely, either as part of the government's poverty reduction strategy or in local anti-poverty efforts.

Many of the recommendations in this report have already been implemented in other places and have benefited low income people there. [See Appendix I for a list of reports outlining various anti-poverty research and strategies]. For instance, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has increased and indexed social assistance rates, expanded drug and dental benefits, eliminated public school fees, and increased supports to develop employment skills. Quebec has a \$7/day child care plan. They have increased family benefits and put in place a provincial working tax benefit to improve incomes of the working poor. If these changes can happen in other provinces and make a difference we know they can happen here in Ontario too.

There is no time to lose. We want an end to poverty.

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## Appendix I: Other Reports

### Reports that substantiate and reinforce the opinions voiced in this report:

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- United Way of Toronto (November 2007). *Losing Ground: The Persistence of Family Poverty in Canada's Largest City*. [www.unitedwaytoronto.com](http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com)

## Appendix II: Project Partners

The “**Ending Poverty Project**” is a partnership between the Income Security Advocacy Centre ([www.incomesecurity.org](http://www.incomesecurity.org)), Campaign 2000 ([www.campaign2000.ca](http://www.campaign2000.ca)) and local partners including:

### **Ottawa**

- Child and Youth Health Network of Eastern Ontario
- Canadian Mental Health Association – Ottawa
- Coalition of Community, Health and Resource Centres of Ottawa
- Ottawa Alliance to End Homelessness

### **Thunder Bay**

- Lakehead Social Planning Council
- Thunder Bay Economic Justice Committee

### **Sault Ste. Marie**

- Algoma Community Legal Clinic
- Algoma University College, Dept. of Community, Economic and Social Development

### **Owen Sound**

- Grey-Bruce Community Legal Clinic

### **Windsor**

- Legal Assistance of Windsor

### **Toronto**

- ARCH Disability Law Centre
- Rexdale Women’s Centre
- Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA)
- Toronto Community Housing Corporation, Youth Leadership Program: Creating Leaders in Chester Lea (CLIC)
- Native Child & Family Services

## Appendix III: Project Goals and Activities

Partnering communities were chosen to ensure regional representation, reflect urban and rural perspectives, and ensure representation from the groups most marginalized by poverty, including youth, people with disabilities, racialized communities, newcomers and Aboriginal people.

ISAC and Campaign 2000 also chose communities where there was already interest in organizing around poverty issues and local partners who could help support low-income people to be involved. While we already had relationships with some of the partners, others were chosen because we wanted to build new networks and expand the organizations and communities we already worked with in our lobbying and advocacy work.

The goals of the project were to:

- ✚ Share information with low-income people across the province regarding the Ontario Government's plans to develop a poverty reduction strategy
- ✚ Assist low-income people to share their experiences of poverty and their ideas for ending poverty with provincial and municipal governments
- ✚ Encourage low-income people to participate in the Ontario Government's poverty reduction consultations and continue to push for an effective provincial poverty reduction strategy
- ✚ Encourage and support low-income people to build broad local support for reducing poverty in their communities

In early 2008, ISAC and Campaign 2000 worked with Chris Cavanagh of the Catalyst Centre to develop a workshop to initiate the project, based on a popular education approach. A **facilitator's guide** for the Ending Poverty Workshop is available online at: <http://incomesecurity.org/campaigns/EndingPovertyWorkshopGuide.html>.

Between May and September, 2008, ISAC and Campaign 2000 held 10 workshops in our 10 partner communities. An additional workshop was held in Ottawa for the Francophone community and the information gathered in a pilot of the workshop with participants at The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto was also included. In total, 290 people with first hand experience of poverty participated, including people with disabilities, Aboriginal people, single mothers, people from racialized communities, new immigrants, Francophones, single men, seniors, youth, low-wage workers and people on social assistance.

In the workshop, participants were asked:

***What causes poverty in your life? And what is needed to end poverty?***

***What would your life be like if you woke up tomorrow and no longer lived in poverty?***

***What actions are needed by government, corporations, communities and individuals to end poverty in Ontario?***

***What issues are you most interested in tackling in your community?***

Participants worked in small groups and were asked to share their experiences and the ideas they discussed. Information was gathered on sticky notes and compiled into a local report, which was shared with project partners and workshop participants. The results of all 12 reports were organized into key themes and released as part of this report, to be used in the second year of the project to continue lobbying MPPs and the provincial government to invest in their poverty reduction strategy and expand its reach, and to build support for local anti-poverty initiatives.