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Ontario does not have a choice on Poverty Reduction

Toronto – Ontario cannot afford to have the poverty reduction strategy sit on the margins, warns Ontario Campaign 2000. The economic and social potential of the province is at risk of being further eroded if the austerity agenda is given precedence over the wellbeing of Ontario's children and their families. The government no longer has a choice in whether or not to concentrate on poverty reduction over other policy areas – poverty reduction must be a necessary part of overall public decision-making.

The 2011 report card, *Poverty Reduction in an Age of Uncertainty and Change*, focuses on child, family and youth poverty and finds that 393,000 children are *still* living in poverty in Ontario. Even though 19,000 children were lifted out of poverty in the first year of the Ontario government's poverty reduction strategy, the province has to help tens of thousands of more children before the 25% child poverty reduction target is realized. Child care, mental health, energy costs, social assistance, racialization and income inequalities are major issues for those living on low- and middle-incomes – problems that are at risk of spiralling out of control. The issues experienced by youth, particularly the hefty cost of education and a significantly high unemployment rate of 15.6% further affect the well-being of current and future generation of families, children, workers and residents.

Poverty affects everyone and is a consequence of how our society responds to the difficult situations faced by people. The report shows that the poverty reduction strategy is not a stand-alone area of work, but that it is a crucial part of all services provided by government and needs to be implemented across all departments and by all sectors.

Alizeh Hussain, Ontario Campaign 2000 Coordinator notes, "Far too many children live in poverty and with the forthcoming cuts in the public sector many more may end up being worse off. Unless positive changes are made to current public programs – changes that look to help people rather than cut costs, the rate of child poverty will rise, making life worse for those who are most vulnerable.

We continue to experience economic issues, yet the rich continue to stay rich while those on low- and middle- incomes get poorer. The government is in a position to make a difference in the lives of all residents of this province. The poverty reduction agenda has to be given precedence in public decision-making, otherwise we, as a society, will further jeopardize the potential of those living in poverty along with the economic security of our province."

Gordon Floyd, President and CEO of Children's Mental Health Ontario added, "Since the recession we have seen an increase in the number of children and youth from lower income

families accessing mental health services. By increasing the risk of mental health conditions in children, poverty puts further pressure on provincial health care and other public services. Poverty helps no one and hurts everyone. The Ontario government must aggressively pursue poverty reduction if we want to move towards a healthier province.”

“It is unacceptable that youth on low-income struggle everyday – even after completing their degrees - to pay the increasingly unaffordable cost of education. Education should be treated as a right and not a privilege. We know education is an investment for everyone – yet students and their families are left with the largest portion of the bill. Skyrocketing student debt isn't taken seriously enough, yet it contributes to growing gap between the rich and the poor,” added Shaun Shepherd, VP External, University of Toronto Students' Union.

The report card's key findings, available at www.campaign2000.ca/Ontario/reportcards.html, include:

- One in 7 children still lives in poverty in Canada.
- Employment is not always an assured pathway out of poverty: 1 in 3 low-income children lives in families where at least one parent works full-time year round.
- A lone-parent family on Ontario Works lives on \$9,122 less than the Low Income Measure (the measure of poverty used by the Ontario government).
- Child care is a vital service for families, especially low-income families. Ontario's child care system is facing a financial crisis as a result of underfunding and impacts from full-day kindergarten. Currently only 1 in 5 children has access to licensed child care space. Child care spaces could be even harder to find and afford for low income families if child care centres are closing and there are fewer child care spaces.
- Housing is the single largest expense for low- and modest-income families. Eight in 10 food bank clients live in rented housing – many having to visit a food bank because they had to choose between paying for food, essential clothing or housing (among other essential expenses). The waiting list for affordable housing in Ontario stands at 150,000.

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Ontario Campaign 2000 is a non-partisan, cross-Ontario network of over 60 organizations committed to working to end child and family poverty. www.campaign2000.ca/Ontario

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