

Open Letter to Hon. David Alward

Premier of New Brunswick

Fredericton, NB

FROM WORDS TO ACTION

Within the next few days, your government will table its 2012-2013 budget. For the Common Front for Social Justice and for New Brunswickers who live in poverty, the budget will be an opportunity to judge whether your government is serious about making the fight against poverty a priority.

Your commitments

Mr. Alward, in 2009, you publicly endorsed the document "Overcoming Poverty Together". The document's stated goal was *to reduce poverty by 25% and extreme poverty by 50% by 2015 and make significant progress towards achieving a sustained economic and social inclusion*. The Throne Speech of 2011 said: *"Your government remains committed to working with New Brunswickers to overcome poverty together. In your Speech to the Province this year, we were pleased to hear you say once more that poverty reduction was a priority for you and your government and that you continued to believe deeply in improving the quality of life for the poor in our province.*

Citizens living in poverty

Since you signed the "Overcoming Poverty" document and made these commitments, however, your government has not taken many significant actions to achieve this goal. In the plan to reduce poverty, you promised to increase the minimum wage to \$10.00 in September 2011 and to index it thereafter with the rate of inflation. Workers at minimum wage had to wait eight months just to receive their small salary increase scheduled for September 2011.

For more than 96% of the 41,000 people living on social assistance, the financial situation remains desperate. Doubling, from \$250 to \$500, the financial contribution seniors must make for drugs does not help to reduce their poverty. Since the 2008 economic crisis, more than 18,000 people have been relying on food banks each month to survive. Thousands of workers, people on income assistance, senior citizens now depend on New Brunswick's 64 food banks. Thirty-five percent of those using food banks are children.

According to the National Council of Welfare Canada, our province is the one doing the least for its poorest citizens – those who need income assistance. Since 2009, their situation has not changed. There are four categories of basic social assistance: single people, people with disabilities, single parents with children, and couples with two children. In New Brunswick, single parents with child are the only ones who are getting assistance at a rate higher than two other provinces in Canada. Even when we compare total revenue received, single parents with one child have are the lowest in seven provinces . Thus, it is quite clear that you have a long way to go to reach your formal commitment to reduce poverty in our province.

Words to actions

Mr. Alward, you were no doubt sincere when you signed the plan to reduce poverty and gave your word that reducing poverty was a priority for you. We believed you, and now is the time for your promises to be translated into action to reduce poverty in our province.

Vision and dental care

In April 2011, your government's plan to reduce poverty called for vision and dental care for low-income children. That year's Throne Speech said *that your government would introduce a new program of vision care and dental care for children from low income families in 2012*. We therefore expect to see you keep your promise and provide money in this budget for such a program.

Prescription drug

In your plan to reduce poverty, there was a commitment to implement by stages starting April 2012 a prescription drug program for uninsured people in the province. Your 2011 Throne Speech promised that the program was been put in place. We are looking forward to seeing you keep your promise and provide money in this budget for this program.

Basic rates increased

In the Poverty Reduction Plan, the Throne Speech and in your State of the Province Speech, poverty was given as one of your major concerns. For these words to translate into poverty reduction, you must make the necessary investments in people. One of the best ways is to increase the basic social assistance rates for the thousands of poor people and families in the province. As you are no doubt aware, the vast majority of them have not received a raise since October 2008, yet the cost of products and services has continued to climb. We therefore expect to see the 2012-2013 provincial budget add money to the Department of Social Development for increasing basic rates.

Conclusion

Your budget will identify your government's true priorities for the upcoming year. Ordinary citizens, working people, community organizations working with the poor, senior citizens, the Common Front for Social Justice and, indeed, all of New Brunswick expect you to take decisive action to begin finally reducing poverty in our beautiful province.

Sincerely yours,

Linda McCaustlin, co- chair, NB Common Front for Social Justice

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