

The Establishment of a Working Group to Arrive at a Poverty Reduction Strategy for New Brunswick

**Presentation made to Honourable Mary Schryer
Minister of Social Development**

By the following organizations:

- Association acadienne & francophone des aînées et ainés du NB
- Canadian Labour Congress, Atlantic Region
- Fredericton Anti-Poverty Group
- John Howard Society, St John
- Justice & Solidarity Team of the Moncton Diocese
- New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women
- New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity Inc.
- New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice Inc.
- New Brunswick Federation of Labour
- Support to Single Parents
- United Church represented by Humphrey Memorial United Church
- Vibrant Communities, St John

Fredericton, New Brunswick

June 17th 2008

1. Linking a Poverty Reduction Strategy with the strive toward “self-sufficiency”

The LePage and McGuire report on “Road to Self-Sufficiency” recommended that the government undertake a comprehensive review of a wide range of government policies and programs to ensure realignment in support of emerging economic circumstances and the self-sufficiency agenda...to includes [a variety of activities including] **reaching out to marginalized groups**¹. When Premier Graham announced the name change of the former Dept. of Family and Community services to Dept. of Social Development, he said: “In 2026, in New Brunswick, we will be in control of our own destiny. We will create more of our own wealth and break the cycle of dependency with Ottawa. We will be a place where people can build a self-reliant future... More New Brunswickers will be making healthier choices to promote their individual wellness... When we build a self-sufficient New Brunswick, we want to make sure **everyone can play a role**. That is why we expanded the mandate and changed the name of the Department of Family and Community Services to Dept. of Social Development. ”

Ghandi said: “Democracy should ensure the same opportunities to the weakest as to the strongest.” We believe that a self-sufficient province is one made up of **self-sufficient individuals**, able to cover their basic needs. We, as a nation, have signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights², whereby we said we would recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. Achieving self-sufficiency means that our government will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right. As was said in the Telegraph Journal of January 5th 2008, “Poverty is the dragging anchor chain on the ship of self-sufficiency. Perhaps 2008 is the year to haul it in and bring all New Brunswickers on board and all hands on deck to create a bright future for our province”³.

2. Description of what has changed in New Brunswick (by Linda McCaustlin)

Minister Schryer, I must bring to your attention that social assistance rates and minimum wage are no longer even meeting basic needs. As of June 13, 2008, furnace oil is \$610 for 100 gallons. To heat a very small place costs at least \$280 or more. A single person, in transitional, permanent disability only receives \$521 a month; in the winter months, a supplement brings it up to \$631. Quite a bit out of balance, is it not? When a client goes for help, one month might be paid, but not arrears. Nothing is ever mentioned about the one-time power emergency of \$270. Instead, your Department has become a loan company, deducting from already insufficient monthly checks. The figure of 610 clients being cut-off this winter should not be happening. To say it is lower than last year is not very appropriate. To have one die is disgusting. There is no excuse for this. Mr. Durelle could have been helped instead of being backed into a corner. Why wasn't NB Housing emergency suggested by the caseworker for wiring, instead of saying it would be paid, but deducted of the client's check. How many are cut off right now? Or do you know?

There is not enough affordable housing available. Hostels are overcrowded and more people are on the streets. Rent has increased \$30 to \$35 a month, in the last two months. If the heat is not included

¹ The Road to Self-Sufficiency – a Common Cause by Gilles LePage and Francis McGuire, May 2007, Recommendation 22.

² United Nations treaty: see: untreaty.un.org/unts/60001_120000/5/19/00008945.pdf

³ Rickards, Sue. January 5th 2008. Charity no substitute for Justice. Telegraph Journal, p. A7.

in the rent, people on social assistance cannot even afford a place anymore. You have not even considered the economic unit, where people could share and try at least to get by.

And where is the food? Do you see money left for food? It leaves hard choices for clients and a whole lot of stress. How long are they going to go before they miss a payment somewhere? Food Banks do not provide enough food for the month. If you think their vegetables and fruits are fresh, think again! It is only what has ended its shelf-life in supermarkets. There are outdated cans and mildewed bread. Would you expect your family to eat this? Between the stress, the lack of nutritious foods and not being able to meet the basic needs, all this puts a tremendous burden on the health system. And not many benefits are given out that the client does not have to pay something. Teeth, for example! If they cannot meet basic needs, they sure cannot afford that! It saves the Department money though!

Inflation rates have done up by 30% from 1995 to 2008. Social assistance rates in that period only went up by 9%. Minimum wage, from 1997 to 2008, increased by 18%. Inflation rate was 26%.

That is why we are here. Enough is enough! Do you have non-profit groups to help everyone pay bills? To buy nutritious food? I don't think so. What is needed is rates brought up to match the inflation rate and a **Poverty Reduction Strategy**. There is no self-sufficiency here. Why have policies at all if workers don't follow them and twist them around, intimidate and threaten? This is not acceptable anymore. It is a violation of human rights. Let's work together for a just society. There are good advocacy groups here. Involve business and government. Let's do this, if you have a heart and conscience.

4. What has been done in Canada in terms of Poverty Reduction Strategies (By Auréa Cormier)

To our knowledge, five Canadian provinces have put a Poverty Reduction Strategy in place or are in the process of implementing one. The are summarized below in chronological order. On a national level, the National Council for Social Welfare has also published excellent guideline on this.

Quebec's Bill 112 - A law to fight poverty and social exclusion⁴. Sanctioned in December 2002, this Bill acts as a guide for the Quebec government and its citizens to undertake actions against poverty, to eradicate its roots, to alleviate its effect on individuals and families and to counteract exclusion factors. Its objective is to work toward a Quebec without poverty. An Advisory Committee was put in place as well as a Poverty and Social Exclusion Monitoring Group to ensure that the aims of the Poverty Reduction Strategy are effectively working. The creation of a special fund for social initiatives accompanied the enactment of this Bill.

Newfoundland and Labrador (NF & L) Action Plan for reducing Poverty⁵. Published in June 2006, this ambitious plan is geared toward changing NF & L as the province with the highest level of poverty to one with the least number of poor people in the span of ten years. Under Premier Danny Williams' leadership, the plan was developed through a collaborative approach involving seven Cabinet Ministers, many focus groups and consultations sessions with community groups. The government also solicited input from the economic sector, from union

⁴ Assemblée Nationale, 2e session, 3e legislature. 2002. Projet de loi 112 – Loi visant à lutter contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale. Éditeur officiel du Québec.

⁵ www.hrle.gov.nl.ca/hrle/poverty/poverty-reduction-strategy.pdf

groups and from government personnel. The strategy produced by NF & L has been quoted by many writers as a milestone in terms of a well thought out poverty reduction plan.

Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan⁶. In the throne Speech of 2007, Premier Dalton McGinty committed the province of Ontario to put a Poverty Reduction Strategy in place. The government's aim is to reduce Ontario poverty levels by 50% by 2018. This plan addresses three priorities: (1) Sustaining employment, which means assuring a living standard above poverty for any adult who works full time throughout the year; this means fair pay and stable working conditions for all Ontarians; (2) Liveable incomes, which means dignity for all Ontarians, including those unable to work; (3) Strong and supportive communities, which means affordable housing, early learning and child care, public education and community programs that help people connect.

Manitoba's Social Inclusion and Anti-Poverty Act (Bill 226)⁷. The second reading of this Bill took place on May 22, 2008. It calls for the Manitoba Government to tackle this province's poverty epidemic head on by implementing various strategies to achieve the goal of reducing Manitoba's poverty level. The Bill calls for: (1) A specific target of reducing the 2008 poverty level by 50% by 2012 ; (2) A Standing Committee with individuals from social justice groups to develop, implement and evaluate the provincial strategy to fight poverty ; (3) Ways to improve social inclusion by better access to education, housing, employment etc. ; (4) An annual report on progress made towards achieving goals set out in the provincial strategy.

Poverty Reduction Strategy in Nova Scotia⁸. In May 2007, the Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Coalition held a workshop to lay out the broad goals of a poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotians. Their document, entitled *Framework for a Poverty Reduction Strategy in N. S.*, was released on October 17th 2007. Its cover page quotes Louise Arbour, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: "Combating Poverty, deprivation and exclusion is not a matter of charity, and it does not depend on how rich a country is. By tackling poverty as a matter of human rights obligation, the world will have a better chance of abolishing this scourge of our lifetime. Poverty eradication is an achievable goal". In the Fall of 2007, a private member's bill was passed to legislate a working group on poverty reduction. Its mandate was to come up, by June 30, 2008, with a strategy to reduce poverty in Nova Scotia.

National Council for Social Welfare. This highly respected research group has published a paper which states that poverty can be reduced, thus improving the country economy and society in general⁹. In their view, a national anti-poverty strategy should have four corner stones: (1) A long-term vision and measurable targets and timelines; (2) A plan of action and a budget that coordinate initiatives within and across government and other partners; (3) A government accountability structure for measuring end results and consultation of [citizens] in the design, implementation and evaluation of the actions that will affect them; (4) A set of agreed upon poverty indicators that will be used to plan, monitor change and assess progress.

5. Our reflections on a Working Group on Poverty Reduction in New Brunswick

⁶ www.ontario.ca/GrowingStronger

⁷ web2.gov.mb.bills/sess/b2263.php

⁸ www.povnet.org/node/2224

⁹ Conseil National du Bien-Être Social. Hiver 2007, Volume n° 126. Résoudre la pauvreté : Quatre pierres angulaires d'une stratégie nationale viable pour le Canada.

The twelve participating organizations¹⁰ involved in this reflection on a Poverty Reduction Strategy for New Brunswick first met on October 31, 2007. Afterwards, they were in contact through teleconferences, telephone conversations and e-mails. These groups have considered several types of processes that would effectively lead to the formation of a New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Strategy. They concluded that a **Working Group on Poverty Reduction** would be the most useful approach. They are hereby suggesting that a New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Working Group could be mandated to:

1. Gather data on poverty in New Brunswick by drawing upon available government statistics, information contained in Claudette Bradshaw's Blueprint for Action, focus groups with low-income workers and social welfare recipients, etc. This could be complemented by reviewing the observations and results contained in the Newfoundland & Labrador Poverty Reduction;
2. Analyze these findings to identify guiding principles, key directions and goals;
3. Draft an action plan with recommendations to be submitted to the Legislative Assembly. The plan should include specific actions and targets to reduce poverty. The N. B. Government would be responsible to cover the costs of operation of the Working Group.

A time frame of 6 to 12 months seemed doable for this Working Group to present an Action Plan to Reduce Poverty in N. B., along with some recommendations to be submitted to the Legislative Assembly. This Working Group on Poverty Reduction would assemble high level government representatives, community organizations with expertise in specific areas of poverty reduction and representatives from the business and union sectors. Regional representation would be important. We should also strive for gender balance. Based on the experience of other Canadian, we are suggesting that the composition of the New Brunswick Working Group on Poverty Reduction could include:

1. *Seven Ministers or Deputy Ministers.* Spearheaded by the Minister of Social Development, other invited ministers could be those of Community Non-Profit Organizations, Education, Finance, Justice, Health, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour. The Advisory Council on the Status of Women would bring valuable data regarding women in poverty. Persons nominated to the Working Groups should not be able to send a substitute to the working sessions;
2. *Ten or more representatives from community organizations.* There are many organizations working on specific poverty issues. Suggestions for consideration by the government are:
 - a. Comité des 12 from the Acadian Peninsula;
 - b. Common Front for Social Justice Inc.;
 - c. Fredericton Anti-Poverty Organization
 - d. *Maison de bienfaisance* from Campbellton;
 - e. A non-profit group from Edmundston;
 - f. Urban Core Support Network from Saint John;
 - g. Vibrant Community from Saint John;
 - h. One representative from a provincial seniors' groups in contact with low-income seniors.

¹⁰ (1) Association acadienne & francophone des aînées et aînés du NB; (2) Canadian Labour Congress, Atlantic Region; (3) Fredericton Anti-Poverty Group; (4) John Howard Society; (5) Justice and Solidarity Team of the Moncton Diocese; (6) NB Advisory Council on the Status of Women; (7) NB Coalition for Pay Equity, Inc.; (8) NB Common Front for Social Justice, Inc.; (9) Federation of Labour; (10) Support to Single Parents; (11) United Church represented by Rev. Gayle MacDonald, Humphrey Memorial United Church; (12) Vibrant Community, St John.

Other community organizations could be selected to arrive at a reasonable regional and gender balance. One third or more of the community organization representatives should be people who are living below the poverty line.

3. *Municipality representatives.* Two representatives, nominated by Federations of municipalities, one francophone and one Anglophone.
4. *Representatives from the business sector.* One representative nominated by Chambers of Commerce and another one nominated by Enterprise New Brunswick;
5. *Union groups.* Two member of N. B. Labour Organizations.

The Coordinator of Vibrant Community Saint John prepared a document on Poverty Reduction Strategies, needs of children and youth, policies to remove the “welfare wall”. Her one-page document is included in Annex A.

Reverend Gayle MacDonald, Minister at Humphrey Memorial United Church in Moncton prepared a document to express her thoughts in support of a Poverty Reduction Strategy. Her three-page text is included in Annex B.

The names of the co-signatories of the above suggestions for the composition for the Poverty Reduction Plan are the following, along with their associated community organizations:

- **Bill Bastarache**, Executive Director - John Howard Society, St John
- **Jean-Claude Basque**, Atlantic Region Representative - Canadian Labour Congress
- **Jean-Luc Bélanger**, President - Association acadienne & francophone des aînés
- **Michel Boudreau**, President – New Brunswick Federation of Labour
- **Auréa Cormier**, Coordinator - Diocesan Justice & Solidarity Team
- **Brigid Donovan**, Office Manager - Support to Single Parents
- **Huberte Gautreau**, President – New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity Inc.
- **Wendy MacDermott**, Coordinator-Vibrant Communities St John¹¹
- **Rev. M. Gayle MacDonald**, Minister -Humphrey Memorial United Church¹²
- **Linda McCaustlin**, Co-Chair, New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice
- **Rosella Melanson**, Executive Director, New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women
- **Dan Weston**, Coordinator – Fredericton Anti-Poverty Group

¹¹ Wendy MacDermott prepared a document on behalf of Vibrant Communities on topics related to Poverty Reduction Policies, needs of children and youth, policies to remove the “welfare wall”. (See Annex B)

¹² Reverend Gayle MacDonald sent her regrets and prepared a statement which is included in Annex C



Vibrant COMMUNITIES Saint John

Vibrant Communities Saint John is a poverty reduction group that

- Brings together community leaders to share, strategize, and champion a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy;
- Provides knowledge and data about poverty to inform community planning;
- Is a voice to government, business, and the community about poverty in Saint John; and
- Encourages coordination and collaboration among individuals living in poverty, community organizations, business and government.

Poverty Reduction Policies

- Accessible services (e.g., case managers, career counselling). By accessible we mean appropriate (e.g., teens and young adult), neighbourhood based (satellite offices in neighbourhoods) with information easily available and comprehensive;
- Engage the community (includes community organizations consisting of people living in poverty) in planning and restructuring programs (e.g., income assistance) and in meeting the target of 2,500 assisted in leaving income assistance.

Level the Playing Field for Children and Youth

- Invest in **Early Childhood Learning Centres** in low income neighbourhoods/community schools. Early Learning Centres provide quality and flexible childcare + infant, toddler, and pre-school programs + parent programs + connection to essential health, education and employment services.

Align policies and improve incentives to remove the “welfare wall” Consider these policy initiatives:

- Increase **minimum wage** to a living wage.
- Provide **health coverage** for all families whose incomes fall below the poverty line. This should include vision and dental.
- Offer a **“work supplement”** program for families to augment the household income until a living wage has been achieved (example: NB self-sufficiency program).
- Expand and improve **childcare** services (more spaces, more trained personnel): increase the rate of \$2/hour subsidy for babysitting and increase the rate for children in licensed daycares so parents not paying the difference.
- Increase **wage exemption** amount for SA recipients who work.

Reconsider “transitional or interim” SA. Implement innovative education to employment supports and provide adequate finances to ‘get back to work’. Eliminate the interim rate

Reconsider ‘authorization’ required for unchanging conditions (e.g., allergies)

This process requires administration, uses precious health care resources, and is extremely inconvenient for recipients.

- Expand **First Steps program** for pregnant and parenting young women.
- Invest in **“fast track” education-to-employment programs** to enable adults who have low levels of education to achieve living wage employment with participating employers with follow-up supports and evaluation.
- Provide **financial supports** for single parents on income assistance going to post-secondary education.

Help Cities to regenerate low income NEIGHBOURHOODS: Convince the federal government to partner with the Province to help Cities eradicate public housing ghettos and revitalize low-income neighbourhoods.

ANNEX B

Thoughts expressed by Rev. Gail MacDonald in support of a Poverty Reduction Strategy

I have been trying for several days to coordinate my thoughts without much success. I don't know if any of what I say will be of assistance. I don't know if anything of any use can be gotten out of these thoughts.

I would like to know why it is so difficult for people in need to get a "White Card", that is if they even know such a thing exists; and why the Government agencies dealing with those need assistance feel the need to withhold helpful information on the processes for applying for various forms of assistance and what information, proof is required in helping their applications be assessed; with the result that people have been known (I know this personally) to leave out information about their situation which would help their application because they didn't know it was relevant. Typically a system which withholds or manipulates information (which should be public since it is public money) is also manipulating the power invested in it and being selective in a way that could be interpreted as being unjust.

Poverty is a huge and costly issue and the rising cost of oil and other forms of energy is only going to make matters much worse. The poor are fighting the battle on all fronts and charitable organizations are running out of resources to assist where they where government agencies fall short.

It is with deep regret that I am unable to attend the meeting with Minister Schyer. I very much wanted to go and listen and learn – and hope. Hope for some willingness to tackle the high rate of poverty in New Brunswick with creativity and passion. This is an issue where visible headway can be made – but only if there is a vision of what we want and a plan to get there. What we need and want is a concrete plan with clear goals and strategies for reducing the level of poverty in New Brunswick. Ideally, we want a plan to eradicate poverty as an unnecessary evil in modern western society – but a clearly targeted reduction is a beginning.

Let me tell you a couple of stories!

Every month, Humphrey Memorial United Church provides a sit-down, meat and potatoes, Sunday family dinner for families in need. This is all with volunteer help. We prepare for 100 – 110 families and aim to have the dinner the last Sunday of the month before Social Assistance cheques arrive. In May, 133 individuals came (including children).

Last February our Mission and Outreach Team held a pancake breakfast to assist Reconnects – a program for assisting people in need in the Moncton area. We presented them at the beginning of April with a cheque of a little over \$1300. The busy, dedicated volunteers in our congregation put on that breakfast and gave that money to Reconnects even though we are having difficulty meeting our own financial obligations as a congregation. Representatives from Reconnects were very grateful. Our donation came at a good time; yet it would probably not be enough to see them to the end of the month. April had come and NB Power was busy cutting off or threatening to cut off power for winter heating bills people on low income had been unable to make. These people (many of them with families) were having to make a choice between heating their homes

or eating. Even with only offering enough to stave off NB Power for another month (a partial payment) or supplying a food voucher for a week's worth of groceries, Reconnects was running out of resources and the help might not be enough.

A woman on disability makes \$40 more a month than qualifies her for welfare. For this she is grateful. But her life is a constant struggle. Her disability is the result of a car accident which occurred 24 years ago. Her husband was killed in the accident. She did work for a number of years, but her doctor has determined that she cannot work safely (because of her physical disabilities). For a while, she shared living quarters with her widowed mother and they helped each other (her mother had a heart condition). Her mother died, and within one month, she had to find new living quarters and move, though she was now reduced to her one income. To detail her struggle over the past two years would take a long time, but the upshot is she is still waiting for an NB Housing Unit (though her doctor has stated it is unsafe for her to be living in an apt. building with stairs and no elevator) and that she has special needs requirements. She also still doesn't have a "white card" to pay for prescriptions. She has used the food bank to try and extend her budget – but to add insult to injury (literally) the food bank box is delivered with a number of goods with expired dates (like what isn't good enough for the rest of society is good enough for her). For all that, she is managing, barely and with much anxiety for what is around the corner.

A man with a beat-up old truck looks for work doing handyman repairs. He is on his way to a job when his truck breaks down. The only tow truck he can find that doesn't require money up front is from Canadian Tire. They tow his truck. Tell him what needs doing, and it is going to cost \$450. He has \$300.00 and that's it. That money would be needed later in the week to pay utilities because it is the middle of winter. Yet he needs his truck. He has called the person hiring him who will hold the job for a couple of days. Where can he get the \$150? He has no resources. He doesn't have credit. His friends will do what they can, but he lives in a housing complex and it is winter. They don't have money either. Most helping charities don't have the resources for that kind of outlay because they are trying to stretch limited resources over a large number of requests. Imagine the man's stress!!! There are no resources.

I need to add that the request of each of the individuals above and others like them is usually met with suspicion and much humiliating grilling. All that was last winter. Imagine what will happen with heating costs and oil prices for filling his tank this winter. I, for one, am often astounded at how well people on low income are at managing their limited resources. So scratch the myth that if a person on social assistance needs extra assistance, it is because they can't manage or they are spending on something they shouldn't. It is more likely that any one of the miscellaneous things that can throw our budget off has come up and there are no resources to fall back on. Furthermore, the constant struggle for food, clothing, heating is a stress which can burn people out with daily living. There is little energy, time or money to provide the enriching activities in children's lives that will make them feel secure and help them to succeed. Depression and anxiety (usually undiagnosed) plague families on low income, and is often interpreted as "laziness".

We can't solve all these problems on a case by case basis, because there are too many of them. Poverty is too pervasive in this province. It is stealing the future of the children who live in poverty, and damaging the reputation and human resources available for improving the lives of

all New Brunswickers. Children who live in poverty are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, poor nutrition, anxiety, depression and are more likely to be under achievers. Their parents are often doing the best they can, but living in survival mode from day-to-day depletes their emotional and psychological resources for parenting and providing the kind of enrichment which will help their children achieve academic success and a secure future.

I could go on for pages on the long-term, costly effects of poverty (financially, emotionally, psychologically and to society), but there are others in our group who have the statistics more in hand than I do. I am also tempted to go on a diatribe of the ways in which the poor in this province (and others I know of) are treated like criminals. But that would not serve to advance our cause at this point.

Frankly I am tired of hearing about this or that NB Government program which turns out to be another set of long, arduous hoops for an already tired, stressed, poverty-stricken person to jump through, too often to find that there is no gold at the end of the rainbow after all (such as a white card for medical expenses, or an affordable, handicap housing unit for qualified individuals). I am also appalled, having journeyed with a couple of people on this, at how disrespectfully these individuals who spent long hours gathering requested information and trying to do everything right are treated. I am not surprised if some of them become angry at the unhelpful, uninformative responses they get.

I don't believe what is being asked is impossible. I know that there are many (and a very small representative few have signed the letter) who would be willing to assist a Task Force on Poverty in setting goals and developing strategies for reducing poverty in New Brunswick.

Recently I attended a day long workshop with the Very Rev. Bill Phipps (former Moderator of the United Church of Canada) and he suggested that the most important ethical questions need to be tested against a "Covenant for Honouring Children" by Raffi Cavoukian on the premise that if it isn't good for children, it isn't good for anyone and vice versa. You can find the covenant at http://www.raffinews.com/child_honouring/covenant_principles

Poverty isn't good for children; and it isn't good for anyone; and I believe together we can do something about it. We can no longer afford to do battle over this issue. We need to agree to work together (government and helping agencies) with a concerted effort, pooling our knowledge and resources. We must look at poverty in-depth, and all its attending issues together and together resolve to drastically improve the lives of those who now live in poverty in New Brunswick. I would like to see a commitment from the NB Government to establish goals and strategies that would effectively and dramatically reduce the level of poverty in New Brunswick.

Faithfully & prayerfully,

Rev. Gayle MacDonald, Minister
Humphrey Memorial United Church, Moncton