

Poverty summit wraps up in Moncton

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Delegates argue poverty violates human rights

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Poverty is a violation of human rights, say those New Brunswickers trying to eradicate it. And this weekend 175 of them took their fight to Moncton for the third summit on poverty, organized by New Brunswick's Common Front for Social Justice.

The summit series began six years ago with a look at the faces of poverty and continued with a second summit themed Justice before Charity.

This year's summit built on the theme of justice, focussing on the idea that allowing the existence of poverty in Canada violates the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which as many New Brunswickers know, had Hampton native John Humphrey as its principal author. Former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor Herménégilde Chiasson attended the summit to speak on Humphrey's legacy and how it related to the work of the delegates.

Article 25 states, "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

Obviously, like most if not all nations, Canada is nowhere near fulfilling the goals of the Universal Declaration.

One of the summit's organizers, Jean-Claude Basque, said this weekend a theme that developed out of the roundtable discussions and especially an address by University of New Brunswick Saint John economics professor Rob Moir was that we shouldn't regard "dealing with poverty as an expense, but an investment."

The discussion at the two-day summit wasn't all philosophical, of course.

The delegates divided into discussion groups looking at such issues as food, prescription drugs, people with disabilities and seniors.

Those looking at prescription drugs emphasized just how critical to public health a national drug plan similar to the universal health plan Canadians enjoy is desperately needed. They also echoed the Province of New Brunswick's own Poverty Reduction Program in saying a provincial drug program is crucial, so that the poor are not forced to choose between basic health and meeting other basic needs.

The group looking at seniors' issues argued the income threshold at which low income seniors can get a supplement should be raised, and those studying the challenges facing people with disabilities concluded a recent provincial government change that saw a \$1,000 per year supplement shifted from an annual lump sum payment to 12 monthly installments shifted back.

Basque said the rationale is that, among other things, landlords have been known to raise rents on disabled people since learning their monthly cheques have gotten slightly higher.

The group also questioned current legislations that limit the supplement to those 21 years of age and older.

While all the various discussion points from the conference have not yet been collated, Basque said the results will inform their discussions with governments in the coming years.

The next summit will be held in two years' time.