

Poverty Reduction

Annual Review of the Brian Gallant's Government in 2017

Report Card

4.4 / 10

NB Common Front for Social Justice Inc.

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Scoring method

*To get a measured assessment of the actions taken by the Brian Gallant government to reduce poverty and to support its citizens having trouble making ends meet, we will review every sector pertinent to poverty and rate government performance, with **1 as the least satisfactory and 10 the most satisfactory score***

Executive summary

Workers: *Steps in the right direction!*

Score 5.5

Jobs and Employment Standards.

There are still nearly 20,000 workers earning minimum wage in the province.

The government has increased the minimum wage to \$11.00 in April 2017, indexing it to the cost of living in April 2018. A new designated holiday, Family Day (February 2018) has been announced. No new employment standards are yet in place.

Pay Equity: *Moving forward!*

Score 5.5

The *Pay Equity Act* of 2009 does not apply to the private sector. Also, this Act does not cover health services offered in the private sector, even though the government relies on and finances much of these services.

Eight out of ten bargaining units and three out of seven Crown corporations have now completed their pay equity process. Salary adjustments are retroactive to 2012. In contrast, some of the adjustments will be spread out until 2021, which is slowing down the achievement of pay equity in the public sector.

Social Assistance: *A wasted year!*

Score 2

Income and policies for recipients.

Still close to 37,000 women, men and children must depend on social assistance to survive in our province.

The government has done nothing to improve the economic situation of these almost 37,000 individuals in 2017. There have been some changes to certain policies, but there were no significant changes to the most restrictive ones.

Seniors: *Many positive activities!*

Score 7

Jobs, income and government initiatives. In 2017, the number of seniors has continued to increase, as did the number of seniors who had employment. The percentage of those having a low income also continued to grow.

The government has published several reports and has put in place several initiatives, including a Healthy Aging Provincial Roundtable *to determine how it will guide and implement this report*. However, the privatization of management of the extramural services will have negative effects on seniors.

The New Brunswick Drug Plan: *Much too expensive!*

Score 3

In March 2017, there were 30% more individuals who took part in the plan, compared to 5,979 in March 2016. The government spent \$22.4 million, while individuals spent \$4.6 million in 2017.

The government did not move on its intention to combine the NB Drug Plan with different provincial prescription plans. It appears it is pursuing negotiations with P.E.I. and N.S. to come to an agreement on joint drug purchasing program.

Social Housing: *Lack of real progress!*

Score 4

One of the social policies that would greatly help all these citizens is access to social housing costing less than 30% of their gross income. In 2017, a single individual on social assistance had to pay 81% of his income for a bachelor's apartment, a single parent with a child, 47%, while that same person at the minimum wage had to pay 40%.

In 2017, the government has slightly lowered the number of people waiting for social housing, but the list is still too long.

Regulated Child Care: *A lot of ground has been covered!*

Score 7

It is quite obvious that one of the challenges for families is to first, find a place in a licensed daycare, then to have financial resources to register their child. The estimated average cost for full-time daycare services in 2016-2017 was \$34.46 for infants, \$30.22 for preschool children, and \$18.80 for school age children.

The government has implemented several initiatives in 2017 to help families and improve quality of services offered for children.

Poverty Reduction Plan: *A disappointing year!*

Score 1

Even after eight years of implementing the Poverty Reduction Plan, there are still 100,000 low-income citizens today. One fifth of all children (20.3% in 2015) live in poverty.

It seems the government does not want to make poverty reduction a priority, since it put the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation that manages the Plan in the hands of the Department of Tourism. The Corporation itself seems to have lost its direction in proposing broad initiatives to reduce poverty.

Notation System

*In order to evaluate the actions the Gallant government has taken in 2017 to help reduce poverty and support its citizens who struggle to make ends meet, we will analyze each sector related to poverty by awarding a score, **1 being the lowest and 10 the highest.***

Introduction

This year marked the 3rd anniversary of Brian Gallant's Liberal government, with provincial elections now less than a year away.

Has this government, whose wish was to do politics differently, succeeded in reducing poverty for over 100,000 citizens of this province?

We are all aware that, in our society, three groups are most likely to live in poverty: workers in low-wage jobs, social assistance recipients including people with a recognized disability, and seniors. Has their situation improved in 2017?

Poverty can decline when workers are paid adequate wages (adequate minimum wage and pay equity), when individuals and families on welfare receive adequate benefits and can afford a healthy diet, if social housing, affordable child care, and literacy programs are in place, as well as a prescription drug program that supports the most vulnerable in our society, and when seniors have an income sufficient to keep them above the poverty line. These are the key to reducing the impact of poverty on individuals and families.

Finally, to reduce poverty, you need a concrete plan and funding. Did the provincial poverty reduction plan introduced in 2009 and updated in 2014 result in new actions being initiated over the past year?

Minimum wage and Employment Standards

Realities in 2017

In New Brunswick, nearly 20,000 men and women work in jobs that pay only minimum wage.

Over two-thirds of minimum wage earners have permanent jobs, over half are women, nearly half worked for employers with 500 employees or more, and almost all (94%) are non-unionized, which means that employment standards are their only protection in the workplace¹.

At this time, with minimum wage at \$11.00 per hour (\$22,880 yearly earnings before taxes), minimum wage workers are hovering about the poverty line, more often than not. The raise introduced in 2017 increased their earnings before taxes by a mere \$728 per year.

Government action/inaction in 2017

Increased minimum wage from \$10.65 an hour to \$11.00 (a 35 cent increase per hour) and indexed it based on the cost of living, starting in April 2018.

New Brunswick ranks 7th nationally

Provincial employment standards comprise the basic rules that all employers must uphold in their dealings with their employees. These standards (unpaid sick leave, minimum wage rate, etc.) provide a minimum of protection. However, for minimum wage earners, this is the only protection available, since they are not for the most part unionized.

Government action/inaction in 2017

- In 2016, Brian Gallant's government had proposed improvements to some employment standards regarding young workers, domestic workers and farm workers, **but these propositions were not yet implemented in 2017.**
- **No new employment standards**, such as paid sick leave, overtime paid at regular hourly rate and not at minimum wage, uniforms paid by employers when workers must wear employer-imposed clothing, and pay equity, **were introduced in 2017**, following recommendations by the Common Front for Social Justice. These changes would make a real difference in the life of thousands of workers.
- **In 2017**, reflecting a recommendation by the Common Front, **a new statutory holiday was announced. Family Day** will be celebrated on the third Monday in February.

Realities in 2017

Over 65% of New Brunswickers are active in the private sector, and 70 % work in female-dominated jobs. The wage gap between men and women sits at slightly more than 8%. Pay inequity is one of the contributing factors to this gap

- The Pay Equity Act, 2009, does not apply to the private sector. Furthermore, this legislation does not cover private sector personal care services, even though these services are government mandated and funded. Jobs in these services are grievously under-paid, at hourly wages ranging from \$11.45 to \$15.00.

Government action/inaction in 2017

Public sector

- Government actively implemented the Pay Equity Act, 2009, in the public sector.
- **Eight out of ten bargaining units and three out of seven Crown corporations have now completed their pay equity process.** Salary adjustments are retroactive to 2012. In contrast, some of the adjustments will be spread out until 2021, which is slowing down the achievement of pay equity in the public sector

Government action/inaction in 2017

Private sector

- **No new investment** in wages for private sector personal care workers (almost exclusively women), despite pressing needs. Major public investments are required to reach pay equity in that job category, which would mean approximately \$20.00 per hour.
- **No improvement in pay equity methodology** for job categories with no male comparators.
- **Pay equity plans are absent in organizations with more than 50 employees** doing business with government.
- **A joint sub-committee with union representatives has been created this fall to focus on pay equity.**
- This year, the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation has **struck a committee on pay equity and the living wage** that includes NB's Common Front for Social Justice, the Coalition for Pay Equity and representatives from businesses, government and the community.

Social Assistance: *A wasted year!*

Score 2

Income and policies

Realities in 2017

From 2016-2017 to 2017-2018, 310 new social assistance recipients were added on average, indicating a worsening of conditions when compared to numbers during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 periods, when there was an average decrease of 1109 recipients².

Government action/inaction in 2017

It has not managed to reduce the number of social assistance recipients.

The basic rate for employable recipients has stagnated since 2010: that year it was \$6,444 annually, and seven years later it is still the same³. If it had at least been indexed to the inflation rate, today's basic benefits would total \$7,185. This results in a loss of income of \$741 annually. This doesn't seem a large amount but for these recipients, it means a real loss of buying power, creating a critical situation for social assistance recipients.

As for the three other categories of citizens receiving social assistance, the last increases in their basic rate took place in 2014. An individual with a recognized disability received \$9,156, a single parent with one child received \$10,644 and a couple with two children received \$1,940. These basic rates have not changed since 2014, meaning that the buying power of these citizens has constantly decreased over the past three years³. When inflation is factored in, the annual loss for individuals with a recognized disability amounts to \$364, for a single parent with one child it amounts to \$423 and for a couple with two children, to \$471.

Social Assistance recipients are subject to a high number of restrictive policies that more often than not, don't help them to get out of poverty.

Government action/inaction in 2017

- ✓ It has **not increased the basic rate for people fit to work over the past seven years (2010)**, while the cost of living has gone up.
- ✓ It has **not increased the basic rate for disabled recipients and other recipients since 2014**, while the cost of living has gone up.
- ✓ It has **not brought any major changes to Social Development's regressive policies** (e.g.: family units, compulsory deduction of the Canada Pension Plan income after the age of 60, appeal procedures, etc.)
- ✓ It has not re-evaluate the criteria for a person to be recognized as disabled.
- ✓ It has catalogued social policies, **numbered them and established a table of contents**.
- ✓ It has **extended the validity of consents to disclosure from 3 to 6 months**.
- ✓ It has **agreed that people will no longer need to be social assistance recipients to apply for a disability pension from social assistance**.
- ✓ It has **decided to broaden coverage (starting April 1st 2018) of the program Healthy Smiles, Clear Vision**, to offer eye exams, glasses, and dental care to all children under the age of four not covered by a government or private insurance plan. Government will pay the deductible for children already insured⁴.
- ✓ In June 2017, it has released a report on providing support for people with a disability.
- ✓ It has given 11 million dollars to Living SJ to fight against poverty, but has given **nothing to the rest of the province, especially its northern portion, where poverty rates are as elevated as in Saint John**⁵.

Seniors: *Many positive activities!*

Score 7

Realities in 2017

In 2017, New Brunswick's population includes **152,590 individuals aged 65 years and over**, reflecting the addition of 4,728 seniors since 2016⁶.

The total median income of seniors was **\$23,110 (2015)** while the total median income of all New Brunswickers was \$30,480⁷.

In 2016, **the number of seniors working at a job continued to increase (+500)**⁸. Since 2008, their numbers has more than doubled and we expect that trend to prevail in 2017. We feel that more and more seniors are in the work force because their retirement income is insufficient.

Many seniors only receive **Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement**. These seniors, if they live alone, receive a maximum of \$585.49 per month from Old Age Security and \$874.48 from the Guaranteed Income Supplement, for a total of \$1,460 monthly or **\$17,520 annually**. **The poverty line according to the Market Basket Measure for a person living alone in New-Brunswick in 2015 was \$19,232**⁹.

The percentage of low income persons 65 years and over (Market Basket Measure) has continued to rise, from 3.7% in 2008 to 9.0% in 2015¹⁰.

Government action/inaction in 2017

- In May, it released the Family Plan report on fostering healthy aging and support for seniors.
- The report entitled *An aging strategy for New Brunswick* was tabled and the provincial government has agreed with its 77 recommendations. **The province has created a Healthy Aging Provincial Roundtable that will guide and oversee the implementation of the report.**
- A provincial project to improve independence for seniors was created. **This new program** will assess health in seniors and aims to keep seniors living at home longer.
- The Financial and Consumer Services Commission is holding consultations across the province to find solutions to help prevent and respond to the financial abuse of seniors. **Public meetings will be held in November-December 2017 and citizens may provide their suggestions through the Internet.**
- The new Minister for Seniors and Long-term Care, **Lisa Harris, toured all nursing homes** in province during 2017.
- The province appointed Norman Bossé as Seniors' Advocate in 2017; he will also continue as Children and Youth advocate. **An additional budget of \$150,000 has been allocated and a half-time employee has been hired, but nothing more.**
- The province **published its *Seniors' Guide to Services and Programs*** in May 2017.
- The provincial government is planning to privatize the management of extramural and Tele-Care services over to Blue Cross-Médavie. **This privatization will have a very detrimental effect on services to seniors.**

Realities in 2017

According to data supplied by the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, the New Brunswick Prescription Drug Plan, 70,000 families (150,000 citizens in this province) did not have a prescription drug plan. The Plan was intended to be funded by the provincial government, employers without a plan in their workplace, and individuals and families wishing to join the drug plan. When the plan was adopted, financial contributions to the plan have come solely from government, and individuals and families.

Government action/inaction in 2017

In March 2017, the Plan included 8,479 individuals, compared to 5,979 in March 2016, a **2,527 (30%) increase**¹².

In 2017, the provincial government:

- ❖ paid Blue Cross-Médavie \$22.4 million and individuals paid \$4.6 million for the 2016-2017 fiscal year. In 2012, the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, evaluated that the government's portion of the plan would be between \$25 million and \$35 million for 70,000 families¹¹. **A lot of money for a small number of families.**
- ❖ wanted to combine this provincial drug plan with existing plans serving social assistance recipients and seniors, and perhaps other programs. **This was not done.**
- ❖ wanted to negotiate with Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador on better practices and approaches to drug plans. **Negotiations are ongoing.**

Social Housing: *Lack of real progress!*

Score 4

Realities 2017

Housing is one spending point that grabs a large portion of citizens' income. In principle, people should not spend more than 30% of their income before taxes on housing, with basic services included. For citizens receiving social assistance or low-income workers, finding secure housing they can afford is a tremendous challenge.

The cost of apartments has increase in 2017 compared to last year (Table 1). In 2017, total annual income for a single individual on social assistance was \$7,920; this means that 83% of his or her income was needed to pay for a simple bachelor apartment. For single disabled individuals (gross annual income: \$10,632), it's 72%. Finding suitable housing entails extra difficulties for people with a handicap, and therefore rental rates will often be higher than indicated in the table below. A single parent with one child (gross annual income: \$19, 291) who seeks a two-bedroom apartment will spend 48% of his or her gross annual income on housing.

As for a single parent with one child who works at minimum wage (gross annual income: \$22,880) in 2017, a two-bedroom apartment will take up 47% of his or her salary.

Table 1. Annual average cost of apartments in New-Brunswick, (2016) and 2017¹³ (\$)

	Bachelor	1 bedroom	2 bedrooms	3 bedrooms
Monthly cost	547 (535)	639 (632)	778 (763)	892 (896)
Annual cost	6,564	7,668	9,336	10,704

One social policy that offers great support to these low-income citizens is access to social housing that will cost them a maximum of thirty percent of their gross income. In certain provinces this maximum is set at 25%.

The province has three housing programs: Public, Rural and Native housing, the Rent Supplement Assistance Program, and the Non-Profit Housing Program with an agreement. There is also a list of citizens and families waiting for social housing. As of March 31st 2016, it had 5,796 applicants, while in 2017 they numbered 5,113, or 683 fewer applicants¹⁴.

Government action/inaction in 2017

Government has done an online survey and created an advisory committee to help develop a long-term affordable housing strategy.

The number of citizens on the waiting list for social housing has decreased by 683 in 2017, but it is certainly too high.

Regulated childcare services: *A lot of ground has been covered!* **Score 7**

Realities 2017

Regulated childcare establishments provide an essential service to New Brunswick families, and are especially valuable for women, who are still largely responsible for children and are increasingly present in the workforce.

In NB, the number of spaces in regulated establishments is on the rise, having increased by 3,161 spaces since 2014-2015, which is good news for families. There was also an increase in 2017.

Table 2. Number of spaces in regulated establishments in New Brunswick, 2014-15 to 2017¹⁵.

	Infants	Pre-school	After school	Total
2014-2015	1 970	10 707	12 880	25 557
2015-2016	2 116	10 772	13 963	26 851
December 2017	2 242	11 234	15 242	28 718

March 2016 – 73% of childcare establishments are operated by the private sector and 27% by the non profit sector¹⁵.

It is quite obvious that a major challenge facing a family is first to find a space for their children in a licensed daycare and then to have the financial means to register them in the daycare. The average estimated cost per day of full-time childcare services in 2016-2017 was \$34.46 for infants, \$30.22 for pre-schoolers and \$18.80 for school-aged children¹⁵. For families with an income below \$50,000, government assistance is available but no help is provided to other families. The amount of assistance can vary between \$2,861.20 and \$15,506.00 per year, depending on income and number of children. As seen in the chart, single parents spend 10.38% of their net income on childcare fees, while a couple with two children will spend 28%, or more than double.

The amount of government funding provided through Quality Improvement Funding Support is set at \$28.50 per day for the youngest children (full time) and \$24.25 per day for children between 2 and 13 years of age (full-time)¹⁷.

Table 3. Examples of percentage of net family income as basis for setting childcare fees in New Brunswick, 2017¹⁶.

	Single parent, 1 pre-school child	Couple, 2 incomes each \$35,000, 1 infant, 1 toddler
Gross Family Income	\$35,000	\$70,000
Net family Income	27,551.67	\$54,990.78
Childcare fees (less amount from the Day Care Assistance Program)	\$2,861.20	\$15,506.00
% of net income spent on childcare fees before income tax	10.38%	28%

Staff remuneration and turnover also present challenges for daycares. The average hourly wage for trained staff working in licensed daycares was \$16.16 for primary staff, \$18.43 for administrator-primary staff, and \$22.09 for administrators, at the end of March 2016. Staff turnover at that time was 28%, the fourth highest rate since 2008-2009¹⁵.

In 2016, the final report of the New Brunswick Child Care Sector Task Force, *Valuing Children, Families and Childcare*, was published. Its first recommendation is extremely important, as it proposes an in-depth transformation of the system: ***We recommend the movement, over the long term, toward a publicly funded and managed system delivered by a not-for-profit early learning and childcare system***¹⁶.

We believe this is the way to go but whether the present government will take that route remains to be seen.

In December 2017, government announced that 28 million dollars from the Quality Improvement Funding Support will be invested in childcare establishments.

Government action/inaction in 2017

- + 839 spaces were created during the 2016-2017 fiscal year. Between April and August 2017, 251 spaces became available¹⁵.
- + Government announced investments to create Early Childhood Centres but it has **not required this new system to be non-profit and publicly funded**.
- + In August 2017, a joint 71-million-dollar investment over three years was announced by the federal government (30 million \$) and the provincial government (41 million \$) to improve learning and care services for pre-school children¹⁸.
- + In December 2017, Brian Kenny, Minister for Early Childhood Development, **announced a 12.2 million \$ investment to transition daycares into Early Learning Centres**.
- + Ottawa and Fredericton intend to fund 4.7 million \$ in grants for the purchase of equipment and supplies to improve the quality of services in Early Childhood Centres. **This funding will only be available in 2018 and 2019**¹⁹.
- + Annual subsidies totalling 7.5 million dollars will be put in place shortly to improve quality in Early Childhood Centres, which will mean \$2.50 per day per space for children 2 to 5 years old¹⁹.
- + It was also anticipated that more spaces would be available for infants. **That plan has not yet been implemented**²⁰.
- + Government expressed a wish to create a policy that would provide needy families with quality childcare services. **This has not been done**.

- ✚ Government has developed a training program in early childhood literacy for educators in early childhood learning daycares. **Training sessions are currently being held²¹.**
- ✚ In December 2017, the government announced a \$28-million investment over four year, starting only in 2019-20, in childcare through the Quality Improvement Funding Support program. **The fund will only be available after the September 2018 election.** The money will increase qualified early childhood educators hourly wages from \$16 to \$19²².

Realities 2017

Today, NB still has 100,000 citizens living on a low income. **One-fifth of its children (20.3%- 2015) are living in poverty.** Minimum wages yield an annual gross income of \$22,880, which is well below the Market Basket Measure, (at \$38,463, latest available data-2015) **and** the number of people using Food Banks and Community Kitchens sits at the second highest level since 2009 (19,769 persons in 2016- latest available data). Nearly two-thirds are social assistance recipients and one-third are children under the age of 18²³.

The 2009-2014 Poverty Reduction Plan contained concrete recommendations and schedules to help reduce poverty, but the new plan for 2014-2019 lacks teeth. There are a number of proposals but **few are directed towards concrete action and almost none have schedules for completion.**

Government action/inaction in 2017

- The Gallant government has transferred responsibility for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) to Tourism, **a department that has no relation to poverty reduction. It is clear that poverty reduction is not a priority for this government.**

- In May 2017, the Crown Corporation held an Economic Summit on economic opportunities related to economic inclusion, and released its Plan for families, which included a section on poverty and support for disabled persons. **The basic rates for social assistance recipients and for people with disabilities have not increased since 2014.**

- In October, the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation launched a campaign themed *Small Acts, Big Impacts*. This campaign asked citizens to do a volunteer act, for instance donating food to a food bank, assisting literacy efforts or driving a person living in poverty. **This campaign was presented as a way to win the fight against poverty in the province. Volunteer efforts are certainly not going to reduce poverty, as evidenced by the proliferation of food banks over the past 20 years and the increasing number of its clients.**

- ESIC includes three advisory committees: one on rural and urban transportation systems, one on a subsistence income, and one on pay equity and one-stop services. In December 2017, the Advisory Committee on Rural and Urban Transportation Systems submitted its report to government. When it comes to the challenges of transportation in rural areas, one of the recommendations is similarly **that Government provide grants to community organizations, services clubs and private sponsors, etc. who run volunteer driver programs.**

Conclusion

The province has introduced a Poverty Reduction Plan in 2009, but it does not seem that the initiatives to reduce poverty have had any effect, since the number of citizens earning a low income is practically the same this year as it was eight years ago.

The salary for workers earning minimum wage was just above inflation in 2017, but their situation in the workplace has not improved, since employment standards did not improve under Brian Gallant's government.

For several years, the situation has deteriorated for thousands of women, men, and children on social assistance. The basic rate for those able to work remained unchanged in the last seven years, for the other categories it has not increased, since 2014, but also restrictive and punitive policies have not been modified.

Some improvements have been made in two sectors: daycare and seniors. The Gallant government has invested more money in daycare and is expecting to establish 300 Early Learning Centres. For seniors, the government has accepted recommendations from the *New Brunswick Aging Strategy* report and has created a Healthy Aging Provincial Roundtable to determine how it will guide and implement this report.

Finally, the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, which is responsible for the Poverty Reduction Plan, seems to have lost its way, since hardly any worthy initiative has been implemented this year.

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