

Letter to Hon. David Alward

FROM WORDS TO ACTION

In a little over a week, your government will table its budget for fiscal year 2012-2013. For us and for citizens in the province who live in poverty, it will be an opportunity to judge if your government is serious about making the fight against poverty a priority.

Mr. Alward, in 2009, you have publicly endorsed the document "Overcoming poverty together". The intent was *then to reduce poverty by 25% and extreme poverty by 50% by 2015 and make significant progress towards achieving a sustained economic and social inclusion*. In the Throne Speech of 2011 you 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 reiterate 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*.

Since you signed the document and made these commitments, however, your government has not taken many 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 to receive their salary increase scheduled for September 2011.

Concerning the 41,000 citizens living on social assistance, their financial situation has remained dreadful except for 3.3% of them. With regard to the seniors, your decision to increase this year their financial contribution from \$250 to \$500 for drugs does not help to reduce poverty. Since the 2008 economic crisis, more than 18,000 people must rely on food banks to survive. We currently have over 64 food banks each month attended by thousands of workers, citizens on income assistance and seniors. Thirty-five percent are children.

According to the National Council of Welfare Canada, our province is the one which is helping the less its poorest citizens, those who rely on income assistance. Since 2009, the situation has not changed: out of the four categories receiving basic social assistance, i.e. the single people, people with disabilities, single parents with a child or couples with two children, the single parents with children are the only ones who are getting assistance at a rate higher than two other provinces in Canada.

Looking at the total income of these four categories, again, single parents with one child is the only category with a total income above the other three Atlantic provinces.

We must therefore admit that you have a long way to go to reach your formal commitment to reduce poverty in our province.

Mr. Alward, you were no doubt sincere when you signed the plan to reduce poverty and you gave your word that reducing poverty was a priority for you. We believed you at the time, but your words must now be translated into action if we want poverty to be reduced in our province.

Your plan to reduce poverty called for the establishment in April 2011 of vision care and dental care for low-income children. In your Throne Speech of 2011, you said that your government would introduce next year a new program of vision care and dental care for children from low income families. We therefore expect to see in the next budget money set aside for such a program.

In your plan to reduce poverty, you also promised to begin implementing by stages as of April 2012 a prescription drug program for uninsured people in the province. In your Throne Speech of 2011, you said that the program is being developed. Therefore, we expect to see in your budget some funds set aside for this program also.

In the Throne Speech and in your State of the Province Speech, poverty has always been mentioned as one of your concerns. For these words to become reality and actually translate into poverty reduction, you must make the necessary investments. One of the best ways is to increase the basic social assistance rates of thousands of individuals and families in the province. As you are certainly aware, the vast majority have not received a raise since October 2008 while the cost of products and services has continued to climb. We therefore expect to see, in the 2012-2013 provincial budget, money added to the Department of Social Development budget to increase basic rates.

Your budget will identify your government's priorities for the upcoming year. Citizens, community organizations working with the poor, the Common Front for Social Justice and the entire civil society all expect you to take decisive action to finally begin the long road towards reducing poverty in our beautiful province.

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