



Ontario Campaign 2000

Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Submission

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Campaign 2000 is a national, non-partisan network of 120 national, provincial and community partner organizations committed to working together to end child and family poverty in Canada. Ontario Campaign 2000 is a provincial partner with 67 member organizations across the province.

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Introduction

Ontario's next Poverty Reduction Strategy should be bold in its scope and its commitment to comprehensive poverty eradication. Dedicated investments to reduce, and eventually eradicate, poverty in our province can build the more inclusive and equitable province Ontario Campaign 2000 coalition members have long envisioned.

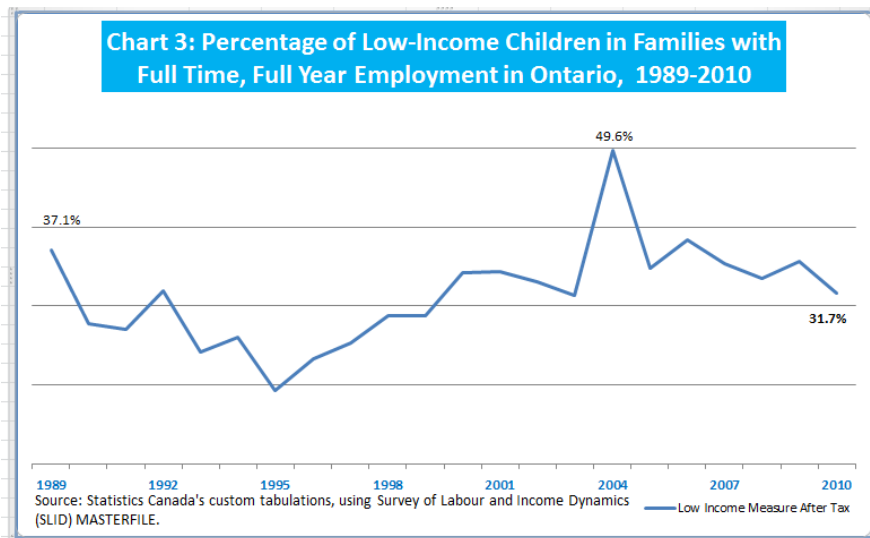
Today, nearly 1 in 7 children in Ontario continue to live in poverty with their families. The next PRS should continue efforts towards reducing poverty among children and families and expand its framework to reduce overall poverty in the province-including among children and families- by 50% before the end of 2018. Ontario should eradicate deep poverty in the province by 2018 and implement targeted programs to address the disturbing trend of women, Indigenous and racialized people, people with disabilities and newcomers being more vulnerable to poverty than others in the province.

As part of the PRS, a poverty reduction lens should be applied to policy making and decisions in all ministries to ensure that new programs and ideas are enhancing Ontarians' opportunities rather increasing their vulnerability to poverty. Given the disproportionate levels of poverty among marginalized groups such as women, Indigenous and racialized people, people with disabilities and newcomers, applying an equity lens to policy decisions is equally critical.

What children and families living in poverty need from Ontario's next Poverty Reduction Strategy:

1. A Good Jobs Strategy

According to recent data, 31.7% of children in Ontario live in poverty despite having a parent who works full time all year. Working arrangements that are precarious, part time and contract without benefits can impoverish families forced to choose between meals and medical expenses. According to the Law Commission of Ontario, Approximately 22% of jobs in Ontario are precarious, "having low wages and at least two of three other features: no pension, no union and/or small firm size."ⁱ People disproportionately vulnerable to precarious work include "women, racialized persons, immigrants, Aboriginal persons, persons with disabilities, older adults and youth."ⁱⁱ



The Ontario government needs a Good Jobs Strategy to ensure access to stable jobs that can sustain families and single people and lift them out of poverty. This strategy should start with increasing the minimum wage to \$14/hour in 2013 and indexing it to inflation. The minimum wage should be determined from a poverty eradication lens, so that when earnings for a person working full time, full year are calculated based on a 35 hour work week, the worker lifts herself at least 10% above the Low Income Measure (LIM). In order to keep pace with the cost of living, the minimum wage set 10% above the LIM should be indexed to inflation on an annual basis.

In 2009, the rise in temp agencies prompted the Ontario government to add new protections for temporary agency workers. Without resources for enforcement of the Employment Standards Act (ESA), few workers can benefit from these new protections. Violations of the ESA continue and many workers report unpaid wages. Funding in order to hire new employment standards officers needs to be invested immediately and government should ensure that ESA enforcement is adequately resourced. Investing in ESA enforcement could offset costs in other areas. For example, many workers facing unpaid wages often have to resort to social assistance to support their families.

The Ontario government also needs to modernize the Labour Relations Act to give low wage workers in the service sector better access to unionization. The act reflects an era of large workplaces and full time employment when employees worked with the same employer for their entire career. Today, employees are more likely to work in the service sector, their workplaces tend to be smaller and they work for an employer for a shorter tenure.ⁱⁱⁱ

An employment equity act and strategy will also reduce the disproportionate poverty levels among members of historically disadvantaged groups, including women, Indigenous and racialized people and people with disabilities. At the federal level, Employment Equity legislation applies to government regulated industry and includes “programs of positive remedy for discrimination in the Canadian workplace” to “ensure access without discrimination both to the available opportunities and to the possibility of their realization.”^{iv} Ontario should follow suit with an employment equity strategy to reduce marginalization and to promote equity and justice.

2. Stronger Income Supports

A More Robust Ontario Child Benefit

Families need an increase in the maximum Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) level so that it provides those receiving income through employment and/or social assistance and/or the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the National Child Benefit Supplement, with sufficient support to address children's needs. In order for the OCB to meet the changing needs of children and families, it should be increased and fully indexed to inflation so that it keeps up with the rising costs of essential items like food, clothing, housing and utilities.

The OCB is a powerful tool that contributed to reduced child and family poverty in Ontario in the first phase of the PRS. The benefit of increases in the OCB should be experienced by families receiving social assistance as well as low income working families. In the future, basic needs rates should not be restructured for any families receiving income through Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.

Simply put, families on social assistance should benefit from the full impact of an increased OCB.

A Social Assistance program that Promotes Health and Dignity

Increasing the shamefully low social assistance rates of Ontario's 892,099 recipients^v is long overdue as current rates do not even cover food, housing and clothing costs.^{vi} As of December 2012, a single parent on Ontario Works (OW) with one young child received \$940 a month plus a maximum annual Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) of \$92^{vii} - even with provincial and federal child benefits and tax credits included, these families lived \$9,116 below the LIM.

Ontario needs positive social assistance reform that promotes equity and justice. The next poverty reduction strategy must stipulate that reforms to social assistance should only be made if they have the effect of reducing poverty. And there should be no "winners and losers" – no one on social assistance should end up with less money as a result of any reform. It should also outline the investments that will be made in reforming the system, as the only real way to make meaningful, positive change is to invest in improvements. If the right reforms and investments are made now, savings will come later. A holistic positive reform of social assistance will also require improving the many other services people need. Employment supports and services, child care services, mental health supports and services, and many others need to be improved.

The social assistance system has been eroded over the past twenty years. Rates are dangerously low and well below the reality of the cost of living in Ontario. Ontario Works benefits for a single person would have to increase by 56% and the Ontario Disability Support Program by 22% to have the same purchasing power as they had in 1993. We must invest in the health and dignity of people on OW and ODSP, and not continue to allow their incomes to erode.

The next poverty reduction strategy must also recognize that people with disabilities face special barriers and need a specialised program. The lack of accommodation in the labour market, the lack of

good quality jobs, and the often lifelong nature of disability mean that people may move in and out of the labour market, and on and off of assistance. Government must take responsibility for ensuring that people who experience this kind of relationship to work are guaranteed an adequate income and the additional supports they require to live in dignity.

Positive reforms that can be made immediately include:

- Making a lone parent's pursuit of child support voluntary. If they choose to pursue child support, they should be able to retain at least 50% of the support.
Changing the definition of spouse. The definition in the Income Tax Act should apply to social assistance recipients.

3. Tailored Solutions to Reduce Poverty among Marginalized Groups

The second PRS needs to create a targeted strategy to reduce poverty among racialized and Indigenous people, people with disabilities, women, recent immigrants and other marginalized groups. Poverty rates are disproportionately high among these groups and the progress of the first PRS in reducing these poverty levels was extremely difficult to track. Collecting disaggregated data will allow us to know if poverty reduction measures are working for communities suffering from higher levels of poverty. Employment equity legislation will also help address discrimination in hiring and ensure that qualified candidates from marginalized groups join the workforce.

In the next PRS, we need more policies that will address the unique challenges faced by Indigenous people. In 2002-03, 25% of First Nations children lived in poverty^{viii} on Ontario's 207 reserves.^{ix} Shockingly, 49% of First Nations children under 6 who live off-reserve and 57% of First Nations children in large cities lived in poverty in 2006 (LICO-BT).^x Higher rates of poverty among Indigenous children and families are linked to the traumas of colonization and attempted assimilation, like the residential school system, experienced by current and past generations.^{xi} Today, Aboriginal education and child welfare are grossly underfunded,^{xii} housing on some reserves is deteriorating or uninhabitable^{xiii} and food insecurity affects 35% of urban Aboriginal children.^{xiv} In 2011, the Aboriginal unemployment rate was 13.7% compared to 7.7% for non-Aboriginals in Ontario.

There should be a more targeted approach to reduce poverty among First Nations people and the urban Indigenous population. Aboriginal communities are made up of many young parents, many young single mothers without high school graduation and their unique needs need to be addressed. As part of formulating targeted solutions and implementing them, disaggregated data must be collected to understand whether poverty reduction efforts are effective.

The next PRS should include the establishment of an Equity and Anti-Racism Directorate (EARD). The EARD could provide for the collection and analysis of ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data across all provincial Ministries and public institutions. It could also complement this data gathering and analysis by providing an ongoing monitoring and program development role for the effective implementation of comprehensive and inclusive equity and anti-racism policies and practices.

4. Strong Public Services across the Province

Accessible, safe, affordable and high quality child care services

Child care and early childhood education are essential to poverty reduction in Ontario, allowing parents to pursue education and employment to realize their economic potential. Ontario does not have enough licensed child care; there are only enough spaces for one in five children under age six and at least 20,000 children are on a waiting list for a child care subsidy in Toronto alone,^{xv} while Canada is last in per-child funding for early education among similar countries.^{xvi}

The introduction of full-day kindergarten (FDK) was a welcome shift toward universally accessible, publicly-funded early childhood education and care services (ECEC) for 4 and 5 year olds. However, the implementation of FDK coupled with long term underfunding of the child care sector and the lack of extended day and summer programming leaves a major gap for many families. The next PRS can address this gap with extended before and after school care for children 0-12 years of age.

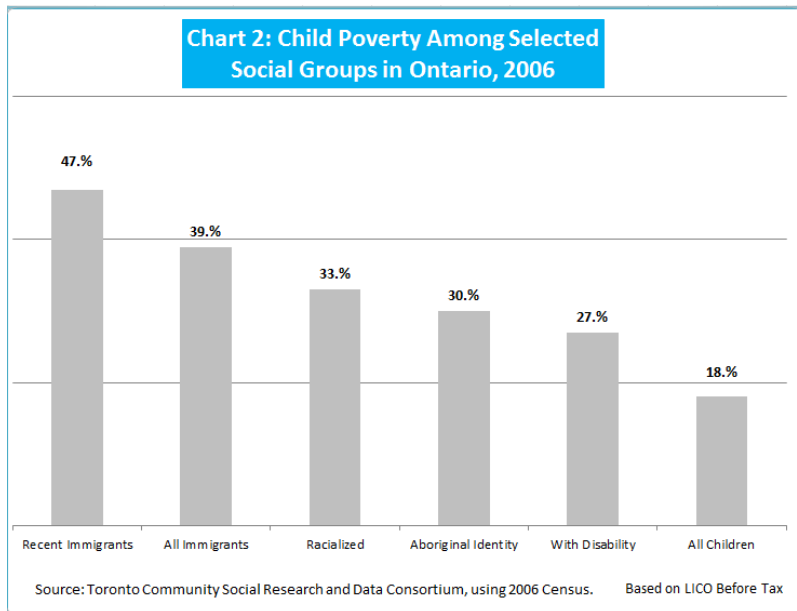
In order to address accessibility and affordability issues, the province needs to look at both the medium term and now by starting the process of developing a modern childcare policy for Ontario's families with a key interim measure being an increase the number of child care subsidies.. In order to ensure licensed child care is more affordable to parents, the province should undertake various initiatives including work with school boards to eliminate rent costs for child care programs that are under financial strain..

The provincial government needs to index provincial funding for child care to inflation as in the health and education sectors. Short-term child care funding changes aimed at preventing collapse have not significantly addressed increased parent fees, stagnant wages for staff and closures of high quality centres. Once the sector is stabilized, the Ontario government must ensure that child care is as affordable as in Quebec where fees are \$7/day and Manitoba, where fees are about \$20/day. Ontario should move toward a system of \$10/day child care.

Adequate Funding for Education & Poverty Reduction in Schools

Public schools are a critical venue in which the province can ensure equality of opportunity between students from a wide range of family incomes and identities. Currently, however, family income has a "powerful influence on children's chances for success" in Ontario's publicly funded schools.^{xvii} Schools with the highest average family income have an advantage when it comes to fundraising for enrichment and enhanced resources, raising five times as much as schools with the lowest family income. This puts children in lower income schools at a double disadvantage with less access to learning-enhancing resources both at home and at school.^{xviii}

Today, nearly 1 in 7 in Ontario, still live in poverty. Child poverty rates are even higher among marginalized communities: 1 in 2 children of immigrants, 1 in 3 racialized children and children of lone female parents,^{xix} roughly 1 in 4 First Nations children^{xx} living on reserve and children with disabilities live in poverty (LICO-BT). In each case, children live in poverty because their families do.



In recognition of these disproportionately high poverty levels, the 2008 PRS named the Ministry of Education’s Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) as a strategy to reduce poverty among marginalized students. The LOG is “intended to finance programs such as nutrition programs, homework clubs, reading recovery and one-on-one support within the classroom.”^{xxxi} In recognition of the exceptionally high levels of poverty among immigrant students, the province also provides an English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) Allocation within its Language Grant to school boards.

Recent research has shown that in Toronto, due to funding constraints faced by school boards, the funds flowed through the LOG’s demographic allocation are not necessarily spent on programs for disadvantaged and low income students and/or students who speak English as second language.^{xxii} In order to ensure that funds are spent on poverty reduction programs, the Province should require a transparent accounting from school boards for this funding, and take steps to ensure that the total “demographic portion” of the LOG and the total ESL/ELD Allocation are spent as intended.

Invest in Affordable Housing

The next PRS must move forward with action on affordable housing. A lack of safe, affordable housing threatens the health and well-being of low income Ontarians.^{xxiii} Children “suffer disproportionately when low income families are forced to pay unaffordable housing costs at the expense of other essential items like food or heating.”^{xxiv} Children are at a greater risk of poor health outcomes, including asthma, due to poor ventilation and air quality, inadequate heat, dampness and mould often found in inadequate housing.^{xxv} Rising housing costs remain a major expense for low income families. One in three Toronto households spends 30% or more of its income on housing.^{xxvi} A single parent with one child on Ontario Works currently receives \$590 in shelter support while the average one bedroom in Toronto is \$1,010.78. Choices between the basics of food, clothing and transportation are unavoidable.

In 2012, 64.5% of food bank users in Ontario were low-income, rental market tenants.^{xxvii} In early 2012, 156,358 households were on waitlists for affordable housing, a 26% increase since 2007.^{xxviii} There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence about homelessness, but it is difficult to track Ontario’s

'hidden homeless' population, which includes people who sleep in cars, stay on the couches of friends and family, in motels or who are homeless in rural and remote areas, among others.^{xxix}

Introducing a Housing Benefit to assist the high proportion of low income people making rent payments in private market housing would reduce the strain on low-income families. Provincial and federal governments should work collaboratively to establish targets and timelines to increase the supply of affordable housing and ensure aging housing stock is maintained. The Ontario government needs to address the gap in homelessness prevention caused by the elimination of the Community Start Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) in 2012 which helped social assistance recipients to establish secure housing. Without access to CSUMB, many women and children fleeing violence will be forced into Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters which are already over capacity. In 2011-12, Ontario VAW emergency shelters provided services to 12,000 women and 8,000 children.^{xxx}

Enhanced Health and Well-being

Investing in poverty reduction requires proactive investments in mental and physical health as a preventative measure. Along with accessible health care, factors related to housing, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, food security, job security and adequate income shape overall health.

Ontario can take action to address the "healthy immigrant effect," a term that refers to the fact that while immigrants' health is generally better than that of the Canadian-born, it tends to decline as their years in Canada increase.^{xxxi} Ontario should repeal the 3-month Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) waiting period for newcomers. According to a 2011 study, "the benefits to eliminating the three-month wait for OHIP would be seen in decreasing downstream costs in health care as well as in areas beyond health, ultimately resulting in numerous cost savings for the province."^{xxxii} The province should also extend health coverage for refugees whose health care benefits have been reduced or cancelled as a result of the changes to the Interim Federal Health program by the Federal Government while continuing to press the federal government to reverse its policy. Enhanced mental health and addictions programs are also needed within Ontario's communities. We need to extend access to dental, drug and health care benefits for all low income people so that health concerns no longer compromise people's ability to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

Meaningful Supports for Youth

Too many young people in Ontario struggle to escape poverty and to access education, training and employment opportunities. Youth keen to pursue post-secondary education in Ontario must contend with undergraduate tuition rates that have increased by 244% since 1990.^{xxxiii} In 2012, the Ontario Tuition Grant was introduced to help offset tuition costs, but two-thirds of Ontario's students – mature students, international students, college students and parents pursuing part-time study – are excluded from eligibility.^{xxxiv} For youth to escape poverty and achieve success in the competitive job market, tuition rates must be reduced or at least frozen, releasing students from the burden of huge debt loads.

Providing meaningful supports and programs are critically needed to ensure that marginalized youth in Ontario can escape poverty and low income. Youth who have been in the care of child welfare services

require additional supports in the often difficult and lonely transition to independence. Research shows youth who age out of government care are more likely to face economic hardship, unemployment or underemployment.^{xxxv} Being on their own, these youth are much more likely to rely on social assistance or disability than their peers and more likely to become homeless; in one study, 43% of homeless youth reported involvement in child welfare.^{xxxvi} Foster care should not be a one-way ticket to adult poverty but instead, an opportunity to learn how to succeed independently. The province should heed the recommendations from the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to extend the age of Extended Care and Maintenance agreements from 21 to 25.^{xxxvii}

Research shows that when poverty is combined with social barriers such as isolation, racism, social exclusion or inadequate housing, it may contribute to violence.^{xxxviii} Some youth living in impoverished communities do not have community resources to rely on to counterbalance these barriers. Targeted, place-based initiatives should be implemented by organizations that recognize and address the barriers that perpetuate poverty, such as racialization, immigration status, age, disability and gender inequity. Such place based initiatives should be available to youth in urban and rural settings and recognize the unique needs of both groups.

In 2013, the unemployment rate for Ontario youth aged 15-24 fluctuated between 16% and 17.1%, trending above the Canadian range of 13.5% to 14.5%.^{xxxix} Outside of Atlantic Canada, Ontario is now the worst province in Canada for high youth unemployment.^{xl} In order to provide young people in marginalized communities with opportunities, infrastructure projects, like the building of affordable transit, should include community benefit agreements that can provide otherwise unavailable educational, apprenticeship, training and sustaining employment opportunities for young people from low income and isolated communities.

Affordable Transit

The province can play a role in reducing the isolation of low income people in areas where the cost of public transit poses a barrier to their ability to participate in their communities, procure sustaining employment or complete training. The province should provide funding for discounted transit passes for low income individuals. Transit expansion should be undertaken from an equity lens, targeting areas and populations that are currently underserved.

Support for poverty reduction in rural Ontario

Government needs to acknowledge rural poverty is different than urban, and that rural poverty needs its own solutions. Our Campaign 2000 partners emphasize that one is not worse than the other, but rural poverty reduction requires some additional strategies. For example, most after school programs do not work in rural communities when children are bussed to and from school, so alternative program and funding models are needed.

Addressing rural transportation issues is a key starting point in poverty reduction program design. For example, centralizing programs can limit access for rural participants unable to travel great distances.

Rural realities should be considered and program definitions should be expanded to meet rural realities. For example, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program or LEAP currently does not address rural sources of heat – propane, wood, furnace oil.

Conclusion

Decreases in the child and family poverty rates during the first PRS provide a strong foundation of progress that the province can build upon. In the next PRS, Ontario Campaign 2000 calls on Ontario to be bold and comprehensive by committing to reducing poverty by 50% among all groups in the province *and* eradicating deep poverty by 2018. In order to do this, we need dedicated investment in poverty reduction policies and programs and to apply poverty reduction and equity lenses to decisions made across ministries. By developing a good jobs strategy, implementing stronger income supports, tailoring solutions that reduce poverty among marginalized groups and strengthening public services across the province, we can make poverty history in Ontario.

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ⁱⁱ Ibid.

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^{iv} 1984's Report on Equality in Employment quoted in Verma, A. (2012). Employment Equity: Taking Action. Health and Racism Working Group.

East Mississauga Community Health Centre.

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^{vi} Toronto Medical Officer of Health. (2012, September 7). Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket – Toronto 2012. Retrieved from: http://www.toronto.ca/health/pdf/boh_foodbasket_2012.pdf. And Tekla Hendrickson (2010). "I'm Still Hungry" Child and Family Poverty in Ontario. Best Start Health Nexus. Retrieved from http://www.beststart.org/resources/anti_poverty/pdf/child_poverty_guide_rev.pdf

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^{xvi} Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. (2009). OECD, UNICEF: What is Going on Canada? Child Care Watch Newsletter, Winter 2009. Retrieved from: <http://www.childcareontario.org/?p=1083>

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^{xviii} Ibid.

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Appendix 1 – Ontario Campaign 2000 Partners:

Ontario Social Development Council (Toronto), Interfaith Social Assistance Review Coalition (Waterloo), Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (Toronto), Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (Toronto), Ontario Association of Social Workers (Toronto), Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services (Toronto), Children's Mental Health Ontario (Toronto), Ontario Public Health Association (Toronto), Ontario Federation of Labour (Toronto), Ontario Public Service Employees Union (Toronto), Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (Toronto), Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (Toronto), Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (Toronto), United Steelworkers of America, District 6 (Toronto), Ontario Association of Family Resource Programs (Toronto), Ontario Association of Food Banks (Toronto), Provincial Council of Women of Ontario (Niagara-on-the-Lake), The Community Social Planning Council (Toronto), Children's Aid Society of Toronto/Metro Campaign 2000 (Toronto), Family Service Association of Toronto (Toronto), Our Kids Our Future (Toronto), South Asian Family Support Services (Toronto), Community Development Halton (Burlington), Social Planning Council of Peel (Mississauga), Peel Poverty Action Group (Mississauga); Peterborough Social Planning Council (Peterborough), Durham Child Poverty Task Force (Ajax), 905-Area Faith Community Leaders; Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton-Wentworth (Hamilton); Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton (Ottawa), Ottawa-Carleton CPAG (Ottawa), Children's Aid Society of Ottawa-Carleton (Ottawa); Hastings & Prince Edward Legal Services (Belleville); Southwestern Ontario CPAG (London), Sisters of St. Joseph of the Diocese of London, Ontario (London), CAPC Niagara Brighter Futures (Niagara); Lakehead Social Planning Council (Thunder Bay), North Bay Labour Council; Income Security Advocacy Centre (Toronto), Elgin St. Thomas Health Unit (Sudbury), Ontario Association of Interval Transition Housing, Canadian Tamil Women's Community, Children's Aid Society of Peel, Legal Assistance of Windsor, Nellies, Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, Workers Action Centre (Toronto), Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, African Canadian Social Development Council, Social Planning Council of Sudbury, Social Planning Council of Cambridge & North Dumfries, Kingston Lennox, Frontenac & Addington Children's Services Steering Committee, Ontario Public School Boards Association, Community Development Council Durham, Early Childhood Community Development Centre (St Catharines), The STOP Community Food Centre; Northumberland Coalition Against Poverty; the Help Centre of Northumberland; Northumberland Community Legal Clinic; Family Service Ontario; Interim Place (Mississauga), Sistering, Toronto & York Region Labour Council, Association of Ontario Health Centres.