

OPEN LETTER FROM MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY GROUP ON TORONTO'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

June 23, 2015

Dear Mayor Tory, Deputy Mayor McConnell, Executive Committee Members, and City Councillors:

As members of the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Advisory Group, we applaud Mayor Tory, Deputy Mayor McConnell and all of Council for committing to implement a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy to improve the lives of residents and make Toronto a more liveable city.

Today's release of Toronto's Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy is an important step forward to building a prosperous city for all.

The Interim Strategy outlines 24 recommendations and 74 actions to build a city "where everyone has access to good jobs, adequate income, stable housing, affordable transportation, nutritious food, and supportive services."

We welcome the Strategy's recommendations for City action to:

- Increase the availability of affordable housing in mixed income and inclusive communities, for example, through funding incentives and inclusionary zoning;
- Increase the number of licensed child-care spaces, allocate tax-base funding for child-care fee subsidies, and expand flexible child-care models that accommodate shift and precarious work schedules;
- Make transit affordable through a fare-geared-to-income Presto Pass;
- Ensure people on income assistance can afford healthy food;
- Become a living wage employer and incent inclusive economic development, particularly in areas of need, through a community benefits program for city purchasing and capital investments, and a social procurement program.

We applaud the Strategy's focus on improving the way City government makes decisions to ensure that the impact of budget choices on levels of poverty is considered, and that equity impacts of decisions are considered in day-to-day planning and decision-making.

Finally, we are very pleased the Strategy recognizes that "reducing poverty will require investments – by the City and by other governments and sectors", and we welcome the commitment to "explore options for dedicating stable revenues to address the root causes of poverty."

Mayor Tory said last November: "We cannot look ourselves in the mirror and say this city is truly great when tens of thousands of kids across the city are growing up in poverty."ⁱ

We agree. It is deeply troubling that our city, among the wealthiest in Canada, has the highest overall poverty rate ⁱⁱ, the highest rate of low-income workers ⁱⁱⁱ, and the fastest growing gap between rich and poor ^{iv} among major Canadian cities. The impact of poverty on Toronto's children, youth and families is of particular concern with youth unemployment rates close to 20 per cent ^v and children from the lowest income group 40 per cent more likely to be born with a low birth weight. ^{vi} Breaking the cycle of poverty needs to happen with our children and youth.

Toronto's reputation as a world-renowned city of opportunity is in jeopardy given the real and significant barriers to success faced by newcomers, racialized groups, First Nations people, individuals with visible and invisible disabilities like mental illness and addictions, and too many women, children, and youth.

All of us pay the price for Toronto's high level of poverty and inequality - to the tune of billions of dollars a year spent on health care, justice, social services, shelter costs, and lost productivity and tax revenues.

We need to think differently about solutions. Building *prosperity for all* must become a political and community priority. Leaders of all levels of government and all sectors of society need to join with residents of all backgrounds to reduce and eliminate the growing divide in our city.

Cities can play a leadership role in poverty reduction because they are employers, investors, service deliverers, conveners, taxers, public opinion leaders, and advocates for provincial and federal action.

Indeed, more than 40 cities across Canada are developing or implementing poverty reduction strategies.

We urge City Council to approve the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy at its July meeting, and, in November, to approve a final Poverty Reduction Strategy that includes clear targets and timelines for progress in improving access to jobs, income, housing, food, child care, transit and other effective services, along with dedicated funding to achieve those targets.

Let's work together to make Toronto a place where everyone has the opportunity to live a decent life, regardless of neighbourhood, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status or religion.

Sincerely,

Simone Atungo, Toronto Community Housing

Pedro Barata, United Way Toronto

Idil Burale, Positive Change TO

Brad Cartan, Our Place Community of Hope

John Campey, Ralph Thornton Centre

Pat Capponi, Voices From the Street

Joe Abbey-Colbourne, Faith in the City

Mike Creek, Working for Change

Debbie Douglas, OCASI - Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

Angie Draskovic, The Yonge Street Mission

Diane Dyson, The Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto and WoodGreen Community Services

Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Ryerson University

Jeff Gruchy, Lumacare

Rob Howarth, Toronto Neighbourhood Centres

Anita Khanna, Family Service Toronto/Campaign 2000

Colette Murphy, Atkinson Foundation

Sevaun Palvetzian, CivicAction

Michael Polanyi, Children's Aid Society of Toronto

Letecia Rose, Nia Centre for the Arts

Kara Santokie, Toronto Women's City Alliance

Leila Sarangi, Women's Habitat of Etobicoke

Richard Senechal, DUCA Credit Union

Sharon Simpson, Toronto and York Region Labour Council

John Stapleton, Open Policy

Winston Tinglin, Social Planning Toronto

ⁱ Newstalk 1010, 2014. Almost 1/3rd of Toronto kids live in poverty. Posted November 14, 2014 by David Woodard. <http://www.newstalk1010.com/news/2014/11/14/almost-13rd-of-toronto-kids-live-in-poverty/print>.

ⁱⁱ Based on Percentage of Total Population below Low Income Measure – After Tax in Canada’s largest cities. City of Toronto Statistics Canada, T1FF, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stapleton, John and Kay, Jasmine, 2015. The Working Poor in the Toronto Region: Mapping working poverty in Canada’s richest city. April 2015. Toronto: Metcalf Foundation.

^{iv} United Way Toronto, 2015. The Opportunity Equation: Building Opportunity in the Face of Growing Income Inequality.

^v Toronto Foundation, 2014. Toronto Vital Signs Report 2014, p. 67.

^{vi} Toronto Public Health, 2015. The Unequal City 2015: Income and Health Inequities in Toronto. April 2015.