

By most international indicators, we live in a privileged society. Most of us can eat and dress well, live comfortably, and provide for our families. However, too many people across our province are living with the stark reality of poverty, and Niagara is no exception. The on-going need for food banks, the growing reliance on school breakfast programs, and a continual request for charitable donations for items such as coats and boots offer short-term support but do not tackle the root issues that lead people into poverty or keep them trapped there. We can all agree that comprehensive collective action must be taken against poverty because the cost of not taking action is far too high, for persons living in poverty and society as a whole. The Brock Observatory's 2013 report pegged the cost of the consequences of poverty in Niagara at \$1.38 billion annually.

The biggest barrier to good health is not smoking or physical inactivity, it is poverty. We know that having access to quality health care such as hospitals is important, but our health care system is poorly equipped to address the most important factors that actually affect one's health such as affordable healthy food, secure housing, sufficient income, quality stable employment, and access to education. We need to shift our conversation from focusing so heavily on treating sickness to one that prevents illnesses before they take hold. This shift is not easy – it is far too easy to blame individuals for poor lifestyle choices, when deeper societal issues and challenges are the primary culprits.

Thankfully, all three major parties in Ontario understand that poverty in our communities needs urgent attention. Their unanimous commitment to poverty reduction legislation in 2009 followed on the province's historic first Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2008. And last year, the Ontario government held consultations across the province on subsequent steps to take in the next five-year Strategy, which is expected for release early this year. The cornerstone of the initial Strategy was the Ontario Child Benefit and it has lifted 47,000 Ontario children and their families out of poverty. The OCB has proven that investing in poverty reduction pays great dividends. Now, we need to see the government make further commitments to other facets of poverty, such as affordable housing, social assistance, minimum wage increase, and dental care. We know a tough fiscal climate continues, but investment is needed now more than ever – every government has fiscal choices and reducing poverty must be prioritized.

We urge you, the reader, to stay informed and ask candidates in the upcoming Niagara Falls by-election what they plan to do about poverty when they come knocking on your doors during the campaign. You can find out more information about the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, as well as the work of the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, by visiting www.wipeoutpoverty.ca

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