

Parents need more money in their pockets

Growing Up Poor: Child Poverty in Ontario

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The thousands of programs that aim to help impoverished children are small pieces of a much larger puzzle.

"There is no question that child poverty is a growing challenge in York Region," said Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor.

"Certainly, we know that addressing child poverty means addressing family poverty."

The Human Services Planning Board is looking at addressing family poverty by tackling issues such as the need to provide more affordable housing and more rental housing and addressing precarious employment and under-employment.

"Ensuring families find stable employment is the first step to lifting children out of poverty," said Taylor, who is chair of York Region's Community and Health Services Committee and co-chair of the Human Services Planning Board.

There are provincewide initiatives to ensure children don't go hungry, receive dental care and access to recreational and educational programs, but politicians and advocates say eliminating childhood poverty comes down to ensuring parents have an adequate income.

"A family having sufficient income is one of the ways we can reduce child poverty," explains Peterborough MPP Jeff Leal.

He says the Ontario Child Benefit is the cornerstone of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy for children. In 2015, the provincial government increased the maximum child benefit to \$1,336 per child under the age of 18.

"One million children in 500,000 low- to moderate-income

families are benefitting from this," he said, noting the province is putting money in the pockets of families by continuing to raise minimum wage.

On Oct. 1, minimum wage was increased from \$11.25 to \$11.40 per hour.

"We'll continue to do that every October based on the Ontario Consumer Index Price," he says.

The MPP says the province also has approximately 4,000 different programs offering nutritious breakfast, lunches and snacks.

"The ability to succeed in school means you have to start the day with a great breakfast and many folks think that is the most important meal of the day," he explains, noting an estimated 800,000 children take advantage of the programs.

Healthy Smiles, a provincially-funded program, services approximately 460,000 children with free preventive, routine, and emergency dental services for children and youths 17 and under from low-income households.

At the federal level, the Liberal government replaced current Canada Child Tax Benefit, National Child Benefit and Universal Child Care Benefit with one child benefit that will put more money in wallets of low- and middle-income families as of July, 2016. The program will pay up to \$6,400 per child under six and up to \$5,400 per child for those aged six through 17. Higher earners will receive less money under the child benefit.

"This is an initiative that will lift 100,000 children out of poverty and will benefit nine out of 10 Canadian families," Peterborough MP Maryam Monsef says. "It is going to be tied to income so that it provides the greatest support to those that need the help the most."

Monsef says poverty is not just about dollars and having food on the table, but also having a dignified roof over your head.



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Growing Up Poor: Child Poverty in Ontario is a Metroland Media Special Investigative Series, by reporters Jonathan Zettel, Reka Szekely, Todd Vandonik and Melinda Cheevers, that spotlights child poverty and to looks behind it to reveal problems and identify solutions

Part of the Liberal Party's election platform was promising \$20

billion over 10 years for social infrastructure.

"These investments will prioritize affordable housing," she explains. "It will also provide supports to municipalities to maintain rent-geared-to-income subsidy."

She adds bringing back the long form census would allow a more accurate measure poverty across Canada. "Knowledge is power," she says.

Municipalities, too, do what they can to help feed low-income families and subsidize recreational and educational programs.

"You want kids to be healthy and have opportunities to make friends and socialize," said Diane Therrien, city councillor and

facilitator of Community Education and Engagement for the Peterborough Poverty Reduction Network, adding, "But everything is little pieces to the bigger puzzle." Therrien says these programs are helpful but are not solutions.

"It remains a fact if their parents are living in poverty - they (children) are going to be living in poverty," she said, noting an estimated 20 per cent of children in Peterborough are living in poverty.

"The idea that when you are walking by a playground and there are 100 kids there, quite a few of them are living in poverty is scary."

- with files from Lisa Queen



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