

20 April 2020

The Honourable Minister Todd Smith  
Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services  
Poverty Reduction Strategy  
315 Front Street West, 3rd Floor  
Toronto, Ontario  
M7A 0B8



**Re: Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force Submission to OPRS Consultation**

Dear Honourable Minister Smith,

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force is currently focused on service coordination for immediate, medium and long-term COVID 19 response associated with its strategic priorities: food security, housing & homelessness, health equity, income and employment security.

Now, more than ever, we need to examine the inequity in our labour systems, the holes in our safety nets and to approach all health and social support programs holistically and considering the dignity of individuals.

The Ontario Province in its Poverty Reduction Strategy is seeking to:

- Make life more affordable
- Prepare people for jobs
- Connect people to places
- And build healthier and safer communities.

At this time in our global history with the COVID 19 pandemic, a poverty reduction strategy is critical. We must consider strengthening existing programs and investing in structures which will carry us through this emergency and into a future recovery period.

Our Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force partners with 52+ community-based and government social agencies including Indigenous partners, planning tables, community groups; universities, institutes, policy-makers and people with “personal, lived experience<sup>1</sup>” in Bruce County and Grey County.

Multi-sectoral collaboration is a core principle of effective poverty-reduction work. We’ve created a platform that allows us to examine the root causes of poverty in our community.

Poverty is more than simply not having enough income – it can also be about discrimination in all its forms, the challenges of physical or mental illness; finding better and more affordable housing; securing reliable transportation to access jobs, healthcare and education; having stable and quality jobs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Grounded expertise” refers to people with lived/living experience with low income.

<sup>2</sup> [Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy](#), What We Heard About Poverty So Far, Employment & Social Development Canada, 2018.

## Enough to Thrive On: making life more affordable

Labour markets are not the same across the province. Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, Grey Bruce reported its lowest unemployment rate in 19 years of 2.4%<sup>3</sup> and yet we are experiencing an increase in precarious and seasonal employment. At the county level 17.9% (Bruce County) and 20% (Grey County) of children/youth (aged 0-17) still live below the poverty line compared to the Ontario average of 14.4%. Our 2019 [Living Wage](#) for Bruce County and Grey County is \$18.39 which is far above most incomes available to working class families.

Even basic needs are increasingly out of reach for those living on low-income and the result is that people with insufficient income face impossible choices every day. "Do I pay the hydro bill or get my child the coat they need?" Some 20% of Grey Bruce households don't have enough food<sup>4</sup>. Food represents a significant portion of everyone's budgets. In Grey Bruce we are seeing an increase of single adults and seniors using the food banks. One in three seniors are at risk of malnutrition in Ontario. Forty-five percent of seniors who are admitted to hospital in Grey Bruce are malnourished<sup>5</sup>.

**Recommendation:** Implement a minimum wage that more closely aligns with living wage rates in Ontario, in alignment with the cost of living<sup>6</sup>.

**Recommendation:** Implement a guaranteed income for working-age Ontarians.

**Recommendation:** Commit to targets for reduction of household food insecurity.

**Recommendation:** Commit to the annual measurement of the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Ontario by making the *Household Food Security Survey Module* a core module in the *Canadian Community Health Survey*.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that the data collected by the *Canadian Income Survey* includes local level food insecurity prevalence and severity data.

**Recommendation:** Commit to the annual *Nutritious Food Basket* local measurement which is used in rural communities.

**Recommendation:** Engage meaningfully with local Indigenous communities and organizations to better understand what food security and food sovereignty mean to them and understand their diverse local assets and needs, while respecting the self-determination of each community and organization.

## Enough to Thrive On: preparing people for jobs

The limited money that people receive with low-paying jobs and/or Ontario Works/ODSP makes it very difficult for people to live on. For example, it means that often people are forced into taking shared accommodations which are not good situations. It means that children don't bring packed lunches to schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Four Market Labour Planning Board, Dec 2019

<sup>4</sup> Nutritious Food Basket Survey, Grey Bruce Health Unit, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Malnutrition Task Force, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Cost of living - including housing costs based on average market rents, utility costs, the cost of a nutritious food basket, transportation, communication devices including telephone and internet, and all personal basic needs.

**Recommendation:** Increase the amount people can earn while accessing social assistance benefits needs so they have a safety net to leave OW/ODSP.

**Recommendation:** Invest in wraparound supports and support positive employment outcomes for clients through life stabilization, employment readiness, and skill development to match local labour needs and make connections to good employment.

**Recommendation:** Increase the income cut-offs for government dental programs and offer dental across all ages.

**Recommendation:** Invest in universal childcare for all.

**Recommendation:** Increase funding for people who enroll in education programs (provide wrap around support and financial incentive).

**Recommendation:** Ensure sufficient funding, inter-ministerial collaboration and administrative alignment so that OW and ODSP recipients receive wrap-around services, such as childcare, housing, mental health treatment, addictions treatment, and employment supports necessary to achieve employment.

**Recommendation:** Social Assistance program design must have the flexibility to account for the unique circumstances and challenges of rural communities, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach.

## **From Housing to Homes: building healthier and safe communities**

Housing is a basic need and a human right. Affordable housing creates safe and healthy neighbourhoods. A Housing First approach and investment in wrap around human services is essential to reducing poverty, ending homelessness, preparing people for employment; and creating healthy and safe communities.

Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, low vacancy rates for rental<sup>7</sup> exist in Bruce County (1.4%) and Grey County (1.7%). Many of our residents are unable to find safe, secure and affordable housing<sup>8</sup>. This translates into 29% of Bruce County and 30.5% of Grey County renters in core housing need. Ontario's housing Supply Action Plan cites lack of rental housing supply and we are certainly experiencing that in our rural communities in Grey Bruce.

**Recommendation:** Invest in Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) funding to build on work to reduce homelessness and poverty in Bruce County and Grey County. The funding stabilizes households and builds connections to employment.

**Recommendation:** Continue to provide the current level of investment in housing programs and services and look to new ways of increasing the investment in order to ensure repairs, renovation and maintenance of existing stock as well as increasing access to new affordable and supportive housing options.

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<sup>7</sup> A healthy vacancy rate for any community is 3%.

<sup>8</sup> CMHC, 2019

**Recommendation:** Invest in the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit to social assistance recipients who are tenants, without any clawback of OW or ODSP benefits.

**Recommendation:** Invest in more tools, incentives and support are needed to address rental supply shortages and community housing repair backlogs, and to develop new community housing supply across the province.

**Recommendation:** Engage in discussions with Indigenous organizations and stakeholders to develop an off-reserve Indigenous housing strategy.

## **We All Live Here: ensuring diversity, inclusion and engagement of people with lived/living experience**

Not everyone experiences life in the same way. Understanding the realities of living in poverty means drawing upon the invaluable expertise of our Community Voices. Their first-hand knowledge of systemic barriers is invaluable in co-creating innovative solutions.

Our community can only be as healthy as its most vulnerable community member. We support the government looking for opportunities to make progress on its goals, with emphasis on support to working-age males, seniors and rural communities. And a special focus on mental health and youth; and addictions.

**Recommendation:** Recognize that a Digital First policy can create unplanned barriers for people to access services through online applications. We should address the stigma and “poverty bashing” for people on OW/ODSP to own cellphones that connect them to resources and services.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that people with lived/living experience are consulted on the strategies.

## **Connecting people to places**

With the closure of offices and schools under the COVID19 pandemic response, access to the internet has never been more critical. Our local school boards are quickly adapting to the Ministry of Education’s directive to move to virtual classrooms and online education. Schools are mobilizing funds to distribute laptops to students and to determine if families have access to the internet. However, our rural communities are hindered by the lack of high speed internet and the cost of even low speed internet.

**Recommendation:** Invest in broadband services in rural communities.

The lack of public transit to connect people with jobs and schools is an issue in for our rural communities. Under the COVID19 pandemic response, public transit infrastructure has been put on hold but it and additional investments are critical for economic recovery.

**Recommendation:** Invest in public transit in rural communities to connect people with jobs and schools.