



28 November 2025

Honourable Minister Michael Parsa
Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
Government of Ontario

Re: Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force Submission to Ontario's 2025–2030 Poverty Reduction Strategy

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force (PTF) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Government of Ontario's consultation on the 2025–2030 Poverty Reduction Strategy.

In Bruce and Grey Counties, poverty is not an abstract policy issue—it is a daily reality for thousands of residents who face rising living costs, stagnant incomes, and chronic housing shortages. As rural regions with aging infrastructure, limited transportation options, and a rapidly rising cost of living, Bruce and Grey Counties are experiencing poverty at levels far above what a prosperous province should accept. A bold, data-driven strategy is urgently needed.

Poverty in Ontario has risen significantly since 2020, and **local conditions mirror—and often exceed—provincial trends**. The number of residents unable to meet basic needs has accelerated sharply, particularly among groups facing systemic inequities, including Indigenous residents, lone-parent households, youth, newcomers, and people living with disabilities.

In Grey County alone, **one in four children now lives in poverty**, while Bruce County continues to see some of the **highest child-care-cost-to-income ratios in rural Ontario**, limiting parents' ability to work or pursue training.

A new provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy offers a critical opportunity to address the structural conditions that pull people into poverty—and trap them there—while strengthening the social and economic foundations of rural communities like ours.

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force and our United Way partners stand ready to support a **community-informed, evidence-based provincial strategy** that ensures everyone can live with dignity, access safe and affordable housing, secure stable employment, and receive the supports necessary to thrive.

The Government of Ontario can meaningfully alleviate poverty and build the social and economic infrastructure needed for the future prosperity of the province by:

1. Laying the groundwork for financial security, good jobs and strong rural economies
2. Getting people housed and keeping them housed by expanding non-market affordable housing, investing in supportive housing, and strengthening renter and tenant protections

3. Ensuring the sustainability of Ontario's community services infrastructure to continue delivering the critical services that meet the unique needs of communities across the province

1. Laying the groundwork for financial security, good jobs, and strong rural economies

Income inadequacy is at the heart of persistent poverty in Bruce and Grey Counties. Despite recent adjustments to ODSP, rates remain deeply insufficient—especially in rural regions where **transportation, food, and housing costs are substantially higher than the provincial average.**

- A single ODSP recipient receives **\$1,408/month**, yet the **local living wage average rate is \$24.60/hour**, translating to a monthly income need far above current assistance levels.
- Ontario Works (OW) rates remain frozen, providing just **\$733/month**, significantly below the income needed for basic survival in any Bruce–Grey community.

These inadequate rates are reflected in skyrocketing local demand for food and income supports. In 2023–2024:

- **Food bank usage increased by over 40% across Bruce–Grey**, with many food banks reporting **record-high first-time users**.
- The **cost of the Nutritious Food Basket rose 15–22% locally**, outpacing income growth.
- Nearly **60% of food-insecure households have employment income**, underscoring that low-wage, precarious work is failing to keep families out of poverty.

Precarious work is particularly widespread in Bruce and Grey Counties, driven by tourism, agriculture, and seasonal employment. Many workers lack benefits, stability, or predictable hours—conditions that make it impossible to maintain long-term housing, childcare, or financial stability.

To ensure all Ontarians—including rural residents—have the means to live with dignity and participate fully in the workforce, we urge the Government of Ontario to:

- **Raise ODSP and OW rates to livable levels** and ensure annual cost-of-living indexing for both programs.
- **Increase the provincial minimum wage to match regional living wages**, recognizing significant cost-of-living differences across the province.
- **Remove punitive financial barriers during transitions to employment**, including temporary continuation of benefits and earned-income exemptions that prevent the “poverty trap.”
- **Invest in rural employment supports**, including transportation solutions, digital access, and regionally tailored training geared toward economic diversification.
- **Build pathways to stable, well-paying jobs**, especially for youth, newcomers, and individuals facing systemic barriers.

2. Getting people housed—and keeping them housed—through expanded non-market housing, supportive housing, and stronger tenant protections

Housing affordability is the most urgent and rapidly worsening crisis in Bruce and Grey Counties. Local data shows:

- **Average rents in Grey–Bruce have increased by more than 40–60% since 2019**, with one-bedroom units now regularly exceeding \$1,400–\$1,700/month.
- **Vacancy rates remain below 1%** in many communities—functionally zero.
- **More than 50% of renters are living in core housing need**, unable to secure affordable, suitable housing.
- Rural homelessness has grown dramatically, with both counties documenting **sharp increases in chronic homelessness**, encampments, and hidden homelessness.
- Indigenous residents continue to face disproportionately high barriers to suitable, safe, and affordable housing.

Deeply affordable housing options are disappearing, while market rents climb far beyond what low-income households can manage. Local shelters, motels, and emergency systems are overwhelmed, and both counties continue to rely heavily on **costly, short-term emergency accommodations** without sustainable provincial funding.

To address rural housing need and ensure residents can both access and maintain stable housing, the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force recommends that the Ontario government:

- **Invest substantially in non-market and supportive housing**, recognizing the lack of private-sector solutions for deeply affordable units in rural communities.
- **Provide provincial surplus land to non-profit and co-operative housing providers**, ensuring new developments are deeply affordable.
- **Create a provincial non-profit acquisition fund** to preserve existing affordable rental housing stock before it is lost to private redevelopment.
- **Support rural municipalities with dedicated funding for housing project development**, given limited in-house planning and development capacity.
- **Strengthen eviction prevention measures** and ensure low-income renters have access to legal supports, arrears programs, and rent stabilization.
- **Fund Indigenous-led housing solutions**, developed and delivered by Indigenous communities.
- **Expand emergency and transitional housing for women and children fleeing violence**, recognizing the acute service pressures across Bruce and Grey.

3. Ensuring the sustainability of community services that rural residents depend on

Community agencies across Bruce and Grey Counties provide critical services—food access, housing stabilization, mental health supports, transportation assistance, harm reduction, settlement services, and more. Yet these organizations are under unprecedented strain.

Local realities include:

- **Historic levels of demand**, particularly for food security, mental health, addictions, housing, and income navigation supports.

- **Chronic staffing shortages**, worsened by low wages, job precarity, burnout, and lack of sustainable funding.
- **Rapidly increasing operating costs**, with no corresponding increases in program funding.
- Declining volunteerism and charitable giving—key pillars of rural service delivery.

The non-profit sector is a major contributor to the Bruce–Grey regional economy, but without stable provincial investment, the capacity of organizations to meet growing community needs is rapidly eroding.

We urge the Government of Ontario to:

- **Transition to long-term, stable, flexible operational funding** that reflects the true cost of service delivery—including inflation and competitive wages.
- **Develop a province-wide nonprofit workforce strategy**, addressing recruitment, retention, training, and wage parity.
- **Fund innovative rural service models**, including mobile, outreach-based, hub-and-spoke, and co-located services.
- **Support initiatives to restore volunteerism and strengthen charitable giving**, critical in rural communities.
- **Create a dedicated provincial home for the social services sector**, improving coordination across ministries and systems.

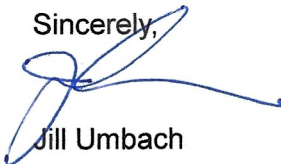
In Conclusion

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force thanks the Government of Ontario for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the 2025–2030 Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Rural poverty in Bruce and Grey Counties is deepening and accelerating. A bold, measurable provincial strategy—grounded in evidence, equity, and community expertise—is urgently needed. We stand ready to work with the provincial government, municipalities, Indigenous partners, and community organizations to build a future where everyone in Bruce and Grey Counties has the resources, housing, supports, and opportunities they need to thrive.

Now is the time for coordinated action, sustained investment, and meaningful commitment to reducing poverty across all Ontario communities—including rural and northern regions too often left behind.

Sincerely,



Jill Umbach

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