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Poverty fight needs Ottawa

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"We simply can't afford poverty anymore."

-- Senator Art Eggleton

A recent Ontario study found that poverty costs Canada about \$7.5 billion in health-care costs and between \$8 billion and \$13 billion in lost productivity. That's every year. The total bill -- more than \$30 billion annually -- is more than half the federal deficit.

That's the dollar cost. The human cost for the estimated 3.4 million Canadians -- including about 800,000 children -- living in poverty is almost impossible to calculate. But it includes issues such as poor health, substandard or no housing, insufficient nutritious food, deficits in education, fewer opportunities for a successful future.

In common parlance, it's downright depressing to be poor. It's bad for individuals and it's bad for communities.

Liberal Senator Art Eggleton chairs a Senate committee that spent two years studying poverty. The result is a 290-page report with 74 recommendations. Eggleton is on tour, trying to drum up public support for a national strategy on poverty. He wants people to pressure the Stephen Harper government to establish a strategy and put substantial funding behind it.

In a meeting with The Spectator's editorial board, Eggleton acknowledged the Jean Chretien governments, in which he was a cabinet minister, failed to create such a strategy during good economic times. But he's hoping the Harper Conservatives will see the economic value of taking co-ordinated action on poverty reduction, regardless of the recent economic downturn.

Eggleton was in Hamilton this week at the invitation of the 25 in 5 Hamilton Network for Poverty Reduction, whose goal is to reduce poverty by 25 per cent in five years.

Over the past three to five years, local agencies and organizations have forged a collaborative model to replace the old silos of unconnected action. This collaborative approach has, among many other things, helped reduce the number of emergency shelter beds in the city by helping people find stable housing. The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, launched by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation, has engaged more than 900 organizations and 42,000 individuals around a common community aspiration: Make Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child. Community-based agencies, such as SISO, help people work toward independence from social assistance. Other communities look to our collaborative model for inspiration.

These types of initiatives, in communities across the country, have made huge differences in spite of the lack of a cohesive strategy on the part of the federal government. Such community-based work must continue and spread, regardless of federal involvement.

But Eggleton is absolutely right that we can't afford poverty. And the feds must get with the program, not because it's the moral thing to do, but because it's the smart thing to do -- not just for those living in poverty, but for all of us.

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