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Budget must face up to poverty

Investments in families must continue to be made for positive change

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Ontario is moving out of the global economic recession, but low-income residents continue to feel the impact of job losses, housing insecurity and the inability to afford healthy food.

The government of Ontario has committed to a poverty reduction strategy that includes reducing the number of children living in poverty in Ontario by 25 per cent in five years. Investments in the early years -- such as full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds, new income supports, after-school programming and investments in communities -- are components of the strategy.

Investing in families and communities must remain a priority in Thursday's budget if our province is to truly recover and prosper.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and community partners encourage the government to expand and accelerate investments that will focus on moving families out of poverty.

Several important pilot projects in Hamilton have demonstrated phenomenal results, and other programs will have an immediate and lasting impact on poverty reduction in our community and across the province:

No one should go hungry

Families are going to food banks in numbers never before seen in Hamilton: there were more than 30,000 visits to local emergency food providers in December. Seventy per cent of those families are in receipt of provincial social assistance programs; food banks and hot meal programs are in crisis mode with limited resources to meet the growing demand, but there are some immediate steps the province could take to ease the pressures.

* A \$100-per-month healthy food subsidy (proposed by the 25-in-5 Network) would assist individuals receiving social assistance obtain healthy food.

* Continuation of the Special Diet Allowance for individuals with health-related dietary needs.

* A "farm-to-food bank donation tax credit" proposed by the Ontario Association of Food Banks would encourage farmers to donate surplus locally grown food providing healthy fruits and vegetables to thousands of families.

Everybody needs a home

It is vital that individuals and families are supported in maintaining affordable housing; one in five renter households in Hamilton are at risk of homelessness because they pay more than 50 per cent of their income toward rent. Local programs have proven to be extremely cost-effective in leveraging resources to help keep families housed.

In the budget, the province should invest in flexible funding options that have an immediate local impact.

* Increase funding for local rent banks -- a low-cost but tremendously effective program that prevents homelessness.

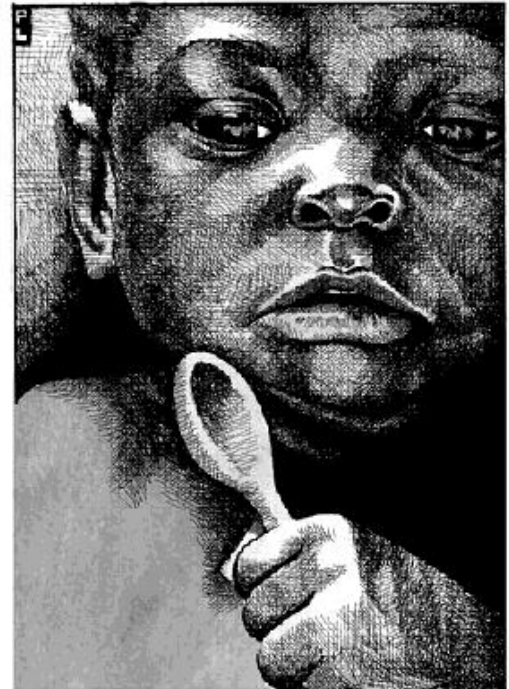
* Enhance community-based initiatives such as rent supplements/housing allowances, trusteeships and utility arrears programs.

* Expand the Transitions to Homes program that is building on the success of a number of "housing first" approaches, and yielding extraordinary results in moving individuals from situations of homelessness into stable housing with supports.

Supports for children and their families

Full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds will be rolled out over the next several years, but close to 1,000 families remain on the waiting list for subsidized child-care spaces in Hamilton. The provincial commitment to full-day learning must also recognize gains made over the past four years for children aged 0-6 under the Best Start initiative.

* Continue provincial advocacy for a robust federal role in early childhood development and renew provincial commitment to ensure high quality early childhood services under the Best Start Initiative can be maintained.



* Increase access to recreation programs for kids and families through co-ordinated before- and after-school programs; expand the "focus on youth" community/school-based summer camp program.

* Work with local partners to expand school nutrition and community literacy programs.

Healthy communities

A regulation change by the Ontario government will encourage new doctors to practise in Hamilton -- great news as many low- income families do not have access to a family doctor - which is critically important for illness prevention. The public health department has identified that Hamiltonians living below the poverty line are three times more likely to have diabetes, lung disease and other health illnesses than the general population.

* The Nurse-Family Partnership program is an effective, evidence-based approach to improving the health and life-course of first-time low-income mothers and their children, and positively impacts school readiness, and should be supported.

Income supports and skills development

Hamilton's unemployment rate has spiked up to 8.9 per cent. Supporting workers who become displaced as a result of job loss while ensuring that adequate income supports are available is critical. Investments in the skills development of our workforce is essential for Ontario's future economic prosperity.

* Enhance access to the highly successful Second Career strategy to assist displaced workers build skills for the future.

* Reform Ontario Works to ensure that people transitioning from Employment Insurance to social assistance can maintain some assets (including RRSPs).

* Ensure the social assistance review currently under way addresses the inadequacy of rates.

Assistance for Hamilton's unique needs

The downloading of social services to municipalities created an untenable financial situation for Hamilton, placing services for the most vulnerable members of the community at risk. The provincial government has recognized Hamilton's unique needs over the past six years and committed to the long-term upload of social service costs off the municipal tax base.

* The provincial government should respond to Hamilton's unique financial pressures until social services have been fully uploaded off of the municipal tax base.

Tom Cooper is director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and a former freelance columnist with The Hamilton Spectator.

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