

END POVERTY NOVA SCOTIA NETWORK

SURVEY OF NOVA SCOTIA PARTY LEADERS

ON POVERTY REDUCTION

ELECTION 2017

GREEN PARTY RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

IMPLEMENTING A POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

Nova Scotia has one of the highest rates of poverty in Canada. This issue has been of concern to numerous service based organizations and anti-poverty advocacy groups, as well as to some politicians, for a number of years. Developing a poverty reduction strategy was the subject of a community based advocacy campaign in 2007 and 2008.

In response to a government appointed Poverty Reduction Working Group report (June 2008) recommending the development of a provincial poverty reduction strategy, in 2009, just prior to the election, the government of the day published what purported to be a poverty reduction strategy in a paper entitled *Preventing Poverty, Promoting Prosperity*.

Unfortunately this fell far short of all the recommendations in the Working Group report. Goals were not well developed or comprehensive enough, and there were no timelines, outcome measures, or reporting mechanisms. It also fell considerably short of other Poverty Reduction Strategies being developed in other provinces in Canada at the time (Newfoundland; Quebec) and those that have been developed since in every province and territory, with the exception of British Columbia.

Preventing Poverty, Promoting Prosperity is not now to be found on the government website and so to all intents and purposes Nova Scotia does not have a Poverty Reduction Strategy at all.

Rates of poverty have not declined since 2009 and we believe that a well developed comprehensive poverty reduction strategy and plan could and should form the basis for provincial go

vernment action to reduce and end poverty in Nova Scotia.

Questions: If your party forms government:

Will you, in consultation with stakeholders, develop and implement a holistic, effective, and comprehensive poverty reduction plan with goals based on the social determinants of health, clear time lines, outcome measures and reporting mechanisms?

Yes

Over what time period will you do this?

To be determined

TRANSFORMING THE EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Two years ago, the Nova Scotia government, through the Department of Community Services, embarked on a process to transform the Employment Support and Income Assistance program.

This transformation is long overdue. ESIA regulations and policies exert a great deal of control over the daily lives of income assistance recipients, provide inadequate benefits that are well below any recognized measure of poverty, poor work incentives, limited educational or training programs and supports to facilitate transitions to employment, and the program fails to adequately meet the daily needs of clients with disabilities and other health issues.

Question: If our party is elected to government:

Will you, in a timely fashion, proceed with ESIA transformation in ways that will, amongst other things, make social inclusion its overall goal, reduce regulatory and bureaucratic control over the daily lives of recipients, provide better support to meet the needs of people with disabilities or chronic health conditions and better work incentives/supports to enable viable transitions to employment or education?

Yes

Will you also introduce progressive increases to income assistance that will close the large gap between welfare incomes and the Market Basket Measure of poverty?

We would rather implement a guaranteed livable income so that the working poor, seasonal employees, freelancers, those with precarious employment, and people who need time out of the labour market to care for aging parents or young children would also benefit.

Over what period of time will you complete this transformation?

To be determined.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Housing that is affordable means not spending more than 30% of household income on housing. In Nova Scotia such households include a high proportion of lone parent households, one-person households, recent immigrants, persons with a disability, Aboriginal-led households, youth households, and senior-led households.

In Halifax (HRM), households with incomes of \$29,566 or less in 2016 (20% or over 30,000 households) were not able to afford average market rents. In 2014, Metro Regional Housing Authority reported there were approximately 1,181 seniors, 666 families and 386 individuals waiting for public housing. Households with low to moderate income households (\$29,567-\$52,266 per year) also face affordability challenges.

In rural areas of Nova Scotia similar problems of affordability exist, but little evidence based research has been conducted on the problem.

With high rates of low income, especially in communities with high levels of precarious employment and unemployment, unaffordable housing appears to be a growing problem.

An aging population, especially in rural areas, also means that maintaining and repairing older homes or the ability to find appropriate alternative affordable accommodation that is safe, accessible and affordable is a problem for people with disabilities and for low income seniors.

Non-market housing alternatives (public housing; cooperative housing; rent supplements) can provide safe, accessible and affordable places to live, but the supply is not meeting the need and the existing non-profit social housing stock requires upgrading and repair.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you, in consultation with stakeholders, adopt an affordable housing plan that increases the supply of safe, affordable housing that meets peoples' needs?

Yes, but we would primarily focus on implementing a living wage and a guaranteed livable income to tackle these issues most fairly and efficiently.

In particular, will you strengthen the non-profit affordable housing sector, upgrade the existing stock of social housing, and seek ways to increase rent supplements?

Our 2017 platform states that Green MLA's would work toward affordable adequate housing and poverty reduction.

We believe that with a guaranteed livable income and a living wage, these issues would be less necessary.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness has been a longstanding and visible problem in metropolitan Halifax where a number of shelters run by charities have struggled for some time to accommodate people,

including some families, who otherwise would be sleeping on the street. Homelessness is also becoming an increasingly visible problem in Cape Breton and in small towns in rural Nova Scotia. There is reportedly also an increase in 'invisible' homelessness in the form of couch surfing, especially amongst youth in both urban and rural communities.

Homelessness is likely to be more prevalent in areas where the stock of affordable and safe housing, and especially of social housing, is low; but many other factors such as domestic violence, trauma, mental health and drug and alcohol abuse and the availability of wrap around social services and supports to address these issues also contribute to high levels of homelessness.

While homelessness has traditionally been addressed through the provision of casual overnight shelter it is in danger of becoming a permanent way of life for some. It is now recognized that in the long-term, housing people in shelters and increasing shelter provision is not the answer. There is a new understanding that multiple personal and systemic factors contribute to homelessness and that these must be addressed through homelessness prevention and housing first strategies that amongst other things provide support and wrap around services.

Increasing the supply of safe, affordable non-market housing options and especially rent supplementation will certainly help, but alongside this there is a need for more wrap around services and to increase the capacity of the non-profit sector to provide these services.

In addition, prevention must also ensure that better institutional protocols and practices are in place so that when they leave institutions such as a hospital, the justice system, or child/youth welfare services a viable supportive transitional housing or accommodation plan is in place for those without a place to call home.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you assist the non-profit sector to prevent homelessness by increasing the funding and capacity of organizations to provide supported/supportive housing and/or wrap-around services to prevent homelessness?

Yes, although a guaranteed livable income would also address some of these issues.

Will you ensure that the systemic issues in public institutions such as the healthcare system, the justice system and the child/youth welfare system are addressed and help to prevent, rather than contribute to maintaining homelessness?

Yes.

Will you adopt a housing plan that will increase the number of safe affordable housing units that meet peoples' needs in both urban and rural locations (see Housing above)?

We are committed to a "Housing First" approach. Likely this would also require increasing the inventory of affordable units, although we would not exclude the option of simply funding units on the market, to ensure that residents are not stigmatized by social housing options, nor need to relocate to another community where such units are available.

WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Fewer good full time jobs and increasing precarious employment (low-waged, part-time or contract work) means that many employed people—even those working full time—still live in poverty. Being employed or finding a job is no guarantee that you will not be poor. One reason for this is that despite a doubling of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 1977, the value of the minimum wage today is at the same level as it was then.

In Nova Scotia, the minimum wage increases yearly retroactively according to increases in the costs of living. However, when a new baseline was established for the minimum wage a few years ago, the baseline chosen was the low income cut-off (LICO)—a measure of poverty often used by governments—for a single individual working 40 hours a week and living in Sydney, Cape Breton. With the poverty line as the baseline, it is virtually impossible for someone earning minimum wage to earn enough to keep themselves out of poverty—unless they work longer hours, work two jobs, or have other sources of income. The Consumer Prices Index which is used to calculate annual minimum wage increases has been criticized as being unreliable in relation to actual living costs for lower income families because it does not weight the cost of essentials such as food.

Six percent of workers in Nova Scotia earn the minimum wage for experienced workers of \$10.85 but recent data from Statistics Canada (2016) show that 33.5% of workers (130,600) earn \$15 or less. 85% of these workers are aged 20 or older, a full 50% of whom are the household's breadwinner. Furthermore, 57% of minimum wage workers are women, so raising the minimum wage would benefit women and help very slightly to reduce the gender wage gap.

It is also the case that only 7% of low wage workers are unionized. Non-unionized workers are mostly employed in jobs in which current Labour Standards legislation define minimal working conditions. This leaves them with minimum protections and vulnerable, and with less likelihood of achieving a living wage, health benefits, family leave, or top up to statutory maternal and parental benefits.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you conduct an immediate review and revise the baseline and formula for establishing a minimum wage, with a view to improving wages and living standards for low waged workers?

Yes

What do you consider to be a fair and equitable minimum wage today?

Enough for a full time worker to be above the poverty line.

Will you review all other aspects of the current Labour Standards Legislation with a view to improving working conditions for vulnerable workers?

Yes. (policy 2.19.3)

REDUCING AND PREVENTING CHILD AND FAMILY POVERTY

The development of a Canada Child Benefit will contribute to the reduction of poverty amongst families with dependent children, but it is not expected to end child and family poverty in Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia government also needs to do its part. The Nova Scotia Child Benefit for both working and non-working families is one tool to help further close the gap between income and the Low Income Measure of Poverty (LIM). However, both the income threshold and the benefit itself are too low and both need to be raised.

Another way to close the gap is to increase earning capacity of adult family members; however, low wages, especially for female lone parents, when combined with child care costs (even if childcare and a subsidy are available) can make sustainable employment a challenge. Increasing the minimum wage would help, but more needs to be done to assist low and moderate income parents to find good quality childcare and to cover more of its costs. If childcare was free for low income families (e.g., with net incomes below \$30,000) while fees for other families were linked to income, then more low income families could increase their earnings.

Early learning and childcare or early childhood education programs can contribute to child development and to better outcomes for children, especially in low income families. This is partly because they help to compensate for educational or socialization activities (e.g., tutoring, recreational programs, vacation activities, music lessons etc) that higher income families can afford to purchase in the market, but are not accessible for low income families.

This was the reasoning behind a pre-primary early learning pilot program recently offered to 4 year-olds in some Nova Scotia schools. Based on a similar program in Ontario, the pilot received good evaluations. But in proposing to expand the program, the Nova Scotia government ignored the unintended consequences that emerged (and were rectified) in Ontario, where the loss of four-year old pre-schoolers from the early learning and childcare sector—up to 50% of children in some centres—put in jeopardy the sustainability of these centres and the sector as a whole.

The quality, availability and accessibility of early learning and childcare need to be better supported through improving wages and qualifications of educators, better regulation, and more sustainable funding models—especially for the non-profit sector. More needs to be done to meet the needs of smaller, rural communities by expanding regulated family based childcare.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you raise the income threshold and the amount of the Nova Scotia Child Benefit?

We would replace that benefit with a guaranteed liveable income.

Will you rectify the unintended consequences for established Early Learning and Child Care centres of expanding the pre-primary early learning sites to more schools across the province?

We would study the needs and best practices, putting the needs of children ahead of the needs of a sector.

Will you invest more in regulated, non-profit Early Learning and Childcare, develop a more sustainable funding model, and ensure that regulations, and the qualifications and wages of educators contribute to quality programs?

Yes

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD AND FAMILY POVERTY

In 2015 Nova Scotia had the third highest provincial child poverty rate in Canada and the highest in Atlantic Canada. Within Nova Scotia, six communities had child poverty rates higher than 30%.

When it comes to the family composition, families led by lone parents are significantly more likely to live in poverty than couple led families. In 2015, 50.4% of lone parent families lived below the Low Income Measure-After Tax (LIM-AT) compared with 11.2% of couple led families.

Most low income lone parent families are headed by women and more female led lone parent families live on income assistance than those that are male-led. In 2011 45% of female led lone parents lived in poverty compared with 23.7% of male led lone parent families.

It is generally understood that there is a link between gender inequality in the labour market and higher rates of poverty for women, especially mothers; but what is not generally understood or widely discussed in this context is that many female lone parents are likely to be survivors of domestic violence. Many are not only vulnerable to poverty but also suffer from health and other problems.

This link between poverty and domestic violence amongst low income female lone mothers needs to be better understood and addressed. Access to childcare, transportation, safe and affordable housing, health care, supportive counselling, and education/training are some of the primary needs women face when leaving an abuser.

Question: If your party is elected to government:

What will you do to end the cycle of domestic violence and poverty in this province, particularly as this affects female lone parents and their families?

Implementing a guaranteed livable income will open up choices to parents, whose safety must supercede financial considerations.

We would also make education at NSCC tuition-free for Nova Scotian students, which would create long-term opportunities.

We would strengthen community groups, mental health provisions, and demand more effective action to stop violence against Aboriginal women and increased support to investigate and address the disappearance of Aboriginal women.

References:

Lesley Frank, Ph.D., *37,450 Nova Scotia Children Still Waiting for Progress: 2016 Child and Family Poverty Report Card, CCPA-NS, 2016*

Lesley Frank, Ph.D., *End it Now: 2015 Child and Family Poverty Report Card, CCPA-NS, 2015*

LONG-TERM CARE

Despite our aging population and the increased need for long-term care facilities, there has been a moratorium on building new homes and beds in the not-for-profit sector and the growth has been more or less limited to the private for profit sector. As a result, waiting lists to enter a non-profit home are too long. There are also reports (CBC Feb 2016) that people in hospital waiting to be admitted have been charged \$30 or \$40 a day for an “alternate level of care”.

Funding restraint, and especially the recent 2% cuts in long-term care funding, have added to these systemic problems in the sector. Recreational and other activities, allotments for food, and frontline workers or their hours have been cutback, and the lack of supervision in some facilities is also contributing to neglect.

This neglect within long-term care facilities and on the part of the government has created a crisis situation. In the process, it has also created particularly difficult problems for low and moderate income seniors currently living in, or in need of, long-term care. This is because they cannot afford to pay the higher fees to enter a private for profit care home or in many cases enhance their care in not for profit homes by paying privately for additional personal care services. They may even have trouble buying nutritious food outside the facility to substitute what is available in the care home.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you reverse the funding cuts of the last two fiscal years to long-term care and ensure additional funding to facilities so they can provide healthy meals and diets, and hire more trained staff (including physiotherapists, occupational therapists music therapists)?

Yes

Will you conduct a comprehensive legislative review of continuing care (including long term care), and with broad public consultation, develop a new legislative framework that includes strengthening current licensing, monitoring and regulatory review processes as well as regulations under the Protection of Persons In Care Act?

We would conduct such a review if evidence suggests that it would be beneficial. We would also continue such reviews periodically thereafter.

Will you move to have long-term care recognized and covered as part of the insured public

health care system?

We would recognize the need to do so and seek solutions that preserve dignity.

We have a membership-supported policy to ensure development of multi-level Long-Term Care facilities to decrease the current cruel practice of separating couples who have different care needs .

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a growing concern because even as the issue is ‘coming out of the shadows’, its prevalence appears to be increasing. It is estimated that over the spectrum of mild to severe, mental illness and in any given year 20 percent of the population experience mental health problems. Lifetime prevalence is said to be 50 percent.

People with mental health issues or illnesses have a higher risk of not reaching their full earning potential due to the inability to sustain employment, gaps in education or training or to social stigma. As a result, they are more vulnerable to poverty.

At the same time, poverty (or income) is also recognized as a social determinant of health. Due to the high stress associated with living in poverty, individual health, including mental health, can be negatively impacted. According to the World Health Organization, “(B)est evidence indicates that the relationship between mental-ill health and poverty is cyclical: poverty increases the risk of mental disorders and having a mental disorder increases the likelihood of descending into poverty.”¹

It may be unlikely that reducing the risk of poverty across the spectrum of society will significantly reduce the incidence of serious mental disorders, but it is likely that it would have beneficial effects for many who do experience mental illness; it could also prevent some forms of mental illness amongst people living in or at risk of poverty.

At the very least, programs that address and prevent both mental health illness and poverty are important in terms of ensuring better mental health outcomes--for people presenting or living with a mental health disorder and for people who are vulnerable to or living in poverty.

Questions: If your party is elected to government:

Will you increase funding for mental health care within the formal healthcare system and in the community in ways that will ensure better public education, prevention interventions, peer support and other kinds of support programs?

¹Mental Health, Poverty and Development, WHO

http://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/development/1_Breakingviciouscycle_Infosheet.pdf?ua=1

Yes

Will you increase funding for the development and maintenance of wrap-around services for individuals living with severe mental illness and mental health problems?

Yes

Will you ensure that these individuals will not be discharged into the community from inpatient or emergency services, unless they have a secure and safe place to live and can access appropriate community support service and that once housing and community support services are secured, they will also have access to outpatient mental health care?

Yes

PHARMACARE

Nova Scotia has three different Pharmacare programs for different groups of people: Seniors Pharmacare; Family Pharmacare; DCS Pharmacare. Each has different eligibility conditions, premiums, co-pay and deductible policies attached to them. In addition, there is a special program for cancer patients with very low incomes (below \$15,720) and another special program for those in palliative care. See:

<https://novascotia.ca/dhw/pharmacare/nova-scotians.asp>

In 2016 there was an attempt by the Nova Scotia government to reform the Seniors Pharmacare program with a view to making access easier for low income seniors. The proposal, however, was roundly criticized because consultation with seniors was inadequate and middle and higher income seniors felt the proposed changes were not based on a fair or rational decision making process or a well-recognized income-based approach to programs and services. The government withdrew the proposals but nevertheless, there appeared to be public support, including from seniors themselves, for a fairer income-based approach to Seniors Pharmacare.

However, there is a moral or values argument to be made for an income based approach that ensures access to prescription drugs for all low income people regardless of family composition, age or source of income. Furthermore, since the costs of administering three different income based Pharmacare programs (and four if the Cancer Patient program is included), is likely much higher than administering one income based program, there is a rational cost-based argument to be made for combining all Nova Scotia Pharmacare programs into one income based program—as long as it is fair and ensures better access for low income individuals and families.

It can also be argued that the ability to access affordable prescription drugs is essential to the health and well-being of *all* people and that a national Pharmacare program should be developed and included in the Canadian healthcare system.

Questions: If our party is elected to government:

Will you reduce administrative costs and improve Nova Scotia's Pharmacare program to create an income based program that is fair and ensures better access for low income individuals and

families?

We have a membership-supported policy to launch research and feasibility studies to examine provincial pharmacare coverage and a province wide health formulary so that first line affordable medications are available to all Nova Scotians.

Will you cooperate with the federal government and other provincial governments to reduce the cost of prescription drugs?

Yes

Will you actively support the idea of developing a national Pharmacare program as part of Canada's healthcare system?

Yes

PUBLICLY FUNDED TRANSIT & TRANSPORTATION

Affordable, reliable and accessible transportation is not only a public good in and of itself, it is essential for daily living for many people and especially for most low income people and persons with disabilities. Not having access to reliable transportation affects health, one's ability to find a job, go to school or attend medical and other appointments and it makes feeding one's family more challenging. It may also cause feelings of social isolation and exclusion. Access to affordable, reliable transportation for people with disabilities and low income people wherever they live in Nova Scotia is essential to health and economic and social well-being.

In metropolitan Halifax it is affordability that is the biggest problem because free or reduced fare bus passes offered by the City are not available to everyone on low incomes. A bus pass for people living on income assistance is regarded as a 'special need' under income assistance regulations and some individuals, even those with disabilities, are routinely ruled ineligible unless they have multiple doctor's appointments.

However, it is also the *lack* of public transportation that is key to understanding what makes poverty such a difficult experience in rural Nova Scotia. Not only are comparatively more people in receipt of income assistance in rural areas, but incomes are lower and unemployment is higher.

Community Transit Nova Scotia and members of the Rural Transportation Association cooperate to address overall systemic issues and spend a lot of valuable volunteer time trying to provide services, but while interest in developing services amongst these organizations and the public is expanding, resources and licensing arrangements need to better keep up with the demand.

In addition, while some municipalities in rural areas support their local community transportation services, others do not.

***Questions:* If your party is elected to government:**

Will you support social inclusion and ensure that the Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) program includes a bus pass or money for transportation in the basic income assistance rate?

Will you support the development of Community Transportation Nova Scotia by increasing the funding envelope to enable member organizations to replace old vehicles and expand services?

Will you allow CTAP funded services a separate license so that members could cooperate more?

Will you mandate all municipalities in the province to fund equitable, reliable and affordable community transportation services?

Reference: Halifax Media Co-op "Rural Nova Scotia Facing Unique Poverty Challenges"
(<http://halifax.mediacoop.ca/story/rural-nova-scotia-facing-unique-poverty-challenges/16574>)