

A REFLEXION ON POVERTY IN NEW-BRUNSWICK

As part of Premier Shawn Graham's public engagement initiative to adopt a poverty reduction plan for New-Brunswick, more than 800 people attended a Public Dialogue session during the winter of 2009. They offered their views and opinions as to the causes of and solutions to poverty in New Brunswick. During the summer of 2009, 30 people were chosen to propose specific actions (based on the findings of the Public Dialogue) that would help reduce poverty to over 100,000 people in New-Brunswick who live below the low-income cut-off line as defined by Statistics Canada. In November 2009, Premier Graham chose 50 people representing the non-profit, business and government sectors as well as people living in poverty. During this Final Forum participants agreed on the essential elements of New Brunswick's first poverty reduction plan *Overcoming Poverty Together: The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Plan*.

The main objective of this Plan is to reduce poverty by 25% by the year 2015. The Plan recommends the elimination of the interim social assistance rate program, thus replacing the 294\$ a month that was allowed to 1 200 social assistance recipients to 537\$ a month. It also extends health cards for persons exiting social assistance for up to 3 years. The Plan also proposes other changes over a five year period such as restructuring and increasing social assistance rates and increasing minimum wage in order to reach the Atlantic average by 2011. These recommendations are conducive to social justice.

But if we read between the lines of the Plan, we realize that only 3% of social assistance recipients saw an immediate increase in their income. The other 97% saw no change at all. Their income will not be increased before 2012 or later. Moreover, people on social assistance who are not employable, are at risk of not being recognized as full fledged citizens.

We invite you to read two examples of people living in poverty in our diocese. You will see the obstacles these people face. The names have been changed, but these people really exist.

Robert is single and fifty years old. After an operation for a fractured hip and leg, he was left severely handicapped and unable to return to work. He receives 537\$ a month from social assistance. Since he is unable to pay for an apartment, he lives in a small room that costs him 300\$ a month. That leaves only 237\$ a month to cover costs of travel (he does not own a car), food, medication not covered by

his medical card, clothes, laundromat fees etc. He relies on a soup kitchen three to five times a week. When the weather collaborates, he gets food from the closest food bank, but during the winter months, he is unable to rely on this, since he doesn't have enough money to pay for transportation. Robert would suffer a lot less if the amount he receives from social assistance was increased.

Susan is a 44-year-old single mother living with her 20-year old daughter, Brigit. The latter works at \$8.25 per hour 4.5 days per week and has to pay back her student loan. With the remainder of her salary, Brigit buys groceries, pays for the telephone and other apartment expenses. Last June, Susan had to resign from her job when she became severely ill. She underwent a series of medical examinations but doctors did not uncover the cause of her health problems. Susan had to apply for social assistance. Normally, she would be entitled to \$537 per month, but because Brigit lives with her, the Department of Social Development deducted \$125 per month, saying the daughter should help her mother financially. With only \$412 per month, Susan is unable to fully pay the \$650 monthly rent and her landlord is threatening to evict her. At the end of January, their unpaid NB Power bill was \$379. There is very little food in the house. In recent months, Susan's eyesight has deteriorated so much that she requires a magnifying glass to decipher numbers in the telephone book. If we lived in a province which had a fairer distribution of wealth through its taxation system, Susan would experience less distress.

For these two cases, the New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Plan unveiled last November does not offer immediate relief. There are no increases in social assistance rates in sight. Several government policies hurting the poor need to be changed. The government said some changes will occur in the mid-2011. It looks like we will have to wait for more compassion for the poor. But even if the hope of a fairer society is not in sight, many citizens long for it. Their inner voice whispers to them to continue fighting for more justice. We invite you to telephone or meet with your elected officials asking them to increase social assistance amounts as soon as possible.

Prepared by the Diocesan Social Justice Team