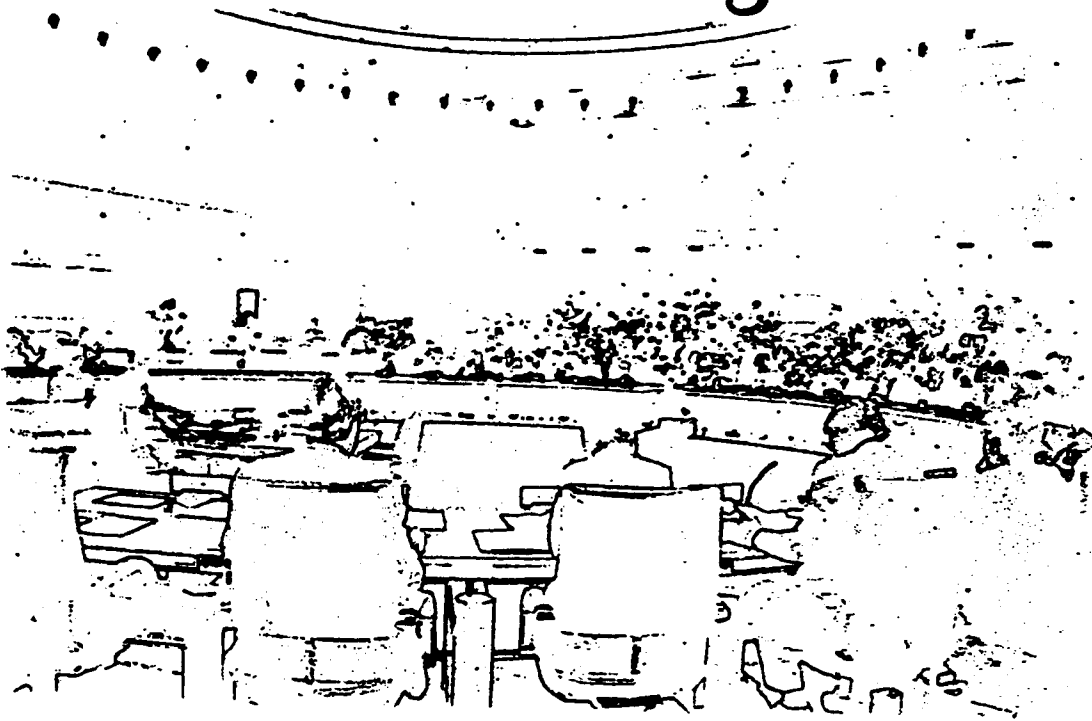


PEOPLE FIRST:
*Creating Hope Through
Change*



TASK FORCE ON POVERTY

In the

Region of Ottawa-Carleton

INTERIM REPORT

July 1999

Community Services Committee Agenda 8 July 1999
Reference Item 2

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Task Force on Poverty represents a process unique in Canada. Under the Task Force, elected representatives of communities of the poor have come together with appointed delegates of Regional government to work together to find ways to improve the lives of people living in poverty. The Task Force was established in September 1998, chaired jointly by a community representative and a Regional representative (Social Services). People First: Creating Hope Through Change (July 1999) presents the interim report of the Task Force on Poverty. The final report of the Task Force will follow in the fall of 1999.

Recent studies confirm the growing gap between rich and poor in Canada's cities, including the Region of Ottawa-Carleton. The initial People's First/Les gens d'abord report (1997) presented the stories of people living in poverty at a series of People's Hearings held across the Region which testified to the impact on the lives of the poor of this growing gap.

The Task Force on Poverty represents a community based approach to poverty reduction combining social and economic objectives. As defined by the Caledon Institute, a community based approach to poverty reduction is based on 4 key interventions: meeting basic needs, removing barriers, building skills and promoting economic development. The recommendations of the Task Force on Poverty encompass all four of these key interventions.

The Task Force has had a number of successes and impacts to date, for example, providing input to the Region's National Child Benefit Reinvestment Plan and Allocations Process, to OC Transpo on the establishment of individual day passes and Sunday family passes, and to the Task Force on Employment "Partners for Jobs". Further details and examples of successes to date appear in the body of the report.

Origin of the Task Force on Poverty

The People's Hearings was a process developed by a group of community organizations to provide a forum for the voices of the poor. Testimony from the hearings was captured in a report entitled People First/ Les gens d'abord which was presented to Regional Council. Subsequently, Community Services Committee approved a motion that a Task Force on Poverty be struck, including community representatives and Regional staff to ensure the recommendations in People First became the basis for action.

Community representatives were elected from cluster groups of people living in poverty across the Region. Representatives continue to liaise with their cluster groups on an ongoing basis.

Several community developers from Community Health and Resource Centres attended the Task Force meetings as observers and provided a range of supports to the Task Force,

for example, meeting spaces, child care, and organizational supports. The Region also provided a range of practical supports to the Task Force, for example by providing child care and transportation subsidies to support the participation of community members, and administrative and other resources to support the work of the Task Force.

The Task Force used the recommendations of the initial People First report as its starting point. Sub-committees were formed based on all topic areas as they appeared in People First. The sub-committees explored ways to move the broad recommendations appearing in that document to practical, action oriented recommendations for implementation. Each sub-committee drew on the experience and knowledge of Task Force members as well as the expertise of a range of people from other groups and organizations. Sub-committees then brought back their recommendations to the Task Force as a whole for discussion and approval.

A summary list of the recommendations appear below by topic area. The topic areas of employment and social assistance have been combined into one new heading “Employment and Income Security” as the Task Force has taken a community based approach to poverty reduction which seeks to combine social and economic objectives.

Employment/Income Security

Adequacy of Social Assistance Rates

- 1. That the Region in partnership with the community lobby the Province to increase social assistance rates for basic needs and shelter to reflect the actual costs of a nutritious diet and adequate housing and utilities.**

Independent Development Accounts (IDA'S)

- 2. That a pilot project be initiated by December 1999 to establish IDA's (Independent Development Accounts), exempt from asset limits, in Ottawa-Carleton to enable low-income people to save for an education for themselves or their children, a house, a business or other approved purposes, and that a sponsoring mechanism be developed to enable community donors to contribute to these accounts.**
- 3. That the Region in partnership with the community lobby the Province to increase asset limits and earnings before claw-back for both OW and ODSP given that the current limits act as a barrier to increasing social assistance recipients' economic self-sufficiency.**

Micro Investment Funds

4. That the Region establish an arms-length Micro Investment Fund that will require applicants to provide an approved business plan, and will be linked with appropriate training and mentoring, and that the Region secure ongoing sources of operational funds for the fund itself and assistance in securing capital for the Investment Fund.*

(Note: The Investment Fund capital will be sought from the private sector, not for profit sector, charitable foundations and other sources in the community).

Technology Learning Centres

5. That the Region support the development of a pilot project to provide:

- a) technology access points through Community Resource and Health Centres;**
- b) training, technology, materials and technological support in these centres;**
- c) mentorship to community residents who seek advice, counsel, and support in order to successfully participate in the economy; and**
- d) additional programs and services to be locally defined by each community.**

Job Training and Economic Development

6. That the Region develop employment development and training projects for :

- a) provision, collection of donations, re-conditioning and repair of washers and dryers for social assistance recipients and the working poor; and**
- b) repair of vehicles for social assistance recipients and the working poor.**

Essential Health and Social Supports (EHSS)

7. That Social Services review its policies for the provision of Essential Health and Social Supports (EHSS) to ensure an appropriate needs test and to ensure that the working poor have as complete access to the range of items under EHSS as are available to social assistance recipients, and report back to Community Services Committee.

Education

School Bus Transportation

8. That the Region, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and other stakeholders work as a community to find a solution to affordability of school transportation for children of low-income families.

Housing

More affordable Housing for people living in poverty

9. That vacant buildings owned by the Region and other municipalities be assessed for suitability as housing in order to retain buildings and offer them for affordable housing to social housing providers.

10. That surplus Regional land and land owned by other municipalities which is appropriate for residential use be retained and made available for affordable housing; and further that the land be leased to social housing providers at affordable rents. Further, that the Region should explore additional ways to maximize the feasibility of investment in affordable housing.

Community Programs

Access for Everyone to Resources

11. That the Region financially support and maintain a complete resource centre in all community health and resource centres or other public institution
(e. g. libraries in rural areas) to provide access to a wide range of information on services for people living in poverty.

12. That the Region support the development of a user friendly, plain language 211 information line for central access to a wide variety of social and health information. There should be access by means of a “menu” to receive the information in a choice of different languages.

Unused recreational Family Subsidy

13. That the Region request that municipalities convert the individual subsidy provided by the municipality for recreational programs to a Family subsidy so that unused portions of one family member’s subsidy may be used by another family member.

Child Care

Choosing Unlicensed Care

14. That information on how to choose a caregiver be more widely available to parent at an accessible price and/or no cost to the parent, that a one page check list on key safety concerns in choosing safe child care similar to that produced by the Infant and Toddler Safety Association be available to all parents, in the official language of their choice, and that the checklist be widely distributed to hospitals, midwives, community resource and health centres, community houses, and schools.

15. That Regional funding be provided to create and distribute the information to be provided to the agencies, and that agencies explore other creative funding sources to create and distribute the information, excluding outright sale of the products.

More Licensed Care

16. That Regional Council advocate for more subsidized licensed care in Ottawa-Carleton.

17. That Regional Council advocate more specifically for flexible licensed care for evening and night time child care.

24 Hours Flexible services

18. That the Region of Ottawa-Carleton provide resources (funds and staff) to prepare a project proposal to create a 24 hour child care service which would provide flexible child care arrangements for people working evenings, nights or rotations, and that Social Services lead this project in collaboration with community partners.

19. That the project seek creative funding arrangements from different funding sources, that it be based on a combination of new child care spaces and the re-allocation of existing spaces, and that the project proposal explore the use of space vacated by school closures.

In-home Licensed and Subsidized Night Care

20. That the Region approve in principle that parents working night shifts have access to subsidized child care in the parent's home, and that Regional Council lobby the Province to allow in home licensed and subsidized night care for reasons other than a disability.

Transportation

Universal Access to Transit Services

21. That the Region approve in principle that all members of the community have universal access to transit services whether their needs are fulfilled by regular or Para Transit services.

Subsidized Bus Passes

22 (a). That reduced fare bus passes be made available to low income individuals and families. For the purpose of this recommendation, low income includes social assistance recipients, employment insurance recipients, people receiving disability benefits (OSDP) and the working poor.

22 (b). That a reduced fare assistance program for social assistance recipients should have no detrimental effect on regular social assistance benefits.

Emergency Ticket Program

23. That a formal emergency ticket program should be established at all centers serving the community to provide basic transportation to individual and families who require it. Tickets may be provided for reasons such as hospital/doctor visits, job interviews or other approved reason.

Single Tickets

24. That customers be able to purchase single tickets from any OC Transpo vendor.

Telephone, Hydro and Gas

Telephone, Hydro (and gas) - Essential Services

25. That the Region, community members and organizations lobby the Provincial Government to create new funds to cover hydro and telephone basic fees, along with “Basic Needs” and “Shelter”, as part of basic monthly social assistance rates.

Security Deposit

26. That the Region act as a co-signer/guarantor for the Security Deposit requested by hydro and telephone companies from social assistance recipients and low income earners.

Sensitivity Training

27. That the Region collaborate with hydro and telephone companies to ensure that appropriate special sensitivity training be given to hydro and telephone companies’ employees dealing with social assistance recipients and low income earners.

*Approved by
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Co-Chair
Task Force on Poverty*

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Jocelyne St Jean
Co-Chair
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Task Force on Poverty represents a process unique in Canada. Under the Task Force, elected representatives of communities of the poor have come together with appointed delegates of Regional government to work together to find ways to improve the lives of people living in poverty. The Task on Poverty was established in September 1998, chaired jointly by a representative from the community and a Regional representative (Social Services). People First: Creating Hope Through Change (July 1999) presents the interim report of the Task Force on Poverty. The final report of the Task Force will follow in the fall of 1999.

People First: Creating Hope Through Change explains how the Task Force on Poverty emerged from the People's Hearings on Poverty and the process it has undertaken to move the recommendations appearing in People First/Les gens d'abord (October 1997) toward concrete actions. It also describes some of the Task Force successes and impacts to date, and presents several key, practical recommendations for action. Further recommendations will appear in the Task Force's final report.

The People's Hearings discussed how to improve the lives of people living in poverty with respect to employment, transportation, telephone/hydro/gas, housing, social assistance, child care, education, community programs and public participation. The interim report of the Task Force contains action oriented recommendations relating to each of these important areas with the exception of public participation, which will be included in the final report.

The Task Force selected recommendations for the interim report from the range of recommendations under discussion by using the following *criteria*:

1. Items which fall within the Regional mandate, particularly those which should be included for consideration in the year 2000 budget process;
2. Degree of urgency (to allow for meeting external deadlines);
3. Timing (around release of other reports with similar focus);
4. Degree of impact (many or few affected? Who affected?); and
5. Concrete things that can be acted on right away.

BACKGROUND

The Poverty Gap

People First/Les gens d'abord eloquently expressed the experiences and lived reality of people living in poverty. The existence of the gap between the experience of the poor and the experience of the well-off in our community, as described in the document, is confirmed by data presented by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Quality of Life Study (May 1999) and the Ottawa-Carleton Social Planning Council/United Way report A Tale of Two Cities (Spring 1999).

The FCM study found that the poorest 10% of residents in Canadian cities saw their total income drop 18.8% from 1992 to 1996. It also found that the top 10% of Canadian earners saw their total incomes rise 6.8% over the same period.

A Tale of Two Cities also highlights the growing gap between the region's richer and poorer residents. The percentage of households in Ottawa-Carleton earning more than \$80,000 a year rose from 13% in 1985 to 25% in 1995, while households earning less than \$20,000 a year increased from 9.6% in 1986 to 14.9% in 1996.

Furthermore, A Tale of Two Cities reports the percentage of children living in low income families in Ottawa-Carleton nearly doubled from 15% in 1986 to 27% in 1996, and that children form the single largest group dependent on emergency food programs, such as the Ottawa Food Bank, at 42%.

Community Based Approach to Poverty Reduction

The Task Force on Poverty represents a community-based approach to poverty reduction. The Caledon Institute of Social Policy (February 1998) describes community-based poverty reduction strategies as based on the following principles:

1. Individuals are not perceived as "clients" who need assistance. Instead community approaches have a direct economic purpose, and incorporate methods employed by the private sector. There is an emphasis on the mobilization of all sectors to create economic and social opportunities for low income households rather than keeping them perpetually as "clients" of services.
2. Empowerment of local organizations and individuals involves engaging disadvantaged populations and neighbourhoods to participate in the governing process, recognizing their ideas, strengths and abilities, unique talents and creativity.
3. Integration of economic and social goals, including combining job training and placement, job creation and retention, and self-employment strategies. Any group or organization providing social services, neighbourhood or peer support can

become the base for skill training, employment brokering, assistance with job search, or worker co-ops.

4. Building community assets by recognition of existing resources and talents, and investing in the development of new skills.

This framework assumes that poverty can be reduced through four key interventions:

- a) meeting basic needs;
- b) removing barriers;
- c) building skills; and
- d) promoting economic development.

The recommendations of the Task Force on Poverty encompass all four of these key interventions.

Task Force Impacts To Date

The development of the Task Force has provided a vehicle for people living in poverty to influence and provide input locally on a range of public policies. Some of the Task Force's successes and impacts to date include:

1. A representative of the Task Force brought the issue of food security forward as a participant on the National Child Benefit Allocations Committee. The 1997 People First report identified ***food security*** as a major concern for people living in poverty and placed this item at the forefront in consideration of how best to allocate Regional funds under the National Child Benefit reinvestment plan. As a result, over \$80,000 was allocated to community programs addressing food security, including the establishment or enhancement of "baby cupboards" at Community Health and Resource Centres, and coordination of a good food box program and a community gardens network.
2. Input from the Task Force contributed to the introduction of ***OC Transpo*** individual day passes and Sunday family passes, programs to increase access to public transportation for low-income families.
3. Input from the Task Force contributed to a Regional decision not to sell 2 ***surplus properties*** owned by the Region located on Albert Street. Instead, the properties were leased to City Living and renovated to provide affordable housing.
4. Representatives from the Task Force provided input on a Regional working group reviewing the Social Services criteria and processes for ***tendering for appliances*** provided to social assistance recipients. A similar working group currently reviewing criteria and processes for the ***provision of beds*** for social assistance recipients also includes representation from the Task Force.

5. The Task Force has initiated communication with the Ottawa Food Bank to address the issue of how best to meet *special food requirements* (e.g. diabetic, vegetarian or halal diets) for some individuals approaching the food banks for service. The Task Force has provided linkages with the Health Department and the Health and Community Resource Centres for this purpose.
6. A representative from the Task Force on Poverty sits on the Task Force on Employment "*Partners for Jobs*" to provide input on the development of employment and training initiatives for low-income persons in Ottawa-Carleton. Members of the Task Force on Poverty also participated in a focus group to provide feedback on the "Partners for Jobs" interim report.
7. A representative from the Task Force on Poverty sat on the Project Team for the *Community Monitoring Project on Ontario Works* to provide input on the effects of the Ontario Works program on the participants. Members of the Task Force provided feedback before the Project Team's final report was completed. Plain Speaking: Hope and Reality was released in April 1999.

3. **HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TASK FORCE ON POVERTY**

History

They came together to share their stories. Stories of courage and despair, of resilience and creativity set the deeply moving tone as over one hundred people enduring poverty from across the region of Ottawa-Carleton gathered at the People's Hearings on Poverty. The Hearings were held at five different locations in the fall of 1997. Through stories, song, drawings, theatre and poetry, participants painted a graphic picture of life for the region's poorest citizens in the wake of a cut of 21.5% to social assistance benefits, a diminishing supply of affordable housing, cuts to social agencies and the imposition of a broad series of user fees.

The concept of holding People's Hearings began in 1990 in Toronto when the Ontario Social Safety Network (OSSN) and the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) held hearings to address the problems of poverty, hunger and homelessness in Ontario. In 1995, with the election of a new government, which ran on a platform of fiscal restraint and cost cutting, the plight of the poor in Ontario began to deteriorate further. By 1997 the situation had reached a point where ISARC and OSSN felt it was time to revisit the hearing process. As a result they initiated a series of new hearings across the province entitled "Neighbour to Neighbour".

In March of 1997, Faith Partners, an inter faith social justice group in Ottawa-Carleton was approached by ISSARC to host a similar set of hearings in this region. Faith Partners, along with the Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton (SPC) and other community organizations explored the idea and decided to develop a process to respond to the unique need for a bilingual process in this region and thus was born the People's Hearings on Poverty.

An organising committee was quickly drawn together with representatives from SPC, Faith Partners, the Family Service Centre of Ottawa-Carleton, Labour Community Services, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Anti-Poverty Project and the Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres. Their goal was to hold hearings that provided a safe and festive opportunity for people living in poverty to speak out about their struggles and their strengths in a way that would help bridge differences in the community through the sharing of stories. These experiences were to be documented as fully, accurately and respectfully as possible and would serve as the basis for the development of recommendations to be presented to the Regional Council of Ottawa-Carleton.

A working group reviewed all the testimony from the five hearings with a focus on identifying common problems and potential solutions, particularly in areas that were within the mandate of the regional government of Ottawa-Carleton. This exercise resulted in the document entitled People First. It featured recommendations in a range of specific areas:

Employment, Social Assistance, Housing, Community Programs, Education, Child Care, Transportation, Telephone and Hydro, Poverty and Participation in Public Policy.

On March 25th 1998, the initial People First report was presented to the full regional council of Ottawa-Carleton with an overflow audience of the region's poor and their supporters in attendance. The report was referred to Community Services Committee (CSC). On April 16, 1998 CSC approved the following motion:

- 1. That a Task Force on Poverty be created in order to deal with implementing the recommendations from the People's Hearings on Poverty;**
- 2. That membership on the Task Force include representation from RMOC departments and agencies including Social Services, Health, Planning and Development, OC Transpo and the Ottawa Economic Development Corporation, as well as up to 10 community representatives including the Alliance to End Homelessness, and;**
- 3. That the Social Services Department co-ordinate this Task Force.**

This motion reflected the tenth recommendation of the People's First report addressing Poverty which was to establish a Task Force on Poverty to oversee initiatives to address poverty in the region and to ensure that the other recommendations in the report become the basis for action. The CSC motion was subsequently approved by Regional Council.

Thus began a process unique in Canada, wherein elected representatives of communities of the poor have come together with appointed delegates of government departments to work in concert, their task being to find and implement solutions to the waste of human potential that comes as a result of an unrestrained growth in the level of poverty.

Riding on the enthusiasm generated by the presentation of the People First document to Regional Council, groups began meeting across the region in what were initially called Pizza and Politics meetings. These meetings included people who made presentations at the People's Hearings as well as others living in poverty who became aware of the initiative as a result of the publicity surrounding the presentation of the report.

These groups, which came to be known as clusters, were organized geographically according to the catchment areas for the original hearings. The original hearings were held based on the catchment areas of groupings of community health and resource centres as follows: South-East/Carlington; Gloucester/ Cumberland; Centretown/ Sandy hill/ Somerset West; Vanier/ Basse-Ville/ Overbrooke-Forbes; and Nepean/ Kanata/ Pinecrest-Queensway.

The original organizing committee took the lead along with representatives from clusters in the process of working with Regional Social Services to set up the Task Force on Poverty. Subsequently, that same group continued on as the Monitoring Committee with

the task of ensuring some coordination between the clusters and as a forum to help resolve any difficulties that the Task Force might encounter in its work.

Development

Once the Task Force was ready to begin its work, the clusters were asked to each elect two representatives and two alternates to sit on the Task Force. Elected members would report back to their respective clusters on a regular basis and seek guidance in their work.

A job description for community representatives was established. It identified that community representatives would be people who have experience living in poverty, are willing to ensure the implementation of the People's Hearings recommendations, liaise with cluster and community members on an ongoing basis and promote awareness of the work of the Task Force and the issue of poverty.

Initially, 10 community members were designated as representatives from the cluster groups and an additional 10 as alternates/observers. However, as the work of the Task Force proceeded this distinction became blurred as all members were making substantial contributions to the work being done. Therefore, the Task Force agreed by consensus that all 20 community participants would be designated as representatives. In addition, members included representation from Regional Social Services, Health, Planning and Development Approvals, Social Housing and OC Transpo as well as the Ottawa Economic Development Corporation and the Alliance to End Homelessness.

Several community developers attended the meetings as observers and provided a range of supports to the Task Force, for example meeting spaces, child care, and organizational supports. The Region also provided a range of practical supports to the Task Force, for example by providing child care and transportation subsidies to support the participation of community members, and administrative and other resources to support the work of the Task Force.

At the inaugural meeting of the Task Force, Alex Munter, Chair of Community Services Committee, and Diane Holmes, Regional Councillor, attended as special guests. They expressed the support of Regional Council for this initiative and their enthusiasm for the opportunity to hear from people living in poverty their recommendations for actions to improve their lives.

The Task Force devoted several initial meetings to developing a working relationship among members and building a shared organizational culture. In addition, the Task Force developed Terms of Reference to guide its work, including mandate, principles, and objectives. The Terms of Reference appear in Appendix A.

The Task Force consulted with and shared information with individuals from a range of groups and organizations. Names of these individuals have been included in the acknowledgement section of this report.

4. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Process for Development of the Interim Recommendations

The Task Force used the recommendations of the initial People First report as its starting point. Sub-committees were formed based on all topic areas as they appeared in People First. The sub-committees explored ways to move the broad recommendations appearing in that document to practical, action oriented recommendations for implementation. Each sub-committee drew on the experience and knowledge of Task Force members as well as the expertise of a range of people from other groups and organizations. This was accomplished in a number of ways, for example, by inviting guest speakers to Task Force or sub-committee meetings, exchanging information through face-to-face meetings and phone calls, or acting as representatives on other committees and working groups addressing similar or related concerns.

Sub-committees then brought back their recommendations to the Task Force as a whole for discussion and approval. Recommendations were selected for the interim report based on criteria (described above) and were approved by the Task Force by consensus. Further recommendations will appear in the final report of the Task Force in the fall of 1999.

The recommendations appear below by topic area. The topic areas of employment and social assistance have been combined into one new heading "Employment and Income Security" as the Task Force has taken a community based approach to poverty reduction (described above) which seeks to combine social and economic objectives.

General Statement for All Task Force Recommendations

The achievement of the Task Force on Poverty's recommendations must not come through the loss of other programs or services now being provided to the community. The Task Force recommends that any recommendations requiring financial resources be funded with new money or money available for reinvestment to be identified by the Region, subject to this stipulation.

Employment/Income Security

Adequacy of Social Assistance Rates

Discussion

The people's testimony at the People's Hearings eloquently described the impact of cuts to social assistance rates. This testimony was documented in the People First report. Clearly, current social assistance rates put people at risk of homelessness and undermine people's secure access to food.

Recommendation

1. That the Region, in partnership with the community lobby, the Province to increase social assistance rates for basic needs and shelter to reflect the actual costs of a nutritious diet and adequate housing and utilities.

Independent Development Accounts (IDA'S)

Discussion

Current Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) limits on assets and earnings act as a barrier to economic self-sufficiency and prevent the development of innovative solutions such as IDA accounts which are being successfully tried in other jurisdictions. Long-term planning for education, home ownership and self-employment is made impossible, yet these are the cornerstones of long-term economic self-sufficiency. Increasing asset limits and earnings before claw-back will reduce recidivism for social assistance recipients: people who move off assistance will have more economic stability, and will be less likely to return quickly to assistance at the first economic setback.

Recommendations

2. That a pilot project be initiated by December 1999 to establish IDA's (Independent Development Accounts), exempt from asset limits, in Ottawa-Carleton to enable low-income people to save for an education for themselves or their children, a house, a business or other approved purposes, and that a sponsoring mechanism be developed to enable community donors to contribute to these accounts.
3. That the Region, in partnership with the community, lobby the Province to increase asset limits and earnings before claw-back for both OW and ODSP given that the current limits act as a barrier to increasing social assistance recipients' economic self-sufficiency.

Micro Investment Funds

Discussion

People living on low incomes have limited access to capital for entrepreneurial endeavors. The following recommendations are intended to provide further support for the pilot project to develop a Micro Investment Fund in the Region already proposed in other reports.

Recommendation

4 (a). That the Region establish an arms-length Micro Investment Fund that will require applicants to provide an approved business plan and which will be linked with appropriate training and mentoring.

4 (b). That the Region secure ongoing sources of operational funds for the Micro Investment Fund fund itself and assistance in securing capital for the Micro Investment Fund.*

(*Note: The Investment Fund capital will be sought from the private sector, not for profit sector, charitable foundations and other sources in the community).

Technology Learning Centres

Discussion

Low income individuals and their families need access points within their local communities to information technology. This would enable them to overcome some employment barriers and provide a more equal opportunity to participate in the economy of the region. Work has started to identify community partners to initiate the project.

Recommendation

5. That the Region support the development of a pilot project to provide:
 - a) local technology access points/learning centres through Community Resource and Health Centres;
 - b) training, technology, materials and technological support in these centres;
 - c) mentorship to community residents who seek advice, counsel, and support in order to successfully participate in the economy; and
 - d) additional programs and services to be locally defined by each community.

Job Training and Economic Development

Discussion

Social assistance rates provide for basic food and shelter only. Some people living in poverty have a difficult time paying to do their laundry at commercial laundromats, and find it difficult to maintain basic car transportation which better enables them to seek employment. At the same time, there is a need to create economic opportunity for low-income people in Ottawa-Carleton through job training and employment development initiatives. Innovative solutions to these needs can combine social and economic objectives.

Recommendation

6. That the Region develop employment development and training projects for :
 - a) provision, collection of donations, re-conditioning and repair of washers and dryers for social assistance recipients and the working poor; and
 - b) repair of vehicles for social assistance recipients and the working poor.

Essential Health and Social Supports (EHSS)

Discussion

Changes to the National Child Benefit System and changes to the Supports To Employment Program (STEP) mean that increasing numbers of working families living in poverty will not be eligible for partial social assistance benefits. For example, increasingly families will no longer qualify for social assistance because of current and future changes to the NCB, yet their overall income level will not have increased. Only the level of government from whom they are receiving social benefits will have changed. Therefore they will need the same range of essential health and social supports as they might have received on assistance, e.g. surgical supplies, other health related items, special diets, vision care, layettes and baby supplies, beds, fridges and stoves. Poor families will continue to rely on municipalities to meet these essential needs, although in many cases will no longer be part of the regular Ontario Works caseload.

In 1998, 100% Regional dollars were allocated to an EHSS fund for non-social assistance recipients. At that time, the bulk of services provided to non-elderly, non-social assistance recipients were dental services.

Recommendation

7. That Social Services review its policies for the provision of Essential Health and Social Supports (EHSS) to ensure an appropriate needs test and to ensure that the working poor have as complete access to the range of items under EHSS as are available to social assistance recipients, and report back to Community Services Committee.

Education

School Bus Transportation

Discussion

School busing in the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) will be discontinued in September 1999 for secondary school students living within 1 kilometre of an OC Transpo bus stop. It is important to note that social assistance benefit rates provide for basic food and shelter only. For social assistance recipients and many of the working poor, purchasing bus passes for children to attend school would represent a hardship. Parents having 3 children, for example, would be faced with a transit cost of \$1,350 (annual pass at \$450).

It is essential that young people from all economic backgrounds be supported and encouraged to complete high school. This is a fundamental building block to creating a skilled, employable workforce in Ottawa-Carleton.

Officials from OCDSB have indicated that the Board is sensitive to this issue and is looking at developing a program to assist parents who will not be able to afford the added cost. However, at the time this report went to press, the Task Force on Poverty had not been able to confirm the details of the program or confirm that the program will be implemented.

Recommendation

8. That the Region, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and other stakeholders work as a community to find a solution to affordability of school transportation for children of low-income families.

Housing

More affordable Housing for people living in poverty

Discussion

Affordable housing is a fundamental right for all people. Apart from the lack of senior government funding programs, one of the major barriers to the creation of more affordable housing is the high cost of land, particularly in urban areas, and the high cost of building, including construction, labour, and regulatory fees. Offering regional and municipally owned properties (land and/or buildings) to social housing providers should enable them to offer housing at the low end of market rent. Opportunities may even exist to develop low cost affordable ownership housing, enabling some tenants to move out of social housing altogether.

In the short-term there may be only a few suitable properties. The benefit of this is the opportunity to pilot the new policy and assess what types of properties are best suited to development of affordable housing, for example those near transit stations, in areas with support services, child care etc. It will also allow time to develop a fair process to select potential housing providers.

In the long term, opportunities exist to significantly increase the number of affordable housing units in the Region.

The financial implications relate to foregone revenue from the sale or lease of these properties. Arrangements for ongoing maintenance of buildings would be negotiated. Financial implications would be analyzed on a case by case basis.

Implementation could begin in late 1999 or early 2000 once Regional staff:

- identify the inventory of vacant regional buildings and surplus lands;
- develop criteria for assessing their suitability for housing;
- prepare a list of suitable sites, based on the above criteria;
- indemnify the suitable lands;
- meet with social housing providers to gauge the level of interest among prospective partners;
- develop a process for selecting a social housing provider to manage the building for affordable housing;
- develop criteria for expected outcomes for the housing providers for example, rent levels to be achieved; and
- meet with other municipal officials to promote the idea with local municipalities.

Recommendations

9. That vacant buildings owned by the Region and other municipalities be assessed for suitability as housing in order to retain buildings and offer them for affordable housing to social housing providers.

10. That surplus Regional land and land owned by other municipalities which is appropriate for residential use be retained and made available for affordable housing; and further that the land be leased to social housing providers at affordable rents. Further, that the Region should explore additional ways to maximize the feasibility of investment in affordable housing.

Community Programs

Access for Everyone to Resources

Discussion

People living in poverty often feel isolated because information to services they require is inaccessible or unknown to them. For example, they need easy access to the “Blue Book” of community programs, bus and city maps, other resource books, social housing applications, a telephone, a computer terminal, a fax machine and photocopier. In addition, a complete listing of all food banks, clothing depots, snowsuit fund locations, “baby cupboards” and similar resources would be available, as well as any other information which would be of value to any low income person such as health and dental clinic locations.

Recommendations

11. That the Region financially support and maintain a complete resource centre in all community health and resource centres or other public institution (e.g. libraries in rural areas) to provide access to a wide range of information on services for people living in poverty.
12. That the Region support the development of a user friendly, plain language 211 information line for central access to a wide variety of social and health information. There should be access by means of a “menu” to receive the information in a choice of different languages.

Unused recreational Family Subsidy

Discussion

The following recommendation will increase the access of low-income families to recreation. Two recent studies from McMaster University, When The Bough Breaks, and Benefitting the Beneficiaries, demonstrate that increasing access to recreational programs is critical to reducing long term social costs in the community. For example, after two years, for parents of children receiving subsidized recreation services, fewer per parent total direct annual dollars (\$1,570 vs \$2,592) were expended for health and social services. The studies concluded that proactive, subsidized recreation services improve the competence of children with a behavioural disorder and the economic adjustment of the parents, while reducing parent expenditures for use of other services.

Recommendation

13. That the Region request that municipalities convert the individual subsidy provided by the municipality for recreational programs to a Family subsidy so that unused portions of one family member's subsidy may be used by another family member.

Child Care

Choosing Unlicensed Care

Discussion

Parents need to have a better understanding of the risks and safeguards in choosing the most appropriate child care for their children. It is important that all parents have access to the information. However, this information often has a cost attached to it and this acts as a barrier to parents living in poverty.

Recommendations

14. That information on how to choose a caregiver be more widely available to parents at an accessible price and/or no cost to the parent, that a one page check list on key safety concerns in choosing safe child care similar to that produced by the Infant and Toddler Safety Association be available to all parents, in the official language of their choice, and that the checklist be widely distributed to hospitals, midwives, community resource and health centres, community houses, and schools.

15. That Regional funding be provided to create and distribute the information to be provided to the agencies, and that agencies explore other creative funding sources to create and distribute the information, excluding outright sale of the products.

More Licensed Care

Discussion

More licensed child care spaces and subsidies to meet the needs of parents in all different kinds of work settings and time schedules are needed.

Recommendation

16. That Regional Council advocate for more subsidized licensed care in Ottawa-Carleton

17. That Regional Council advocate more specifically for flexible licensed care for evening and night time child care.

24 Hours Flexible services

Discussion

People living in poverty often work in service sector jobs that involve evening and night work shifts. Sometimes they are scheduled according to a master rotation that constantly changes their work shifts from day, to evening, to night. Child care in these circumstances is very difficult to secure. A 24 hour child care service could alleviate some of these difficulties.

Recommendation

18. That the Region of Ottawa-Carleton provide resources (funds and staff) to prepare a project proposal to create a 24 hour child care service which would provide flexible child care arrangements for people working evenings, nights or rotations, and that Social Services lead this project in collaboration with community partners.

19. That the project seek creative funding arrangements from different funding sources, that it be based on a combination of new child care spaces and the re-allocation of existing spaces, and that the project proposal explore the use of space vacated by school closures.

In-home Licensed and Subsidized Night Care

Discussion

Low income parents of young children, working evening and night shifts, are presently unable to obtain in-home licensed child care and sometimes have to decline employment on this basis. Changes in the child care services system must occur to help low income workers in other than day work shifts.

Recommendation

20. That the Region approve in principle that parents working night shifts have access to subsidized child care in the parents home, and that Regional Council lobby the Province to allow in home licensed and subsidized night care for reasons other than a disability.

Transportation

Discussion

During the People's Hearings on Poverty, the lack of access to public transportation due to financial hardship was cited repeatedly as a major obstacle in the efforts of low-income people to improve their lives. Job searches and actually maintaining low paying jobs were identified as anywhere from difficult to impossible because of insufficient money for bus fare. People who require counseling and other support services are also prevented from getting to the places where the services they need are being offered. With little money to spend on necessities, people often must pay higher prices for goods within walking distance from their homes because they can't afford to travel to shops offering better bargains. This problem is even more severe for those living in the more rural areas of the Region. The prohibitive cost of transportation adds additional stress to families with several children who become virtual prisoners of their homes and immediate communities in spite of the fact that our region offers a range of free or low-cost educational and recreational activities.

The region of Ottawa-Carleton pays an ever increasing price as a result of having so many people unable to improve their lives by taking advantage of our public transportation system. The relatively small cost of providing mobility to those living in poverty could pay off many times through expanded horizons.

Recommendations

Universal Access to Transit Services

21. That the Region approve in principle that all members of the community have universal access to transit services whether their needs are fulfilled by regular or Para Transit services.

Subsidized Bus Passes

22 (a). That reduced fare bus passes be made available to low income individuals and families. For the purpose of this recommendation, low income includes social assistance recipients, employment insurance recipients, people receiving disability benefits (OSDP) and the working poor.

22 (b). That a reduced fare assistance program for social assistance recipients should have no detrimental effect on regular social assistance benefits.

Emergency Ticket Program

23. That a formal emergency ticket program should be established at all centers serving the community to provide basic transportation to individual and families who require it. Tickets may be provided for reasons such as hospital/doctor visits, job interviews or other approved reasons on an emergency basis.

Single Tickets

24. That customers be able to purchase single tickets from any OC Transpo vendor.

Telephone, Hydro and Gas

Telephone, Hydro (and gas) - Essential Services

Discussion

The Task Force recognizes hydro and telephone as essential utilities. To cease such services is considered a threat to personal safety and well being. Because the costs of these items are not built into basic social assistance rates, people living in poverty sometimes have difficulty and lose these essential services.

Recommendation

25. That the Region, community members and organizations lobby the Provincial Government to create new funds to cover hydro and telephone basic fees, along with “Basic Needs” and “Shelter”, as part of basic monthly social assistance rates.

Security Deposit

Discussion

Telephone and hydro utilities often require security deposits from social assistance recipients and low-income people. The amount of the deposits are an important barrier. In similar circumstances with respect to security deposits on rental accommodations, Social Services provides landlords with letters of guarantee for last month’s rent.

Recommendation

26. That the Region act as a co-signer/guarantor for the Security Deposit requested by hydro and telephone companies from social assistance recipients and low income earners.

Sensitivity Training

Discussion

When facing hydro and telephone companies’ employees, people living in poverty often feel they are treated rudely and with indifference. Officials with the hydro and telephone companies are sensitive to this concern and have expressed an intent to provide sensitivity training to their staff to deal with this concern.

Recommendation

27. That the Region collaborate with hydro and telephone companies to ensure that appropriate special sensitivity training be given to hydro and telephone companies' employees dealing with social assistance recipients and low income earners.

APPENDIX A

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE TASK FORCE ON POVERTY***Mandate***

To bring together people struggling with poverty and Regional representatives to seek solutions to poverty in our Region, and to implement the intent of the recommendations appearing in “People First” into these solutions.

Principles

1. People are the most important priority.
2. The work of the task force will be rooted in what presenters expressed at the people’s hearings on poverty.
3. Be positive and constructive, and acknowledge what the Region and the community have been able to achieve together thus far.
4. The Region is to be held accountable for what is in their mandate.
5. The Region will assist in the implementation of the recommendations that involve other stakeholders and partners e.g. education sector, private sector.
6. The Region shall lobby, alongside community and social action groups, for change at the Provincial and Federal levels.
7. The results of the task force will apply equally without bias or discrimination to all members of our diverse community.
8. All Task Force Members’ contribution will be respected and accepted equally regardless of personal background.

Objectives

(The mandate will be achieved by):

1. Ensuring the concerns raised in “People First” have been addressed in a workplan.
2. Ensuring that practical solutions are implemented improving the everyday life of people living in poverty and demonstrating these accomplishments.
3. Ensuring an internal progress review occurs at the 8 month mark to determine whether measurable progress has occurred.
4. Creating a model of collaborative problem-solving by creating links between and among the community, agencies, Regional departments and other stakeholders.
5. Facilitating more efficient use of tax revenue by supporting an integrated approach.
6. Showing leadership in developing a model for a different way of accomplishing change.