



CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

## Building a more inclusive Canada: Poverty elimination

### Poverty in Canada

In 2007 the poverty rate in Canada was 9.2%, almost 1 in every 10 people. With the economic downturn that led to the recession of 2008-2009, new research from CPJ projects that the rate increased to 11.7% or 3.9 million Canadians living in poverty.

Poverty is often thought of in terms of income level or the very minimum resources needed for survival, but it is much more complicated. Poverty is a multifaceted issue that has wide social and economic implications. The nature of poverty in Canada can be characterized by income insecurity, little or no access to affordable and suitable housing, and social exclusion and the lack of



opportunities. The lack of income security forces thousands of Canadians to rely on food banks every month. The high cost of housing causes many low income families to have to choose between paying the rent and buying groceries. Participation in community events is often limited by high costs, or the fact that low wage jobs in certain sectors force people to take on extra jobs or work overtime to make ends meet, leaving little time with their families or communities.

Various social programs such as Employment Insurance (EI) and welfare are intended to provide support to unemployed and low income Canadians. But cuts to these programs over the past 15 years have resulted in a major weakening of the social safety net, particularly as payments are much lower than the cost of living. They have also made it more difficult to qualify for help from these programs. These social programs often have the unintended effect of trapping people in poverty instead of helping them out.

### Substantial and sustainable action on poverty: Dignity for All and Bill C-545

Anti-poverty and social justice advocates have been calling for strong federal action to eliminate poverty for years. In 2009, Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada was launched. Dignity for All is calling for a federal poverty elimination strategy, an anti-poverty Act and sufficient government investment in social security programs. So far the campaign has received the support of over 350 organizations and 5500 individuals, including more than 50 MPs and Senators.

In line with the goals of Dignity for All, Member of Parliament Tony Martin (New Democratic Party) introduced Private Member's Bill C-545, *An Act to eliminate poverty in Canada* in June. Seconded by Liberal MP Michael Savage and Bloc Québécois MP Yves Lessard, the bill has the support of the New Democrats, the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois. Most legislation in Canada is introduced by the government, but individual MPs can create Private Members' bills. These bills, however, are much more difficult to pass, since time spent on Private Members' bills is limited and it is difficult to obtain the support of a majority. The fact that this bill is supported by three parties is therefore very encouraging.

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Bill C-545 calls for specific action to be taken to address and eventually eliminate poverty in Canada, including the development of a federal plan to eliminate poverty and the position of a Poverty Commissioner to oversee progress towards poverty elimination. Just as poverty is multi-faceted and covers a wide range of social issues, Bill C-545 calls for the coordination of various government departments in order to combat the roots of poverty and the many areas impacted by it. Targets and goals will be set by the government and monitored by the Commissioner, in consultation with Canadians, with federal government departments, and provincial and municipal governments. The plan will also seek to work with existing provincial and municipal poverty reduction strategies across Canada. The bill also provides a stronger role for the National Council of Welfare, which is currently an advisory body to the Minister of Human Resources.

The bill focuses on three main elements related to poverty – income security, housing and social inclusion. Eliminating poverty and addressing these elements includes investing in the well-being of people and creating sustainable programs and a strong safety net to ensure this well-being.

### **Bill C-545: What you can do**

Bill C-545 is still in the very early stages of the Parliamentary process. It was introduced on June 16. Debate on the bill is not yet scheduled when Parliament resumes this fall. You can help by contacting your MP and asking him or her to pledge their support for Bill C-545. This includes urging MPs to make sure that Bill C-545 is brought to debate in the House of Commons as soon as possible. You can also remind your MP of the urgency of ending poverty in Canada, asking them to help by voting in favour of Bill C-545.

### **Additional resources:**

Bill C-545: *An Act to eliminate poverty in Canada*

[http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/403/Private/C-545/C-545\\_1/C-545\\_1.PDF](http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/403/Private/C-545/C-545_1/C-545_1.PDF)

Citizens for Public Justice: *Advocacy Tool Kit*

<http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/AdvocacyToolkit3.pdf>

Citizens for Public Justice: *Bearing the Brunt: How the 2008-2009 Recession Created Poverty for Canadian Families*

[http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/Bearing\\_the\\_Brunt.pdf](http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/Bearing_the_Brunt.pdf)

Dignity for All: The Campaign for a Poverty-Free Canada

<http://www.dignityforall.ca/>

Senate Subcommittee on Cities: *In from the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/40/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/citi-e/rep-e/rep02dec09-e.pdf>

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