

Poverty Report Highlights Local Realities

by Monica MacKinnon

A recent report on a survey regarding women and poverty highlights 11 common themes faced by 29 low-income women living in Antigonish and Guysborough counties. The survey gathers information from these 29 women as well as 16 helping professionals and volunteers who work with services designed to assist people on low-incomes.

The report, entitled "A Community Response to Women's Poverty," notes in both its introduction and its concluding recommendations that Canadian policy makers and communities have the power to change the situation of poverty in the country.

"Most of the children who live in poverty are members of single mother-led families," the report states. "Single mothers are the group of women most likely to be poor in Canada today. Young single mothers are especially vulnerable. Nine out of 10 families led by young single mothers live in poverty. Inadequate social assistance programs, the lack of affordable housing and child care, wage discrimination and the streaming of women into traditional, low-paying jobs are generally accepted to be causes of single mother's poverty. Most of these conditions are a result of policies and practices set in place by our governments and corporations with the tacit support of citizens, employees and consumers. We have the power to change this."

A lack of money for the basic necessities of life was a common problem identified by 18 of the women on low-incomes and 11 of the helping professionals and volunteers. The report points out that "grocery money is the largest flexible item in the budget," unlike fixed expenses such as rent and utility bills. Thus, the grocery money is frequently drained off for many unexpected expenses that arise in the household. The report points out that while these unexpected expenses are regularly occurring and predictable

basic needs, such as dental care, school supplies and transportation, they are treated by social assistance programs as unusual expenses that are not covered by the regular allowances.

Because grocery money is often spent on basic needs not covered by social assistance, people are required to make frequent use of foodbank services. The report cites the comments of one food bank volunteer who said that food banks fill a need, but they should not have to exist at all. "Where do they (people in need) go when we can't

serve them? Why are they here in the first place? There is a gap before us. We (foodbanks) shouldn't exist!"

Another person working with people on low-income said "I always had a social conscience. Until I started this I wasn't sure I would have believed there are homes in the county that for two days before they come to the food bank they have no food in the fridge and it happens over and over. It's part of a problem that many people probably don't understand, and we have some

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work to do to make them aware."

Citing the Canadian Dietetic Journal's 1997 "Proposed Assistance Levels for Food in Nova Scotia" the report points out that the monthly cost of food for a female over 19 years of age is \$144.90, however Family Benefits provides only \$126 and Income Assistance allots only \$111. For a male aged seven to 12 years the Canadian Dietetic Journal proposes assistance levels at \$172.50, but Family Benefits provides only \$112 and Income Assistance only \$97.

Other basic expenses which the women surveyed said they could not afford to meet are school supplies and fees, clothing, transportation, non-prescription medicines, utilities, telephone service, eye glasses and home repairs.

Further issues of concern identified by both women living on low-incomes and helping professionals and volunteers are housing, transportation, changes to social policy, access to information, child care, the emotional impact of poverty, access to education and training, recreation and entertainment, community resources, and unemployment and low wages.

Affordable housing and enough money to pay utility bills was identified as a key concern among respondents. The report said that "it is not unusual for rental housing in the private market to be poorly insulated and draughty. Electrical appliances can be old and in poor condition and electrical wiring can be out of date, all of which can contribute to higher electricity costs."

One of the 16 helping professionals and volunteers surveyed said "People have to live in a place where they can feel good about getting up in the morning. It would have to be pleasant and affordable. If housing was the least of their worries it would make a huge difference."

The report noted that for people on low-income, struggling to pay food and shelter each month, transportation to medical appointments, shopping, and recreation facilities for children is a challenge even in the good weather. Lack of affordable transportation is cited by one social worker surveyed as the biggest gap in the services and supports available to this group of people. This lack of transportation service is particularly acute for people living in rural Guysborough County.

Included in the report are a number of recommendations to various provincial government departments,

including the Nova Scotia departments of Community Services, Housing and Municipal Affairs, Education, Labour, and Justice, as well as the Municipalities of the Town of Antigonish and County of Antigonish, Health Canada, the Status of Women, and Human Resources Development Canada.

The report also made two recommendations to community organizations. Community organizations that offer service or support to people on low-income could ensure that those who benefit from the charitable efforts have a voice in the development, management and evaluation of the services. Community organizations could also provide the beneficiaries of the service or charity with a simple and accessible process through which they can raise concerns, which may arise in the course of interacting with the charity or service organization. The report also recommended that local municipalities offer children and youth of low-income families access to all recreation programs through sliding scale of fees or free registration and offer support to community-based, non-profit groups who service low-income residents of the municipality.

Other recommendations to government organizations included acknowledgement of the importance of parents of young children staying at home full-time to focus on parenting, adequate funding for adult literacy programs, bursary assistance and debt reduction for low-income students, and restructuring of policy.

The survey was conducted by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre during the winter of 1998/99. Project coordinator, Katherine Reed, presented highlights of the report to Antigonish County Council last week.