

# 2010 Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultations “What We Heard”

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## Introduction

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) was launched in 2006 with a detailed first Action Plan titled *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*. The Action Plan outlines a series of goals, objectives and commitments for the 2006 to 2010 period that were aimed at preventing, reducing, and alleviating poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador. The five goals that the Provincial Government has worked toward achieving during the first four years of the strategy are:

- Improved access and coordination of services for people with low incomes
- A stronger social safety net
- Improved earned incomes
- Increased emphasis on early childhood development
- A better educated population

In 2005, public consultations and focus groups were held to inform the development of the first Action Plan. The feedback that was gathered from the community was combined with research into the causes and consequences of poverty to guide future initiatives. The success of this process motivated the Provincial Government to make consultation with the public an important aspect of its poverty reduction strategy to receive feedback on a regular basis on how the strategy is working and to make adjustments going forward. Active and informed dialogue helps improve policy and programs for residents and communities while ensuring government remains responsive to people’s needs.

In 2008, a second round of consultations took place to gather public input on the strategy’s progress and its impact to date. People talked about the positive impact of initiatives like the expanded prescription drug program, the provision of free text books to high school students, low income tax reduction, and increased earnings exemptions for Income Support clients. Residents encouraged government to keep poverty reduction a key priority and to maintain support in keeping with the directions outlined in the 2006 Action Plan.

In keeping with the Provincial Government's consultation commitment, a third round of public consultations was carried out during the fall of 2010. The purpose of these consultations was to inform the next four-year Action Plan for the Strategy that will guide anti-poverty initiatives until 2014. Input was provided by stakeholders through a series of public sessions, roundtables, focus groups, and by telephone, email and written submissions. This document summarizes the feedback received during the 2010 consultations.

## **Overview: The 2010 Poverty Reduction Consultation Process**

Between October 18 and November 10, 2010 a series of public consultations was held in 15 communities throughout the province. More than 350 people attended the sessions, which took place in St. John's, Carbonear, Placentia, Clarenville, Marystown, Gander, Grand Falls-Windsor, Corner Brook, Stephenville, Baie Verte, Hawke's Bay, Sheshatshiu, L'Anse-au-Loup, Happy Valley-Goose Bay, and Hopedale. Government Ministers and MHAs were in attendance to hear feedback directly from the community. Three hundred more individuals participated in roundtables and focus groups. The Provincial Government also received numerous private submissions. In total, more than 650 stakeholders provided input that will help strengthen the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The public consultation sessions attracted a wide range of expressed views with members of the public participating from a variety of perspectives. This included private interested citizens, persons with disabilities, youth and seniors, as well as community leaders and representatives speaking on behalf of community-based organizations, labour groups, private business, and municipalities.

The two roundtable discussions were used to engage provincially-based community groups specifically. Representatives from disability and chronic illness organizations, as well as those from pan-provincial organizations participated. These groups provided valuable insight, contributing to the policy debate while addressing the changing program needs of the populations whom they serve in the community.

The 12 focus group sessions were held to engage individuals living in or vulnerable to poverty. Approximately 200 people attended the focus groups and provided valuable insight into their personal experiences associated with living with low incomes. It was clear from these discussions that while much has been achieved, still more remains to be done. People experiencing intergenerational poverty noted the cycle of dependency is hard to overcome without available access to sustainable and comprehensive long term supports.

Approximately 60 written submissions were received, both from organizations and individuals who wanted to provide feedback on what is working and what adjustments in their view should be made to strengthen the strategy. Also, more than 100 phone calls were received through the PRS toll-free telephone line from people with a comment on the consultations or an inquiry into the process. The Provincial Government was pleased with the high participation levels and broad community interest in this round of poverty consultations, as it shows a high level of support for poverty reduction efforts and confidence in the strategy. Government recognizes that maintaining an active and ongoing dialogue between government and community is key to creating measures that successfully prevent, reduce and alleviate poverty, and will continue collaborating with the public as it proceeds with its next four year Action Plan.

This document summarizes the feedback received during the 2010 consultations. There were several key areas of focus among the feedback received, and they included:

- affordable housing and homelessness;
- income issues - barriers to employment, income support and income security for vulnerable populations;
- access to and awareness of government programs and services;
- child care and early learning services;
- transportation;
- cost of food;
- literacy and education

Participants articulated their concerns, and also discussed the poverty reduction strategy – both in terms of its current effectiveness, as well as what should be accomplished in the future. We begin with a summary of the feedback received about the provincial strategy, and then close with a summary of feedback regarding poverty issues.

## **Feedback About the Goals and Initiatives of the Poverty Reduction Strategy**

Overall, individuals and community groups at sessions throughout the province expressed a positive view of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The examples of PRS initiatives that people see as making a difference include:

- The Provincial Government Guide to Programs and Services for Individuals and Families.
- The provision of funding support for community-based programs and services and efforts to build capacity.
- The expansion of meal and snack programs in schools, and the development of programs to improve the availability of food, such as community freezers.
- The supports available through Healthy Baby Clubs, Family Resource Centres and Women’s Centres.
- A strong focus on the needs of young people and engagement through an expanded Community Youth Network, support for youth at risk through partnership with community-based organizations, and improved availability of career and employment transition options offered through the Linkages and Youth Connect Programs.
- The expansion of the Newfoundland and Labrador Prescription Drug Program and the extension of income thresholds to support greater eligibility.
- The reduction in interest charged on student loans and the maintenance of a post secondary education tuition fee freeze.

- The increased emphasis placed on participation in Adult Basic Education programs.
- Work underway in related program areas including the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers and the Violence Prevention Initiative.

With respect to the goals of the strategy, residents generally felt that the current PRS goals were still appropriate and were very important for the long term success of the strategy. People feel these should be maintained or enhanced to reflect emerging needs. Consultation participants stated that the Provincial Government and the community must continue to collaborate, explore options and work towards meaningful solutions that meet the overall goals of the strategy and significantly reduce, prevent, and alleviate poverty in the province.

## **Focus of Feedback Received During the 2010 Consultations**

### ***Housing and Homelessness***

All across the province, people suggested that improving the accessibility and affordability of stable housing should be a foremost concern of the next phase of the strategy. Low vacancy rates, increasing rental rates and rising housing prices are difficult challenges for individuals and families with low income, people in receipt of Income Support, single parents, seniors, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. Affordable housing advocates want to see benefits in action to prevent, end and respond to homelessness. They also support strengthening the links between government departments and Newfoundland and Labrador Housing.

Residents made a number of suggestions on ways that government should consider to address issues relating to housing and homelessness. Examples of these include: increasing Income Support shelter rates, providing more rental supplements, enhancing home repair programs. In addition, issues were discussed relating to improving housing and emergency response, increasing the availability of affordable housing and providing access to supportive housing for people at risk of becoming homeless.

### ***Income Issues: Barriers to Employment, Income Support and Income Security for Vulnerable Populations***

Income insecurity and the lack of access to quality, rewarding employment are viewed as major causes of poverty. While it is recognized that improvements have been made in addressing these areas, many consultation participants noted a need to strengthen incentives to encourage and assist people in their efforts to go to work. For example, some people said it is often difficult to leave Income Support and enter the labour force as the decision to do so may cause a loss of benefits. Many consultation participants suggested that adjustments could be made to the income thresholds to enable people to keep a certain amount of their Income Support benefits for longer periods of time while they transition into the labour force.

In regard to pre-employment programs, some consultation participants stated that more flexibility is needed to ensure greater participation and develop successful outcomes. Consultation participants suggested investing in training initiatives, including building on Adult Basic Education, expanding employment programs to more rural areas, expanding eligibility criteria for the funding of participants, and investing in school-to-work transition programs. The Targeted Initiative for Older Workers Program was seen as a program delivery model that could be used to address issues in other areas of concern.

### ***Access and Awareness, Coordination within Government, Collaboration with Stakeholders***

Consultation participants often spoke of the need to enhance the public's awareness and access regarding government programs and services. People generally praised the Provincial Government Guide to Programs and Services that is now in its second edition and felt it could use further promotion. It was described as being a valuable tool that is helping people connect to services.

Residents expressed that government should work internally to improve its coordination and sharing of information about its services and ensure there are staff available to help people navigate the various systems. It was also suggested the capacity of local community organizations should be enhanced, as these organizations are highly knowledgeable and in a good position to target the delivery of services to vulnerable individuals.

To further improve access and awareness, people suggested that government should engage in greater advertising and promotion activities to ensure residents in need are aware of government programs and services that can help them. Suggested forms of advertising included radio and television ads, social media and through “word of mouth” advertising. It was further suggested that community groups and municipalities could have a more significant role in helping to get information out to residents in their community. Residents also suggested making better use of telephones and internet as ways of delivering support services. People also spoke of the benefit of having in place social media channels that effectively reach target groups, and in particular young people.

### ***Childcare and Early Learning***

Many consultation participants spoke of a need for additional childcare and early childhood learning opportunities. People feel that improving access to childcare is key to reducing barriers to education and employment for people with low income. It was suggested that this issue could be addressed with an expanded childcare subsidy to families and improved flexibility in eligibility criteria. Many participants noted that it is challenging to find private childcare providers due to limited availability and cost.

### ***Transportation Needs***

Transportation issues continue to be a significant barrier for people. This is especially true in rural, remote, and isolated communities, and in particular Labrador. Limited access to reasonably priced transportation affects a person’s ability to work, attend school, access health care services, and fully participate in community activities. Stakeholders suggested that government should work more closely with municipalities and community groups to explore creative solutions to address this issue at the local level. Some participants proposed that government should consider providing transportation subsidies and tax credits to people with low income, seniors, and people with disabilities. Others recommended that government should provide funding for after-hours school bussing in rural areas to support the participation of children and youth in extra curricular activities.

### ***Cost of Food***

People expressed a need to address the rising cost of food. It was suggested government should focus on this specific issue in the coming

years. This challenge was noted to be especially critical in the northern coast of Labrador and other remote regions in the province, where the transport of goods and services is both complicated and costly.

### ***Literacy and Education***

Many consultation participants said literacy and education were critical to preventing and reducing poverty. They suggested establishing dropout intervention programs to keep children in school. The provision of more alternative education options, including the use of online technologies, was also seen as a positive way to encourage people to remain in school. Many felt that providing life skills programming, vocational training, and financial planning education to youth would generate many positive outcomes. As well, the high school apprenticeship and co-op education models were noted as being effective approaches in forging lifelong attachment to the labour force.

Residents and student advocates supported the continued freeze on tuition fees at the public post-secondary level and called for further reductions in the cost of education, including the elimination of the current provincial needs-based student loans system in favor of a replacement grant system.

### ***Social Inclusion and Supportive Communities***

Some stakeholders identified social inclusion as a key concern with respect to reducing poverty. Individuals and organizations discussed how important it is to remove prejudice and stigmatization. They supported government taking further action in this regard. Stakeholders also supported overcoming barriers to participation in community life through engagement in school and recreational activities. Participants felt public awareness and education campaigns would help reduce the stigma of mental health issues and poverty in the community.

### ***Feedback that was Specific to Focus Groups***

Community-based organizations and advocates throughout the province helped in organizing focus group sessions where people who have personal experience with poverty could meet, discuss areas of concern, and offer solutions from their perspective. Generally, participants spoke positively about government's efforts to reduce poverty overall and commented on issues that were also raised at the public sessions. However, there were



also other issues raised by individual citizens that were not highlighted in a significant way during the public sessions.

- **Access to medical services / dental services:** One of the foremost issues raised in these sessions was the need for improved access to dental services. Focus group participants noted that access to medical services, and dental services in particular, should be considered in future years, as these services can be very costly but have a direct impact on the well-being of individuals.
- **Education:** Some focus group participants noted the importance of supporting people's education as a means of addressing poverty, and felt that there should be more measures put in place to prevent youth from dropping out of school and encourage people to return to school.

### ***A Note to Consultation Participants***

The Provincial Government is grateful to everyone who took the time to contribute to the 2010 Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultations. This process was very successful in terms of the amount of feedback that was received, the diversity of perspectives represented, and the quality of the ideas presented. The increased participation in these consultations indicates that the public's support of our anti-poverty efforts is growing, and that is every encouraging as we proceed with launching our next four year Action Plan.

From the very beginning, public consultation has been a defining aspect of our approach to poverty reduction because our strategy must stay current and responsive to changing conditions and needs. Stakeholders throughout the province, including advocates, civic leaders, volunteers, and people who are vulnerable to poverty, have always responded to our calls for feedback, and their valuable input has been a major reason why our strategy is considered a model for other jurisdictions to follow.

The Provincial Government knows there is still much work to be done and many challenges to be faced with respect to fighting poverty. However, with the continued support of advocates and the public, we will navigate those challenges, and ensure a better quality of life for all residents.