

Addressing poverty can't come soon enough

by Mark Pavilons

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. Nelson Mandela

And, according to Clint Borgen, poverty is relatively cheap to address and incredibly expensive to ignore.

I think the pandemic has given us all a big jolt, a reawakening of sorts. Poverty, in all of its guises, is abundant, right here at home.

The economic losses during COVID-19, and the fact our levels of government are printing cheques like there's no tomorrow, indicates we're in this really deep. And the need runs just as deep.

I understand that governments simply don't plan for a rainy day, but come on, we've known about things like poverty (here and abroad), job, gender and race inequality for decades. Only when it becomes fashionable do governments turn on the funding taps.

In 2018, the Government of Canada made a historic commitment toward reducing poverty through Opportunity for All Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy. Recently, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Ahmed Hussen, tabled the first report on Canada's progress, entitled Building Understanding: The First Report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty.

The strategy included concrete poverty reduction targets and established Canada's Official Poverty Line to measure poverty and track progress toward the targets. It also created the National Advisory Council on Poverty to provide independent advice to the government on poverty reduction; to submit an annual report on the progress achieved toward the government's poverty reduction goals; and to continue a dialogue with Canadians on poverty.

The report also provides key recommendations on how to improve poverty reduction efforts to ensure that the 2030 target is met, which include: continuing existing measures to reduce poverty; specific measures to address poverty among Indigenous people; more inclusive data gathering to support better decision making; incorporating an equity lens in policy development to meet the needs of marginalized groups; and working with the provinces and territories to ensure a robust social safety net that provides benefits at the level of our Official Poverty Line.

This is all well and good, but really, we only recognized poverty as an official problem in 2018? And we're only now getting a report on it?

The mind boggles.

Thanks to lightning-fast information via the internet, we're all well aware of poverty around the globe. We're kept abreast of the plight of refugees, the homeless, the orphaned and the sick, on a daily basis.

And what are we doing about it?

I get it, we're all consumed by the pandemic and our own little worlds. I truly believe that for most upper-middle class Canadians, it has been an irritant, a minor delay in their plans.

For some of us, it's been a strain on our household budgets and personal financial security.

And for many, it's sent them into a monetary and emotional tailspin.

Is there help on the horizon?

Well, the feds made a number of commitments that could reach its poverty reduction targets. For example, the government is continuing to invest in affordable housing; carrying out a campaign to create jobs; supporting initiatives to improve food security; and planning to bring forward a new benefit and employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities.

Through programs like the Canada Child Benefit, 367,000 children have been lifted out of poverty since 2015 in Canada. The Government of Canada is committed to continuing its poverty reduction efforts, and this report will help to inform government policies, programs and service delivery.

While it is encouraging to know that the progress we are making in our fight against poverty is leading us in the right direction, we know that there is more work to do. Our government remains committed to delivering on our poverty reduction targets and ensuring every Canadian has an equal and fair chance to succeed," says Minister Hussen.

Officials are quite pleased that from 2015 to 2018 we, as a country, had made significant inroads in reducing poverty, reducing Canada's poverty rate by 24.1%. Admittedly, though, we're in the middle of a global pandemic, and the impact on people living in poverty has yet to be fully realized.

The pandemic response gave us all a vision of the possible: what we could do as a country if we cared for and took care of each other. Poverty deserves a similar response," added Scott MacAfee, chairperson of the National Advisory Council on Poverty.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy targets a 50% reduction by 2030, relative to 2015 levels, which is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal to end poverty.

I believe if we can come up with a vaccine for a global threat in a year, we can surely "cure" poverty in less than a decade. Imagine if we directed just a fraction of the hundreds of millions spent on COVID toward poverty reduction.

We've proven we can come together as a species when we're faced with the unthinkable. Well, let's use that newfound commitment and drive to solve one of our oldest social issues.