

# INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION

## ISARC



NEWSLETTER

May 2009

### Stories of Advocacy for Justice with Government

*Join Us on May 27<sup>th</sup> at University of Toronto Multifaith Centre*

Faith communities and leaders sometimes need to advocate for justice with governments: elected politicians, government staff, and legislatures. Where in our theology, tradition, and scriptures do we find the basis to speak to government on behalf of an adherent or for issues that impact our community? Do we only speak for those who are connected to our faith group? Are we able to speak for all who are marginalized socially and economically?

In other countries, speaking up to government could have brought heavy penalties. Today, we live in Canada, where we have freedom of speech and the right to discuss issues with our political leaders. How does our faith community engage with government in a democracy?

ISARC's multifaith forum will address this issue from 10 am to 3 pm on Wednesday, May 27, 2009, at the Multifaith Centre of the University of Toronto. Address is 569 Spadina Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor; it's the Koepfer Building. Cost is \$20 / person and covers the cost of the lunch and other expenses.

At this forum, an inner circle will have one leader each from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Unitarian or humanitarian. The outer circle will listen and then have opportunity to discuss issues raised in small groups. We will close with a plenary.

As ISARC moves forward seeking justice for Ontarians who are marginalized economically, it is important to balance our perspective from the wisdom of many faiths, not just Christianity or the Abrahamic faiths. Since some faith traditions have come to Canada from countries which are not safe and/or not democratic, we can help each other understand how to advocate most appropriately in this culture.

**Registration is on the last page! Send in your registration as soon as possible!**

#### Important events:

- MULTIFAITH FORUM—  
MAY 27



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### Ontario Bill 152 – *Ontario Poverty Reduction Law*

*“I’m heartened, again, by the way that groups and individuals, across the political spectrum, have come together to support this important piece of legislation. Thank you again for your on-going commitment to this issue.”*

Sincerely, Hon. Deb Matthews, chair of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction

Ontario made a historic step forward on poverty reduction as Bill 152 is passed on Wednesday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Many ISARC and 25 in 5 coalition members attended the legislature for this important moment. Throughout the process, the 25 in 5 Legislative Action Table had constructive, ongoing dialogue with government officials and leaders from all three provincial parties. Greg DeGroot Maggetti of ISARC chaired the 25 in 5 legislative committee.

An impressive list of two dozen groups appeared before the Ontario Legislative Standing Committee on Social Policy on April 20 and 21; several other groups made written submissions. After many changes by the Committee which strengthened the bill, the third reading in the legislature began as ISARC held its forum at Queen’s Park.

The standing committee’s ability to achieve key amendments could not have happened without the strong, unified voice presented during the hearings. [Toronto Star](#) had a positive editorial to coincide with the beginning of the Standing Committee on Social Policy hearings.

While we did not succeed in getting all the amendments that we had proposed, we did have a significant impact on key facets of the bill.

It is significant that, with the passage of Bill 152 into law, provinces representing two-thirds of Canada’s population (Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador) will now have entrenched a commitment to poverty reduction in legislation. This means that pan-Canadian approaches are now within reach at the national level.

Below is an analysis of Bill 152:

#### **Key amendments, or What We Got**

- Poverty reduction strategies will be guided by a vision that reflects Ontario’s aspiration to be a leading jurisdiction in reducing poverty.
- Recognition that adult poverty, as well as the poverty of children and families must be tackled by poverty reduction strategies.



# Ontario Bill 152 – *Ontario Poverty Reduction Law*

- A fixed date, March 31 of the following year, is established for the annual report to be laid before the Legislative Assembly.
- Stronger language regarding the significance of discrimination on the grounds of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability and the need for particular attention to be paid to the barriers faced by these groups.
- Women are now included in the list of groups at heightened risk of experiencing poverty.
- Stronger language to support the involvement of Ontarians, especially people living in poverty, in the design and implementation of poverty reduction strategies.
- Recognition of the significance of the third sector in poverty reduction work.
- Stronger language regarding the indicators to be used to measure poverty specifies that determinants of poverty include but are not limited to income, education, health, housing and standard of living.  
Stronger language regarding the individuals and groups to be consulted with by the Minister on a regular basis states: “The individuals and groups to be consulted by the Minister must include representatives of people at heightened risk of poverty including immigrants, women, single mothers, people with disabilities, aboriginal peoples and racialized groups.”

## **What we did not get**

- A vision of a poverty-free Ontario
- An independent body to review and assess progress on poverty reduction.
- A clause that would require Ontario’s laws, policies and practices to be consistent with the principles outlined in the legislation.
- Recognition that strengthening Ontario’s human rights laws and the enforcement system is essential to the reduction of poverty.

A clause requiring targets to represent a “substantive” reduction in poverty.

## **Bill 152 as amended by the Standing Committee**

[http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills/bills-files/39\\_Parliament/Session1/b152rep.pdf](http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills/bills-files/39_Parliament/Session1/b152rep.pdf)

Link also at [www.isarc.ca](http://www.isarc.ca)





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## Religious Leaders' Forum looks at Social Assistance in Ontario (30 April 2009)

In the morning, Zaineb Zimmerman quoted Nobel laureate John Polanyi in the April 30th Globe and Mail, "The rewards of timidity are modest." Zaineb who is from the Kingston Round Table on Poverty and Michael Creek from Voices on the Street in Toronto have both lived in poverty and received social assistance. They urged ISARC and its constituents to work for human dignity and justice. Both described how their dignity had been stripped away while on social assistance. "It was not our fault," both declared. Zaineb's marriage ended and she came back to Canada as a single mother; Michael struggled with cancer. Through their speeches, they demonstrated their integrity and wisdom. Both continue to work toward poverty elimination in Ontario. Michael and Zaineb were not timid about human dignity.

Rabbi Tina Grimberg, Imam Habeeb Alli, and Paula Finbow from Society of St Vincent de Paul reflected on the interfaith prayer vigil, which provided the occasion to join with people of other faiths to pray for legislators and the poor in Ontario. Each brought wisdom from their tradition and experiences that were reflected in the vigil.

ISARC now has candles from the prayer vigil for each Member of the Provincial Parliament (MPP). Hopefully constituents can present the candle, let the MPP know that s/he is remembered in prayer, and request that Ontario push to eliminate poverty as soon as possible. This summer "Do the Math" will be available to demonstrate the difference between the cost of living and OW, ODSP, minimum wage, and EI. Contact Brice Balmer at [isarc@gto.net](mailto:isarc@gto.net) if you are able to gather a group of people or individually take the candle to your MPP. At the forum, candles were presented to MPPs Cheri DiNovo, John Milloy, Gerry Phillips, and Michael Prue.

In the afternoon, Marvyn Novick said we should focus our energy to increase rates for social assistance (not only OW and ODSP, but also EI and minimum wage). All are poor! People may wish to debate Guaranteed Annual Income and other long term changes, but right now rates need to be increased. Marvyn is a strong proponent of the Healthy Food Benefit.

Sarah Blackstock from Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) up-dated ISARC on the up-coming provincial social assistance review. Little information is available about starting times, who will be appointed to the review committee, or what topics will be discussed. Yet this review is important, especially if the changes include asset rates, transition to employment, health and dental benefits, and amount of money deducted from social assistance when a recipient earns money. Can OW and ODSP actually assist people through transitions into employment or from one job to another? ISAC lawyers currently are in court testing the Ministry of Community and Social Services' denial of the dietary supplement.



