

INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION

ISARC



NEWSLETTER

January 2009

Prayer Vigil begins March 2, 2009, at Queen's

How do faith communities live out their destiny? Through prayer, meditation, and action! ISARC will begin a prayer vigil at Queen's Park on Monday, March 2nd, to pray for the Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) and for those who are most economically marginalized: people who are low wage workers, disabled, on social assistance, children, and/ or homeless. This is not a protest action but a time for prayer and reflection. Specific MPPs will be remembered each day; prayers will be for their integrity, courage, and spiritual sustenance. Those who suffer unnecessarily in our wealthy province will be remembered. Finally the prayers will reflect: "How can each of us be in solidarity with those who make decisions and those who suffer?"

Two groups per day will come to Queen's Park where ISARC will have a tent. The first group will participate from 9 am to 1 pm; the second group from noon to 4 pm. During the noon hour, a religious leader will lead the groups in prayer and reflection. ISARC is hoping that different faith groups will come together and the noon service will be interfaith.

Since we do not yet know when the budget will be released, we are planning for the whole month of March, even though we expect the budget in the second or third week. When we know the

budget date, we'll contact everyone and re-schedule as appropriate!

Some MPPs may join us. When ISARC last had a prayer vigil, MPPs were curious about who was being prayed for and who was coming to the vigil. ISARC will try to have constituents' MPP on the prayer vigil when they participate.

Bruce Voogd, formerly with Citizens for Public Justice, will coordinate the prayer vigil in Toronto. He and ISARC's administrative assistant Murat Ortanca will coordinate the daily schedule. Individuals and groups can reach Bruce and Murat through isarc@rogers.com

Prayer works! In 1989, ISARC conducted a prayer vigil; Bob Nixon, then MPP and Ontario treasurer, came into the legislature with a billion dollar increase for Ontarians who are poorest.



Join us! Sign up for the prayer vigil today at isarc@rogers.com

Important events:

- PRAYER VIGIL AT QUEEN'S PARK— MARCH 2
- Ontario 2009 BUDGET— MID MARCH
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS' FORUM— APRIL 30
- MULTIFAITH FORUM— MAY 27

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INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION ISARC

Ontario Food Benefit Proposal

Many people come to the middle of the month, have no money, and need food. In consultations around the province, 25 in 5 found support for a “Food Supplement” which would add \$100 per month to the Basic Needs Allowance for adults on the OW and ODSP caseload.

The Healthy Food Supplement is proposed to begin to address the adequacy issue in current social assistance benefits. It is the first step in a path to improve the incomes of people not in the workforce, so that they can meet the basic necessities of daily living, especially access to healthy food. Data collected by Public Health on the cost of a Nutritious Food Basket shows that people on social assistance do not have enough money to meet the basic nutrition requirements.

Faith communities are very aware of many individuals and families which need food in the middle of the month because of low wages, low social assistance rates, and high rents. This could dramatically lessen the need for emergency food hampers. It could allow some adults to find rental housing, rather than use shelters or Out of the Cold.

Initially ISARC preferred a significant increase in OW and ODSP with the recipient free to choose how to spend the money. It was a matter of dignity for re-

ipients.

Various advocates and researchers convinced us that

- 1.) It was difficult to put increases into OW and ODSP
- 2.) Some people on low wage jobs should have this Food Benefit without qualifying for OW or ODSP
- 3.) The Healthy Food Supplement is a simple measure which is easy for the government to begin. It adds to the Basic Needs Allowance.
- 4.) The Healthy Food Supplement is needed now for people clearly in distress and at high risk of illness and chronic disease for lack of adequate and nutritious food.

While advocating for this Healthy Food Supplement with other 25 in 5 groups, ISARC will ask questions and continue to seek further clarification. Something must be done because so many individuals and families cannot afford a nutritious diet. Many working people with low wages also need income assistance for healthy food; their inclusion should be a second step in the overhaul of income security in Ontario.



Religious Leaders’

“Social Assistance: Closing the Gap” is the topic for the Religious Leaders’ Forum from 9-3 on Thursday, April 30, 2009, at Queen’s Park. Registration will begin after the Prayer Vigil. Speakers, including individuals living in poverty and advocates, will discuss the impact of the federal and provincial budgets. The theological reflection will focus on the prayer vigil. Cost is again \$40.





ISARC - Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition

Tasks Ahead

“The work is never done” until poverty is eliminated! During previous campaigns, the faith communities and other advocates got the attention of the government and some promises or proposed programs. Then everyone relaxed. Other priorities rose in the government’s agenda and poverty reduction slipped. This time must be different. We learned from previous experiences. In solidarity with people on lower incomes, we must keep up our advocacy and education work ... or other priorities will rise to the top. The poor cannot suffer again.



If we know what’s ahead we can plan our work and our rest! Since this is a long-term strategy –we must be vigilant locally for 5 years, for 10 years for 50% reduction, and beyond. What are the questions for observation and action?

1. Has the Ontario government set targets and are they being met in your local community? Faith groups can check with social planning councils, local governments, and census data and local surveys to see if poverty is being reduced. We need to let our MPPs know that we are observant!
2. Is new affordable and supportive housing being built? The provincial government will be developing a housing strategy, starting Spring 2009. Are non-profit housing developers and local governments receiving funds? Is housing being remodelled and built?
3. Do people on the margins feel more included? What barriers keep excluding new Canadians, single parents, children, people with disabilities, workers with low wages, and others? Are those barriers being addressed locally and provincially? Does your community have ways of surveying people to check for inclusion?
4. Are wages for workers increasing? Is the minimum wage \$11/ hour in 2011?
5. Are OW and ODSP recipients able to keep more of their wages? Has the government made it easier to make the transition to a job?
6. Is child care available in your area for working parents? Is it available for parents who are in training or re-training?
7. Are there on-going poverty reduction consultations with the provincial government staff and politicians? Watch for the establishment of a secretariat and a continuation of the cabinet committee on poverty reduction.
8. Have schools become hubs for recreation and community activities. Monies have been allocated already. Some school boards are hiring coordinators. Check your school for after school programs for all ages.

It’s time for us to be vigilant at the local, provincial and federal level. Though it’s poverty reduction, we will all benefit through these changes.

ISARC Multifaith Forum

Stories of Advocacy for Justice will be the focus of the ISARC Multifaith Forum on Wednesday, May 27, 2009, at the University of Toronto Multifaith Centre. Speakers from the major religions will tell stories of justice as they walked in solidarity with marginalized peoples. Registration will begin in April.



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INTERFAITH SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM COALITION (ISARC)



JANUARY 2009 NEWSLETTER

Provincial and Federal Budgets

The federal budget was released on Tuesday, January 27, 2009. Quickly assessing the budget through the frame of “25 in 5” declaration, there were some gains:

1. Housing had significant allocations, especially renovating current affordable housing, new housing on the reserves for Aboriginal Canadians, and additional housing for seniors and the disabled.
2. Working Income Tax Benefit which helps low wage workers was increased.
3. Employment Insurance (EI) benefits were lengthened five weeks to a maximum of fifty weeks. Will more workers be eligible for benefits, especially in Ontario? There was the promise of additional EI benefits while in re-training. Is that happening?
4. There was substantial money for training and re-training. Mostly this is for EI recipients with some positive exceptions. What happens to adults on social assistance or with expired EI benefits?
5. Money for infrastructure will relieve fiscal pressures on the province and municipal governments. This infrastructure includes recreation and community facilities. .
6. Income taxes were reduced at the lowest levels.



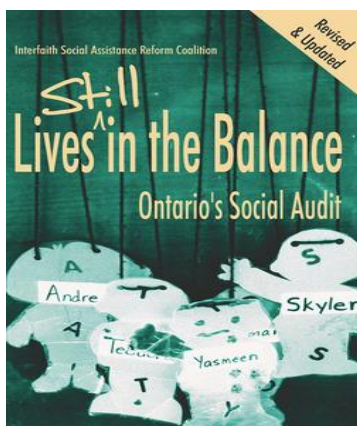
Clearly this budget addresses these key areas in the 25 in 5 declaration.

Campaign 2000 – an ISARC partner in many coalitions – points to problems in the budget: no changes to EI eligibility, no increase in child care, and no improvement to National Child Benefit. Lone mothers will be working harder without additional supports.

More information and analysis can be found at www.campaign2000.ca www.wellesleyinstitute.com and www.cpj.ca
There are also links to other sites on www.isarc.ca

The provincial government will now be examining the impact of the federal budget on poverty, child care; income security, affordable housing, community-based programs; dental, drug, and vision coverage; and transit. Watch for the Ontario 2009 budget in mid-March!

John Stapleton in “The Last Recession Spook” shows that recessions are often times when governments institute new and increased social benefits. More people need assistance and the population accepts the rationale. This is such a time!



Lives Still in the Balance is a key

Get the background you need to meet with your MPP, speak to an all candidates meeting, or have conversations with others about poverty. Lives Still in the Balance from ISARC is still up-to-date and gives background information on many issues: housing, social assistance, disability, low wage work, children in poverty, health care, etc. At the end of the book are the proposals which would most effectively help those who live with the lowest incomes in Ontario. If you want to begin to understand poverty in Ontario, read and discuss Lives Still in the Balance.