



# **Poverty Free Saskatchewan**

## **Submission to SaskForward Policy Summit**

### **January 28, 2017**

#### **Including a Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction**

The Government of Saskatchewan's announcement following the budget of 2016 to launch a "transformational" agenda in response to a massive deficit was a puzzling and confusing political move. What exactly did Premier Wall have in mind? What magnitude of change was the government considering? Transform has two different meanings, "to change the outward form or appearance" or "to change in character or condition/potential". (Webster's) Within a few months and after several government announcements it has become clear that the government is intent on changing the character of governance in the province.

Poverty Free Saskatchewan (PFS) has been advocating for a systematic approach to poverty elimination since 2009, identifying six pillars for addressing poverty: housing access and affordability; income security for vulnerable groups; education, training and early childhood learning and development; enabling and rewarding work and participation in our communities; improving access to and quality of services for low income people; and, promoting health and preventing illness. PFS has also been advocating for a provincial legislative Act on poverty elimination.

Aboriginal children experience poverty at much high rates than others in the province. Of the 55,000 children living in poverty in 2010 31,000 were First Nations and Métis. How will the province ever transform their lives unless Indigenous people are fully included in anti-poverty planning and response?

PFS proposes that the government missed a huge opportunity to undertake positive transformational change when it failed to move forward on the anti-poverty file. The government ignored some important recommendations of the Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction, has not come forward with a real poverty reduction plan and has implemented cutbacks contrary to poverty reduction. Yet the provincial government says it is committed to implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action. PFS is calling on government to transform its approach to poverty and include more initiatives that address Indigenous child poverty. If the government were to construct a well thought out anti-poverty plan and included the TRC Calls to Action then it would be finally on its way to reaching its poverty reduction target. If it just gives lip service to TRC, anti-poverty gains will not be made.

## **Saskatchewan Government Poverty Reduction Strategy**

In December 2014, the government of Saskatchewan initiated the development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy and appointed an Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction (AGPR) to guide the process. The AGPR was mandated “to review past and ongoing initiatives that address poverty, identify key gaps and opportunities to reduce the incidence of poverty in Saskatchewan, and make recommendations to government to inform the future development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy.” (1) From the outset, it was clear that the AGPR was not empowered to produce a poverty reduction plan, instead it was to merely inform the government about identifying ways forward. Most importantly though, the AGPR report did recommend that the government utilize a comprehensive, integrated approach, and create an implementation plan with targets, timelines and a budget aimed at reducing poverty. This is an important and necessary structural approach to attacking poverty; moreover, this template has been put forward many times in the past by various community groups and academics, including Poverty Free Saskatchewan.

The AGPR report also acknowledged the recommendations of the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The AGPR report stated, "Respecting the dignity of First Nations and Métis people includes addressing the consequences of colonialism, residential schools and ongoing racism." Recognition of the TRC's Final Report was an important step forward by AGPR and identifies ways in which the provincial government could support the TRC report's recommendations.

The government reviewed the recommendations of the AGPR report and in February 2016 released the Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy (SPRS).

The Minister of Social Services at that time, Donna Harpauer, in the introduction to the SPRS report, set forth the long-term poverty outcome of the government. She stated, “We have set an ambitious goal to reduce the number of people who experience poverty for two years or more by 50 per cent by the end of 2025.” (2) The report, however, failed to provide a working definition of “people who experience poverty for two years or more”; nor did it identify any methodology for establishing this metric and calculating it on an ongoing basis. Thus, one of the key measurements of progress toward poverty reduction is just a vague political promise.

Under housing and homelessness, the SPRS recommends no specific targets for the increase of social housing that would be needed by 2020.

The early childhood development and childcare section does not provide any actual numbers of child care spaces required or how to develop a high quality affordable child care system.

The education section puts much emphasis on increasing the number of students attaining a grade 12. This has been a government target for many years. Increasing investment in public, Catholic and band schools to help attain this target is long overdue. Also, there is little emphasis on a job creation strategy, or how education and employment targets for First Nations could be improved.

The health and food security recommendations lack targets and justification for the limited measures identified.

Although the SPRS report identifies six key components of a poverty plan, it does not identify any changes to government structures to carry out the policy and program changes necessary to affect the lives of those most affected by poverty. The report suggests an independent review body but does not indicate whether this work could be accomplished by a task force, a special poverty office or a new government department. Without a pathway to move the recommendations forward they can easily be lost in the complex relations among ministries.

Unfortunately to date an actual plan, which is needed to implement this Strategy, has yet to see the light of day. Instead of an expansion of social and economic benefits and protections we are seeing announcements of broad-based funding cuts to social, health and education programs that support our most vulnerable citizens.

### **Addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action**

In December 2015 after six years of study and deliberation of the history and legacy of Canada's residential school system the Truth and Reconciliation Commission tabled its report along with 94 Calls to Action. The report estimated that 3200 (5%-7%) of enrolled students enrolled in the residential school system died from tuberculosis, malnutrition and other diseases resulting from poor conditions. Separation of Indigenous children from their parents resulted in lifelong negative impacts on both children and parents and destabilized indigenous culture for generations. While its recommendations are comprehensive, the Commission was set up to address the damages related to residential schools. First Nations people were provided some compensation for those harms. The TRC could not recommend any damages for other impacts of colonialism such as loss of land, loss of control over resources or any other losses at odds with Canadian sovereignty. (3)

The TRC urges all levels of government, federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal to work together to change policies and programs in a concerted effort to repair the harm caused by residential schools. Call to Action 53 recommended establishment of an independent national oversight body to monitor, evaluate and report to Parliament on implementation progress to ensure government accountability. To date no such body has been created thus it is difficult to ascertain what implementation progress is being made by the federal or provincial

governments, despite all the verbal commitments. The Assembly of First Nations promised to develop an action toolkit and a progress report to present at the 2016 annual general gathering. Prime Minister Trudeau announced a five-point plan in response to the TRC including: setting up a public inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, lifting of the two per cent cap on funding First Nations programs, making significant investments in education, implementing all 94 recommendations including the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples and finally, agreeing to meet with the four First Nations leaders after the final report was tabled. The public inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women is underway but progress on other Calls to Action is unclear.

The TRC Calls to Action related to the justice system require wide ranging responses from the provincial government that are closely correlated with poverty elimination. These include “eliminating the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody, provide sufficient and stable funding to implement and evaluate community sanctions that will provide realistic alternatives to imprisonment”, address and prevent Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, “ work with Aboriginal communities to provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, overcome the experience of having been sexually abused” and finally, commit to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in custody over the next decade. (4)

Call to Action 55 requests all levels of government to provide annual reports on such indicators as number of Aboriginal children in care, compared with non-Aboriginal, reasons for apprehension and total spending on preventative and child care services, comparative funding for education of First Nations children on and off reserves, educational income and outcome attainments of Aboriginal people, and progress on closing the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities with respect to a number of health indicators such as: infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence and the availability of appropriate health services. (5)

There is much overlap between the TRC funding, monitoring and reporting demands and what would be automatically evaluated and rolled up into a high quality, well integrated anti-poverty plan.

Canadian Premiers voiced their support for the Call to Action, including Premier Wall. The Government of Saskatchewan’s media release and web page stated “the government committed to meeting this task (TRC Calls to Action) through the adoption of practical solutions. We will create a multi-ministry team to carefully examine this report and the full report once released. We will look to build on successes, such as teaching Treaty and First Nations and Métis histories in the classroom and the Joint Task Force on improving education

and employment outcomes for First Nations and Métis people. The recommendations and the stories conveyed throughout the Commission's work will be critical to informing Saskatchewan's future efforts toward reconciliation." (6)

The Saskatchewan government's web page sets out the inter-ministry strategies to implement the TRC and highlights the following achievements:

Joint Task Force (JTF) on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People

- The government has made good progress in addressing the JTF's recommendations; many of those recommendations are echoed in the work of the TRC.

What does good progress mean? To what extent has the gap closed between Aboriginal education and employment outcomes and non-Aboriginal employment and education outcomes?

How has the Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy **addressed the poverty of Indigenous people?**

- The Advisory Group on Poverty Reduction heard from a wide range of community stakeholders, including persons from First Nations and Métis organizations.
- The advisory group's recommendations include the principle of respecting the dignity of First Nations and Métis people, which also includes addressing the consequences of colonialism, residential schools and ongoing racism.
- The recommendations also include enhancing early childhood services and educational and employment outcomes for First Nations and Métis people.
- Although, the government has produced the Saskatchewan Poverty Reduction Strategy, but a real implementation plan has not been released.

Unfortunately, the recommendations of the AGPR have not been fully recognized. The government's Poverty Reduction Strategy did not accept AGPR's more stringent poverty reduction target; it has not established a basic income pilot project; it has not supported living wage initiatives, nor has it advanced new policies and programs to overcome structural causes of poverty such as assessing health outcomes in all new anti-poverty policy development.

## Saskatchewan Disability Strategy

- A key recommendation in the Disability Strategy is to ensure that First Nations, Métis and Inuit people experiencing disability are well-supported regardless of their home communities.
- Responding to this recommendation will require discussion with the federal government and First Nations.

In 2016, unfortunately we have seen funding cutbacks to benefits programs. While some people who previously received benefits will continue on, others who are new to programs, or change housing locations, will not receive the same level of benefits. These include cuts to: the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability, the Seniors Income Plan, and the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement. In addition, the Saskatchewan government is now counting the federal Guaranteed Income Supplement as income after the age of 65

## Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan

- The Ministry of Health is leading the development of cross-ministry implementation of the 10-year *Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan*.
- One of the plan's key recommendations is to partner with First Nations and Métis people in the planning and delivery of mental health and addictions services, to better meet community needs
- This is one of 10 recommendations that have been prioritized to take place over the next four years.

Has the government provided any monitoring, funding, reporting of mental health outcomes?  
Are there any government reports on TRC Calls to Action 33-38?

## Child Welfare Transformation Strategy

- The Child Welfare Transformation Strategy has three themes:
  - Work differently with First Nations and Métis people
  - Increase prevention and support for families; and
  - Renew the child welfare system.

- The Ministry of Social Services is committed to working differently with First Nations and Métis people to provide the best possible child welfare services and outcomes for children and families.
- First Nations and Métis people have been engaged in the strategy and will continue to be engaged as the child welfare system is transformed and continually improved.
- The focus of Saskatchewan’s current practice is to strengthen the family home to support children to remain safely at home and/or to safely return home from being “in care” with the ministry.
- A review of child welfare legislation has taken place with new legislation anticipated in 2017.

The Child Advocate and others have documented many issues related to the child care system in Saskatchewan as it relates to First Nations children.

A recent study by the University of Regina, Department of Social Work revealed for the first time the extent of child poverty among Indigenous and other Saskatchewan children. (7)

- For children in First Nations families, the poverty rate in 2010 was 59.0 per cent. Among those families indicating they were Métis, 25.9 per cent were in low-income households. In 2010, of the 55,000 poor children in Saskatchewan, 31,000 were in First Nations or Métis families.
- The child poverty rate for children in immigrant families in 2010 was 27.1 per cent and for those in non-immigrant visible minority families was 19.3 per cent.
- Depth of poverty was greater in the Prairie provinces than in other Canadian provinces. In Saskatchewan in 2014, the income for one-half of families in poverty was at least \$12,000 to \$13,000 below the poverty lines.

### **Transformational Opportunity**

It is abundantly clear that if the province wishes to create a positive future for all we must greatly reduce the numbers of children in poverty and particularly indigenous children. The TRC Calls to Action demonstrate that redressing the legacy of residential schools and advancing reconciliation will only occur if the root causes of poverty are addressed. The AGPR report suggested some ways forward; however, the government continues to ignore the report’s most important recommendations.

Poverty Free Saskatchewan’s publication *Budget 2016: Transformation or Austerity?* documents the negative effects of the government’s diminishing social expenditures, which inevitability

create increased social exclusion and inequality and higher longer term costs to government. ([www.povertyfreesask.ca](http://www.povertyfreesask.ca)). Most recently the government has decided to centralize all the regional health authorities and has recommended amalgamation of Saskatchewan's school boards creating confusion and disruption and an unknown number of job losses. Governance is about how power is distributed and shared at the provincial and local levels and how accountability is rendered. Therefore, a redistribution of more power to the provincial government at the expense of the regions and local communities will produce minuscule savings and merely create more disaffection toward the current provincial government system.

Since 2009 Poverty Free Saskatchewan has advocated for a poverty elimination plan and since 2014 for a Saskatchewan Anti-Poverty Act which entrenches the human rights the province is committed to in the United Nations International Covenant. Such legislation is the essential ingredient of an effective anti-poverty plan and would allow us to once again play a leadership role in pioneering progressive social legislation. Most importantly it would provide needed protections for our most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens, especially children in poverty.

Real transformation would occur if the government would undertake the following:

- Pass legislation to establish an Anti-Poverty Act.
- Set up a multi-discipline anti-poverty office and develop a comprehensive and integrated anti-poverty plan that takes account of the TRC calls to action.
- Implement a multi-year plan, with a dedicated budget, that is in full compliance with the Anti-Poverty Act, with a dedicated budget and reporting of annual progress to the legislature.

## Sources

1. AGPR report <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/17/87896-Poverty-Reduction-Strategy.pdf>
2. SPRS report Minister's statement <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/17/87896-Poverty-Reduction-Strategy.pdf>
3. <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>
4. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>
5. Ibid.
6. Premier's Statement on TRC Calls to Action <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2015/june/05/commission-report>
7. Child and Family Poverty in Saskatchewan 2016 <http://campaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/SASKReportCard2016.pdf>

## **POVERTY FREE SASKATCHEWAN: OUR BELIEFS**

PFS is a network of individuals and organizations working to eliminate poverty in the province since 2009. The province has many other individuals, businesses and community organizations working to alleviate the harmful effects of poverty and address the root causes of poverty. Working together more closely, we can eliminate poverty.

Poverty has serious consequences. The Poverty Costs campaign estimated spin off costs of poverty to be \$3.8 billion, about five per cent of the province's gross domestic product.

The guiding principles underpinning PFS's anti-poverty strategy are:

- A focus on vulnerable groups;
- Community involvement carried out through meaningful province-wide engagement processes that hears from all vulnerable groups and includes them in planning and implementation of strategies and programs;
- Anti-poverty targets timelines for achievement and performance indicators to be met; and
- Adoption of government accountability mechanisms that are clearly set out in a Saskatchewan Anti-Poverty Act.

PFS's strategies to eliminate poverty were developed and have been communicated to the public and government. These strategies must cut across key issue areas and be supported by investments in the following:

- Housing access and affordability;
- Income security for vulnerable groups;
- Innovation in education, training and early childhood learning programs;
- Enabling and rewarding work and participation in our communities including support for a living wage;
- Improving access to quality services for low income people; and
- Promoting health and preventing illnesses among vulnerable groups, including food security initiatives.

**January 2017.**

**Poverty Free Saskatchewan, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada**

**Website: [www.povertyfreesask.ca](http://www.povertyfreesask.ca) E-mail: [povertyfreesask@gmail.com](mailto:povertyfreesask@gmail.com)**