



Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers
autorisés de l'Ontario

Honourable Kathleen Wynne
Premier of Ontario
Room 281
111 Wellesley St. West
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

August 22, 2013

Open letter: Ontario's registered nurses implore government to accelerate poverty reduction efforts

Dear Premier,

Five years ago, the Liberal government made a bold decision. It recognized that poverty was a growing concern within the province of Ontario that could no longer be ignored and announced a five-year plan to combat it with the creation of a poverty reduction strategy. Ontario's registered nurses greeted the news with enthusiasm. Nurses were already aware of the ever-widening gulf that existed between those who had a lot and those who did not have enough and had urged action on this all-important issue.

Building on this promising start, Ontario's nurses were further heartened when all three parties in the Ontario legislature voted unanimously on May 6, 2009 to approve an amended *Bill 152, the Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*. This put into law mechanisms to reflect "Ontario's aspiration to be a leading jurisdiction in reducing poverty" by outlining principles, targets, indicators, and processes by which the government would "support a sustained long-term reduction in poverty in Ontario."

The government's announcement in July to launch province-wide consultations to help inform the development of a new strategy for the next five years demonstrates the Liberal party's commitment to this issue. For that, we commend you.

Premier, our government reports that more than 40,000 children and their families were lifted out of poverty between 2008 and 2010. While we appreciate work has been done on this issue, we are acutely aware there is much more that remains to be done. The situation is dire, and action should not be slowed down because of the economic downturn that affected Ontario's economy. There are simply far too many children, far too many families and far too many single adults living in poverty today. It is shameful and it is unnecessary. And it is actually costing the government billions and every household in the province around \$2,500 every year by not addressing this problem head on.

There is still a staggering number of children, 383,000, who live in poverty. More than 573,000 households in our province are "food insecure" or lack basic access to nutritious food in sufficient quantities to maintain good health. And let us not forget the single adults on Ontario Works who still face the brunt of government inaction by being forced to live on \$606 per month.

We are proud the province's historic *Poverty Reduction Act, 2009* requires "Ontarians, especially people living in poverty, are to be involved in the design and implementation of the strategy" and recognizes that "not all groups share the same level of risk of poverty." While we understand and support the need for meaningful consultation, we are mindful that throughout Ontario, thousands of people remain hungry, homeless or lacking adequate shelter. They are not earning enough to provide for themselves and their

families, or are left to subsist on income levels that deprive them of basic essentials such as the ability to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and access to dental care and transportation.

Nurses are imploring you to accelerate your government's efforts. We believe these are crucial areas that need addressing now:

- Ensuring paid work is a pathway out of poverty by increasing the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation
- Reforming Ontario's social assistance system so it reflects the actual cost of living
- Improving access to affordable housing, supportive housing and addressing homelessness
- Reversing cuts to the child dental care program and extending it to adults in need
- Providing access to high quality, not-for-profit child care
- Ensuring effective training and workforce development opportunities are available

Premier Wynne, we can no longer ignore the magnitude of the challenge before us. We are certain that you believe as we do that a person's life should not prematurely end because he or she happened to be born to a family struggling with low income. Numerous reports and studies conclude poverty is the key factor in determining if Ontarians, indeed, human beings generally, have healthy and long lives.

Like our colleagues at the Canadian Medical Association, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) lists poverty reduction as one of our association's highest priorities.

Again and again, Ontario's nurses implore you to live up to the expectations and the targets set out by your government in 2008 when *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* was launched and work to ensure "every person has the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential, and contribute to and participate in a prosperous and healthy Ontario."

With warmest regards,



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Rhonda Seidman-Carlson, RN, MN
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cc: Honourable Deb Matthews, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Honourable Teresa Piruzza, Minister of Children and Youth Services
Honourable Ted McMeekin, Minister of Community and Social Services
Tim Hudak, Leader of the Official Opposition
Andrea Horwath, Leader of the Third Party