

The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2009-04-04

Province spending \$155m tackling poverty

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE Staff Reporter

Sixteen months after legislation to form a poverty-cutting group was unanimously passed in Nova Scotia's legislature, the government rolled out an anti-poverty program Friday.

The \$155-million plan, which includes money for affordable housing, child care, pharmacare and training for low-skilled workers, was announced in Kentville.

It was unveiled about nine months after the province's Poverty Reduction Working Group delivered a report to the MacDonald Tories.

The strategy was developed "with the core goals of improving opportunities for rewarding work, improving support for people in need, putting a focus on children, and collaboration and co-ordination," a government release says.

About \$88 million will be spent on training workers with less than a Grade 12 education.

"This will improve opportunities for people to get a job, or in some cases, get a better job," the release says.

The money will be used to provide skills training and upgrading and to help with employment searches, it says.

Other key elements include spending \$59 million "to increase access to quality, affordable housing and the development of a provincial housing strategy," according to the release. It says "as part of the focus on children, Nova Scotia's child benefit and low-income pharmacare for children program will be made available" to more families.

"New investments will also make more child-care subsidies available and all subsidies will be made portable," the release says.

The government trumpeted its program for the needy, saying it's "a framework for breaking the cycle of poverty" in Nova Scotia. Opposition parties gave it mixed reviews.

Metro resident Sharon Murphy, a board member of a national organization called Canada Without Poverty, told The Chronicle Herald that local anti-poverty workers intend to meet Monday to go over the government's new strategy.

In a commentary published in The Chronicle Herald in February, Ms. Murphy said a

recent study published in the Canadian Journal of Public Health "showed minimum-wage incomes are insufficient for nutritious diets. Even more troubling is that in January, Canadians suffered the highest number of job losses (129,000) in over three decades."

The government's working group presented its report last June 30.

"This is a long-term plan for a Nova Scotia where resources are used wisely and government and community action is co-ordinated to effectively help those in need," Labour Minister Mark Parent said in Friday's release.

The NDP begs to differ.

New Democrat MLA Marilyn More acknowledged the anti-poverty strategy does have "some good nuggets" but she doesn't consider it a long-term plan. And she finds the timing of the government's announcement a little curious.

Asked if she felt the unveiling was akin to a pre-election distribution of cash, considering a provincial election could happen this spring, Ms. More said no, it's the delay that is bothersome. She said any public money intended to tackle poverty "and alleviate the suffering of people" is worthwhile.

"It's the lack of a comprehensive plan that bothers me," said Ms. More, the MLA for Dartmouth South-Portland Valley. She said she is disappointed she didn't hear anything about "the pressing need" of transportation being included.

Liberal Leader Stephen McNeil said he's "cautiously optimistic" the anti-poverty program will address the needs of Nova Scotia's poor. He, too, said the delay in implementing the program is troubling.

"We'd been very critical of the delay," Mr. McNeil said in an interview. "And the fact that we seem to be on the eve of political uncertainty in the province, and (the government) determines to make the announcement now — we would have liked to have seen the announcement done 12, 14 months ago."

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