



Listening to the People of PEI: Public Engagement Findings Report

Poverty Reduction Action Plan

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“Poverty is a circle: wages rise, food costs, housing, utilities and transportation costs rise...” - Public Survey respondent”

A COMPLEX ISSUE

Poverty is a complex issue that takes many forms and can affect many people in our communities. Poverty almost always involves inadequate income, but its scope can extend to include lack of access to healthy food, adequate housing, higher education opportunities, employment opportunities, reliable transportation, and health services. These challenges tend to be unevenly spread across the population, with higher rates among certain groups. Prince Edward Island (PEI) is not immune to poverty, as outlined in the 2016 census, which showed that in 2015 one in six people living in PEI (23,000) was living in low-income.

POVERTY REDUCTION ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In November 2017, the PEI Government committed to developing a collaborative Poverty Reduction Action Plan, which will be released in the fall of 2018. In February 2018, through Engage PEI, the PEI Government created the Poverty Reduction Advisory Council consisting of 12 appointed community members. The Council is working together with a Cross-Departmental Secretariat representing 10 provincial government departments, and the overall efforts are being led by the Department of Family and Human Services.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

To support the development of the Poverty Reduction Action Plan, a public engagement process took place between March 2018 and June 2018 where people living in PEI were given the opportunity to highlight barriers and challenges faced by those living in poverty, identify priorities for actions, and explore ways to work together to reduce poverty. The public engagement process was designed with support from 60 community organizations that took part in a planning session in early March, as well as input from the Advisory Council and Cross-Departmental Secretariat. The process included a public survey, a service provider survey, 10 small group conversations with service providers and those with lived experience, and six public community conversations, which all together reached 1427 people in PEI.

It is important to note that this was not a stand-alone rigorous academic approach, but rather a community-based approach that is intended to complement other research and practices in the development of the Poverty Reduction Action Plan. It provides a snapshot of what the people who participated in the engagement process see as promising approaches to addressing poverty in PEI.

KEY THEMES

The key poverty-related themes that came out during the public engagement process include the following:

- Housing
- Income and employment
- Social services and supports
- Food insecurity
- Health services
- Education and training
- Childcare
- Transportation

Housing

“The housing issue (specifically the lack of affordable, quality/safe housing is absolutely the number one contributor to poverty in Prince Edward Island”- Public Survey respondent

Housing was identified as a priority in all small groups and public conversations, and was ranked as one of the top three areas of priority for action by 76% of service provider survey respondents and



73% of public survey respondents. Participants expressed concerns in several housing related areas: access to affordable, safe housing; availability of market rental properties; cost and condition of market rental properties; subsidized housing; home ownership for people living on a low income; building of affordable housing; and homelessness, especially among women and youth.

The suggestions for action to improve the housing situation on PEI were to increase income levels to match housing and utility costs; implement rental regulations; tenants' rights; incentives to build affordable housing; increase the availability of accessible housing; provide people with support to stay in their own home; prioritize public housing and broaden its eligibility; and provide shelters and short-term housing for those who are homeless and in need of safe temporary housing.

Income and Employment

"I think low wages, lack of jobs; affect all other aspects of peoples' lives. Not enough money means a lack of healthy food, no dental, eye care, children can't play sports or community activities, housing is probably substandard and transportation can be a problem"- Public Survey respondent

Income and employment were discussed in all small group and public conversations and were identified as one of the top three priorities for action by 38% of service provider survey respondents and 61% of public survey respondents. Participants shared concerns about income levels in PEI that make it very challenging for people living in PEI to make ends meet – wage rates, seasonal work, social assistance rates, pension and Employment Insurance (EI) rates, and 'claw backs'. They also spoke of job opportunities, working conditions, and stigma that prevent some people living in PEI (e.g. newcomers and people with disabilities) from fully participating in community life. Tax rates, especially for people and families living on a low-income, were also raised as a concern.

The suggestions for action brought forward by participants were to reduce employment barriers and increase employment opportunities; develop an approach to wage rates that balances the needs of employers and employees; increase support to small businesses; reduce taxes especially for those living in poverty; provide and/or pilot a basic income guarantee; increase income including social assistance and pension rates; and improve the EI system.



Social Services and Supports

“The people who make just a little too much to qualify for social programs but are still struggling, fall through the cracks”- Public Survey respondent

Social services and supports on PEI were recognized as a priority area in all small groups and public conversations, and identified as one of the top three areas to focus on by 56% of service provider survey respondents and 35% of public survey respondents. Participants in the public engagement process identified service gaps and eligibility criteria and thresholds for social programs and services – especially for certain vulnerable groups including children and youth – as significant concerns. They spoke of the challenges of navigating the system, and of social inclusion as both a cause and effect of poverty. They also highlighted systemic barriers, such as stigma, an understanding of what living in poverty is like, the perceived difference in power between service providers and those living in poverty who are seeking help, access to culturally sensitive supports for Indigenous people, and a lack of coordinated care.

Suggestions for action put forth to address these barriers focused on adjusting social services and supports so they focus on social inclusion, embracing people of all abilities, making cross-generational connections, and providing social opportunities that make life worth living. This includes making social services and supports more available to all people no matter where they live in PEI. For some participants, systemic changes are needed to help people better navigate the system and access programs and services that provide appropriate supports across the lifespan.

Food Insecurity

“Many seniors have very poor food options at the end of the month as do families with small children. Many of those days, I escort them to food banks or provide them with small food items I carry in my vehicle...” (Service Provider Survey Respondent)

Food insecurity and the cost of food were highlighted as areas of concern in all public conversations, nine out of 10 small group conversations, and both surveys. In the surveys, 46% of service provider respondents and 47% of the public respondents ranked food security as one of the top three areas they would like to see the Poverty Reduction Action Plan focus on. Participants across all data collection sources identified challenges in two main areas: the cost of food, particularly healthy food, and the need for more life skills to support food security such as budgeting, making healthy food choices and meal preparation.



To help address food insecurity, participants suggested actions that increase income levels so people can afford to buy healthy foods; incorporate life skills training into schools, communities and other educational programs; provide more support to food distribution programs; and expand meal services for those in need.

Health Services

“The cost of drugs, dentists, and glasses all need to be looked at. My husband and I both work full-time but only make minimum wage. How can we possibly afford these things when we can barely pay our bills?” – Public Survey Respondent

Healthcare services and costs were discussed across all small groups and public conversations and were identified as one of the top three priority areas by 22% of service provider survey respondents and 32% of public survey respondents. The main areas of concern noted by participants were the cost of prescription medications, dental care, eye care and hearing care; access to physicians across the Island; the centralization of services which limits impacts access to medical services in smaller communities; wait times for services; and the need for more mental health and addictions services and supports.

Participants put forward the following suggestions for action: improve healthcare services across PEI focusing on increasing access to physicians and medical services; support with costs related to dental care, vision care, hearing aids and prescription drugs; increase access to mental health and addiction services; and provide support for transportation to access medical services.

Education and Training

“...we must invest in literacy across the board, but especially among adults, and offer more pathways to return to school”- Public Survey respondent

The connection between education and training and poverty was highlighted in all public conversations and eight out of 10 of the small group conversations. In the surveys, 20% of service provider and 28% of public respondents identified education and early learning as one of their top three areas of priority for action in the Poverty Reduction Action Plan. Participants’ main areas of concern in relation to education and training include: early intervention and supports; literacy rates



(including financial literacy) and access to Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) and literacy programs; the cost and availability of supports for post-secondary education and training for people living on low income; support for people living on social assistance to further their education; access to education and training, particularly in smaller communities; and barriers for newcomers to fully participate in community – e.g. cumbersome credentialing process.

Public engagement participants suggested actions in education and training that cover people living in PEI at various stages of life: provide additional early intervention; expand life skills and career development in public schools and community settings; provide alternatives for children and youth in schools including trades; facilitate the working relationships between schools and the community to benefit children and youth; increase access to literacy and GED training programs across PEI; increase access to post-secondary education through reduced costs and additional supports; provide more learning opportunities in the workplace and community including expanding existing employability programs; and simplify the accreditation process.

Childcare

“If there had been public transit and more affordable day care options for licensed care then I might have been able to return to work after my husband’s accident last spring”- Public Survey respondent

Childcare was identified as a concern in all public conversations, seven out of 10 small group conversations and both surveys. Twenty-two percent of service provider survey respondents and 26% of public survey respondents identified childcare as one of the top three areas to focus on in the Poverty Reduction Action Plan. The most common concerns voiced by participants were related to the cost, available subsidies, number of spaces (especially for infants), daycare policies and operational hours, and supply of childcare workers. All of these issues prevent parents/caregivers from participating in the workforce, pursuing further education, and fully participating in community life.

Participants suggested actions to increase access to childcare services and extend hours of service; provide more financial support and/or implement universal childcare; and increase childcare worker salaries and benefits to levels that reflect the value of this service.



Transportation

“...having public transportation across the Island would allow those who can’t afford a car to be able to get to work and keep their jobs”- Public Survey respondent

Finally, transportation was identified as a key area of concern in all small groups and public conversations and was identified as one of the top three priority areas by 14% of service provider and 15% of public survey respondents. The key issues with transportation are the amount of available public transportation; the costs of car ownership; and the inadequate financial support provided through social assistance to help with transportation.

In an effort to address transportation issues on PEI, public engagement participants’ suggestions for action included: build affordable and wide-reaching public transportation; reduce the cost of car ownership by reducing associated fees; and support car sharing/carpooling ideas.



Moving Forward

“We need partnerships across all areas – every Islander has a role.” – Written comment from a Montague Public Conversation Participant

In moving forward with the development and implementation of Poverty Reduction Action Plan in PEI, many who took part in the public engagement process would like to see government take responsibility with community partners and adopt a systemic approach to address the root causes of poverty, which includes a shift toward economic and social equality. Everyone needs to be working together – all levels of government, businesses, community groups, charities, those living in poverty and the general public – to address the key themes identified and overcome poverty. Participants stated that the Poverty Reduction Action Plan ought to continue to engage people with lived experience of poverty, be supported in the provincial budget, increase awareness of poverty and the impact it has on people living in PEI, improve the coordination of services, be community-driven, and focus on taking action with clear targets and timelines. It is built on the idea of hope and dignity for all people living in PEI.

It should be noted that the engagement process occurred prior to the implementation of a number of initiatives that may address some of the proposed actions – e.g. Social Assistance Renewal, Provincial Housing Action Plan, and AccessAbility Supports.