
What is Needed to Support Local and Provincial Strategies to Address Child Poverty in Ontario?

The Best Start Resource Centre hosted a full-day forum for service providers who work with young children, with parents of young children, or who have the opportunity to influence the health and development of young children. A number of speakers shared their knowledge on issues such as rates of child poverty, consequences of child poverty, strategies that reduce the impact of child poverty, and strategies that influence the rate of child poverty.

At the end of the presentations, participants broke into smaller groups and discussed the question, “*What is needed to support local and provincial strategies to address child poverty in Ontario.*” The following suggestions emerged from the discussions (they are not listed in order of interest).

- **More collaboration between communities, different sectors, and different levels of government**
 - Participants suggested that a coordinated effort between various sectors (i.e. early childhood education centers, local public health units, community health centers, local, provincial and federal government organizations) is needed to address the complex issue of child poverty.
- **Increase community participation and development to raise awareness and address child poverty**
 - Engaging the community, especially those who use services (such as parents who use early childhood education services), was brought up a number of times by participants. Creative, fun events (i.e. potluck dinner) were proposed by participants to help bring people together around issues of child poverty. Participants also suggested the need for tools to support and engage communities that have barriers such as language or social isolation.
- **Increase supports for employment to help families increase their income and improve their living conditions**
 - Participants would like to see better access to good, meaningful, full-time work with healthy wages. They also suggested more support for newcomers whose main priority is finding employment.

- **Increase social assistance rates**
 - Participants suggest that social assistance rates increase to a livable amount. Front-line workers would like to participate in a social assistance review.
- **Increase parental participation in early childhood activities**
 - Encourage parents to come to early childhood activities and help them engage with their children. Recognize the many barriers and factors involved in a parent's life and take that into consideration when they are unable to attend meetings or activities. Some suggestions to increase parental participation are supporting them through educational opportunities and accompanying them when they are not comfortable alone (e.g. to discuss an issue at their child's school).
- **Increase accessibility of services and programs**
 - Participants suggested that community health centers and public health units need to work together to improve access to their programs and services. There also needs to be more access to early childhood education centers. There is a need to address specific accessibility issues (i.e. transportation, childcare, work, language).
- **More family involvement in advocacy work and policies that addresses child poverty**
 - Participants felt that families living in poverty should be involved in the decision-making process and involved in developing strategies and policies.
- **Raise awareness around issues of child poverty**
 - Raising awareness around issues of child poverty and challenging stereotypes around poverty was important to participants. They also felt that awareness also needed to be raised around provincial programs and strategies. Participants hope that by raising awareness, advocacy will increase as well.
- **Recognize the importance and support the work of early childhood education in reducing child poverty**
 - Participants wanted to highlight the work done through early childhood education services that enable women and men to attend school or work in order to better support their families. They also note that early childhood educators are underpaid and in order to eradicate child poverty, this profession needs to be valued. They see early childhood education as an important part of the foundation of poverty reduction strategies.
- **Invest in children to reduce child poverty**
 - Many participants supported investing in children through prevention and early intervention in order to reduce child poverty.

- **Front-line workers need to be involved in decision-making**
 - A number of participants suggested that front-line workers be more involved in decision-making processes. They are passionate about facilitating change and should be involved in conversations around reducing child poverty.
- **More funding to support programs and strategies to address child poverty in Ontario**
 - Increasing funding to support efforts to reduce child poverty was a priority among participants at this forum. In general, participants felt that not only should there be an increase in funding, but that there should also be a more appropriate use of existing funding (i.e. focusing funding on homes rather than shelters, providing supports to parents rather than keeping children in care). Participants felt that funders need to be more flexible as well, especially with regards to the criteria for funding and the evaluation style. More specifically, participants suggested increasing funding to support early prevention and identification programs, such as preschool speech and language and school readiness programs.

Participants were clear throughout the discussion that they would like to see change, will advocate and work for change, will work in new ways and have many suggestions to help reduce poverty and support local and provincial strategies to address child poverty in Ontario.