



# *Alternatives North*

## **Alternatives North Responses to the GNWT Poverty Survey March 2011**

The Government of the Northwest Territories is conducting a web-based consultation on poverty related issues and solutions. Below is the submission of Alternatives North, including the questions used by the GNWT to guide feedback.

Northern groups and individuals are encouraged to submit their comments before the April 15, 2011 deadline.

The consultation materials can be found at  
<http://survey.stats.gov.nt.ca/Poverty/>

### Questions and Answers

#### **1. What is being done and works well to address factors of poverty in your community?**

*Think about:*

- *What supports are available to people in need in your community?*
- *What GNWT programs and services aimed at helping people in need in your community are working well?*
- *GNWT works in a variety of ways to reduce poverty. What do you think works best (programs, services etc.)? Why?*
- *Can you identify a poverty reduction initiative that has had measurable success in your community? Who took the lead? Other players? What elements contributed to its success?*

#### **What's Good?**

- ✓ Income security and housing programs help some people avoid starvation, poor health, jail time and living on the street.

Some examples of current poverty reduction initiatives that "work" are:

- ✓ programs for parents that provide child care,
- ✓ early childhood education programs such as Aboriginal head start,



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- ✓ family literacy programs that strengthen family and community connections,
- ✓ programs that build social capital, such as those run by the Baker Centre and the Immigrant Collective Kitchen in Yellowknife, or CBQM in Fort McPherson.
- ✓ Some of the community mobilization projects that came out of the Social Agenda process were great...the problem is project funding ending just as things start to gain momentum.

### **What's Needed?**

- ✓ An integrated, cross-government strategy so that individual initiatives and departments effectively work together to eliminate poverty as a first priority.
- ✓ A strategy that assesses the poverty-elimination potential of everything government does. For example, could energy conservation measures be designed to create meaningful, permanent work that would also eliminate poverty? How can the Aboriginal Achievement initiative reduce poverty?
- ✓ A social safety net that ensures no one lives in poverty.
- ✓ A focus on poverty elimination, not just reduction. It's not okay if any of us is poor. It's not okay if children are less poor but still go hungry.
- ✓ A focus on reducing inequality. Studies show that the social and economic costs to society increase with greater relative poverty, not just with absolute poverty.

### **An Anti-Poverty Strategy Could**

- ✓ identify the causes of poverty and design and coordinate programs and services to eliminate it.
- ✓ monitor and evaluate the impact of all government actions on the quality of life of all citizens to see what is working to eliminate poverty, what is not, or even what is making matters worse.
- ✓ calculate and report on savings realized through anti-poverty efforts -- providing more services for people living in poverty has repeatedly been shown to save costs to the public system particularly in the area of improved health.

## **2. With programs and supports available, why do people continue to struggle?**

### *Think about:*

- *Who are the people in your community that live in poverty?*
- *What do you think causes poverty in your community?*
- *How does poverty affect people in your community?*



**It is a Myth that Poverty is all about Personal Deficits and Failures**

Systemic issues, including low employment and poor distribution of wealth, cause poverty. All poor people do not have personal problems that cause their poverty. For example:

- ✓ More than one-half of poor families and almost one half of poor single people in Canada rely on employment income and do not access welfare.
- ✓ Getting a job does not mean avoiding poverty. No minimum wage in Canada provides a living wage.

It is not about “bad choices”. Blaming poverty on poor people themselves is wrong and distracts us from addressing the real causes of poverty.

**Some systemic issues affecting poverty**

- ✓ Income security programs that are inadequate or have rules that make it impossible for people to become self-reliant.
- ✓ Over-reliance on markets and uncoordinated private sector activity to create “opportunity” and “solve” the problem of poverty.
- ✓ A popular misconception that people don’t want to be self-reliant and “take advantage” of income security programs.
- ✓ A reliance on short-term programs that are inadequate for long term problems, such as residential school impacts.

**3. What other things can be done to reduce poverty and what should the top priorities be?**

*Think about:*

- *What would help people in your community to get out of poverty?*
- *Think about specific groups that are vulnerable to poverty; what specific initiatives would best address poverty for people in those groups?*
- *Reducing poverty costs money. We all pay for these programs through our taxes. What would reduce poverty, be a good use of our tax dollars and invest in the future?*
- *If the GNWT could do one thing to reduce poverty, what should it be?*

Here are some top priorities to eliminate poverty

- ✓ Political Will – Political and public service leaders must decide poverty is unacceptable.
- ✓ Cost/Benefit Analysis – Acknowledge, as other jurisdictions have, the sound business case for eliminating poverty. It is cheaper to eliminate poverty than to provide band-aid programs or ignore the problem.\*
- ✓ Understand Poverty – Increase public awareness of poverty and its causes and reduce the blame placed on people living in poverty.



- ✓ Communicate the value of the public services needed for quality of life (the social safety net) for all citizens and how much value we get for our tax dollars.
- ✓ Communicate the economic and social costs to tax payers of poverty, not just the costs of eliminating poverty.
- ✓ Corporations and businesses benefit from poverty reduction too. They should pay their fair share of the taxes necessary to eliminate poverty.

\*Research tells us that we can save money in the long run. Early childhood intervention can save \$7 in future health, education, and justice system costs. Malcolm Gladwell wrote about "Million Dollar Murray", a homeless man in Nevada, who cost the health care system more than any other individual in the state, more than it would have cost to give him an apartment and full-time nurse.

### **Provide Adequate and Affordable Housing**

Adequate and affordable housing is a key factor in fighting poverty. Lack of or poor housing results in poorer health and higher health care costs. Overcrowding increases social (and health) problems including violence against women.

### **Provide Quality Community-Based Early Childhood Education**

Affordable, quality early childhood education care programming is needed in each community so that child-care is not a barrier for parents, grandparents and siblings to work or study. Offer rich learning opportunities provided by trained educators to help children become school-ready.

### **Provide Quality Mental Health, Trauma and Addictions Support and Treatment**

Quality mental health professionals (supported by regional specialists) are needed in each community to deliver programs that address mental health, trauma and addictions.

### **Link Community and Economic Development**

Poverty most impacts Aboriginal people, women, people with disabilities, single parents and single people of all ages. Focus public economic development investments on reducing the inequality that exists within and among NWT communities, not just on creating business.

#### **4. What are the roles of residents, community and governments in efforts to reduce poverty?**

*Think about:*

- *What is the role of the residents in efforts to reduce poverty in your community?*
- *What is the role of community in efforts to reduce poverty in your community?*
- *What is the role of the GNWT in efforts to reduce poverty in your community?*



- *Are there others that have a role to play in efforts to reduce poverty in the NWT?*
  
- ✓ Residents can take responsibility to become educated and to participate actively in serving their community.
- ✓ Communities can take responsibility to identify who, when and why people slip into poverty and then identify solutions. They can solve the problems or insist that governments and business do so if poverty is caused by their policies, actions or inactions.
- ✓ The GNWT can take a leadership role to actively engage communities, business and civil society in a collaborative process to develop and implement an anti-poverty strategy. The most successful poverty elimination strategies elsewhere have been those that were the most collaborative.

**5. Other comments or suggestions?**

- ✓ Promotion of this survey has been very limited. Alternatives North would not have known about it if we had not been actively checking the website looking for it.
- ✓ The GNWT should report publicly the unfiltered results of its consultation.