

The unraveling of Ontario's social safety net

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.

-Nelson Mandela, 2005

Prepared by the Durham Economic Downturn Task Force

Representing:

Canadian Mental Health Association

Catholic Family Services of Durham

Community Development Council

Durham Children's Aid Society

Durham College

Durham Regional Police Service

Kinark Child and Family Services, Durham

Oshawa Community Health Centre

Social Services Department, the Regional Municipality of Durham

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Introduction

During times of economic uncertainty, it is crucial to support individuals and families who are already vulnerable, as they will be the ones who endure the greatest impact. Ensuring that families are strong will assist them in contributing to a successful economic upturn.

Investing in our social safety net is not only just and fair -- it is economically prudent. It must be an essential component of government budgeting during this critical time. If there is not pro-active and multi-faceted intervention -- including support for vital community services -- we will further entrench the problem *and* it will cost us even more in the long term.

Similar to other regions in the province, the Region of Durham has been experiencing greater demands on its human services needs. Human service providers in the region are currently tasked with balancing the fiscal reality, while meeting the ever-changing needs of residents. These significant financial pressures have been magnified by the recent layoffs and unemployment in the automotive sector and its feeder industries.

Durham Economic Downturn Task Force

In order to deal with the increasing pressures on the region's social infrastructure, the Durham Economic Downturn Task Force has been formed. The task force is a multi-sectoral group of human service providers that broadly represents the community. Participants include: The Regional Municipality of Durham, Social Services Department; Durham Children's Aid Society; Community Development Council of Durham; Catholic Family Services of Durham; Canadian Mental Health Association; Durham College; Whitby Mental Health Centre; Kinark Child and Family Services; Oshawa Community Health Centre and Durham Regional Police Service.

The Task Force is committed to ensuring that the social infrastructure within Durham Region is supported, as it is the foundation for social and economic stability. As such, it is currently developing a collaborative strategy with community-based solutions to assist families that are impacted by the economic downturn, and address the greater service needs among residents in the region.

A critical component of this strategy involves sustained and increased funding from the provincial government to address the increasing human service needs of Durham's residents. Essentially, increased economic and social support for these vulnerable individuals would be a stimulus for local communities. Research shows that healthy individuals and families support economic development and renewal. It has also demonstrated that increased economic support for vulnerable individuals and families is spent locally, thus providing much-needed local economic stimulus.

Impact on Durham Region

Many families across Durham Region are facing real pressure from high levels of unemployment. As a result, increasing numbers of people are requiring social assistance and relying more on community support services.

Social service providers are often the first to see the impact of a downturn in the economy. We see the impact in both an increase in the numbers of families needing services, but also the effect on the client populations that we are already serving.

Public investments in low and modest income families are particularly strategic because they use their money in their local communities to pay rent, purchase food and other necessities, such as child care. Similarly, community services operate locally, functioning as a support to families, as consumers of local food and services, and as local employers. For example, the members of this Task Force employ 5,518 individuals.

As the economic crisis escalates, so will the number of children and families who desperately need services to maintain safe, stable homes. When parents cannot provide proper care, housing and food for their children, local service providers must step in to provide supports. Supports to families include assessments, crisis intervention, counseling and links to other community services.

The current context

- With recent shifts in the manufacturing sector (GM layoffs and impacts to related industries), the unemployment rate in the Oshawa CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) has risen from 7.5 per cent in 2006 to 8 per cent, as of February 2009 (compared to the national rate of 7.2 per cent and the U.S. rate of 7.6 per cent).
- From 2005 to 2009, there has been a decrease in employees at the General Motors facility in Oshawa from 13,000 to approximately 7,000—almost half of the workforce.
- In addition to the manufacturing sectors, the service and retail industries across the region have also been affected by the current economic downturn.
- The reliance of Ontario's food banks increased by 13 per cent between September 2007 and September 2008, while Oshawa exceeded the provincial average, with an increase of 15.3 per cent (Note: this figure is for the time period before the most dramatic impact of the economic downturn). And, in Ontario 40 per cent of food bank clients were children.
- Lone parent families are inordinately burdened with poverty; and Durham leads the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with 61 per cent of the children who live in poverty, living in lone parent families (GTA average is 51 per cent)
- The population of Durham Region is expected to double in the next ten years, with a total population of 857,039 in 2031 (46 per cent increase from 2006). This growth translates to an increased number of clients requiring access to programs and resources, and a greater strain on the human services in the region.

Key considerations

- The Children's Services Division of the Social Services Department, The Regional Municipality of Durham currently has a waiting list of about 2,100 (equal to one year of waiting). As such, it is difficult for a parent who wants to go back to work or retrain, as access to child care is too long in coming.
- The Income Support Division of the Social Services Department, The Regional Municipality of Durham has reported an increase of 10.8 per cent in social assistance (Ontario Works) caseloads from January 2008 to January 2009, with a 4 per cent caseload increase from December 2008 to January 2008. The Ontario Works Program is funded 80 per cent by the province and 20 per cent by the Region. Without an adequate amount of provincial support in 2009, a deficit will accumulate in the program.
- Family Services Division of the Social Services Department, The Regional Municipality of Durham is seeing an increase in family violence and mental health issues, as a result of the economic downturn, and a greater demand for counseling services.
- Durham Children's Aid Society has experienced a 15 per cent increase in new investigations over the last year (this includes forecasted projections for the fiscal year, ending March 31, 2009). While this is not solely due to the economic downturn which has had its greatest impact in the last quarter, it is troubling as the number had remained relatively stable (or had decreased) for the previous five years.
- Whitby Mental Health Centre recognizes the link between poverty and the increased need for child and adolescent mental health services. Currently at WMHC, the adolescent outpatient average wait time for clinics is 50 days.
- For people living in poverty and have a predisposition to mental illness, losing resources, such as income, employment, and housing, can increase the risk factors for mental illness or relapse.
- Catholic Family Services of Durham Region is funded by the province to provide family violence treatment counseling to approximately 500 women and children per year. In the fall of 2008, requests for service were up 24 per cent over the same period in 2007. A rise in family violence is predictable when there are major job layoffs.

The cost of poverty

We need to prevent further child and family poverty to avoid an even wider gap between rich and poor in Canada. Public investment in poverty reduction is smart economics.

Social service providers already struggle with the lack of available resources. There are long waiting lists for those services that do exist, and in trying economic times these challenges will only worsen. Implementing "belt-tightening" methods has been tried

before and has deepened inequalities within Canada, and it costs more in the long term due to increased reliance on social services.

We either share the collective responsibility as a society to prevent and reduce child and family poverty, or we face rising costs in health care services, policing, criminal justice and education, and reduced output due to high unemployment.

For families that may already be struggling with substance abuse, domestic violence or mental illness, being hit by hard economic times can be devastating. The combination of risk factors not only threatens the family unit, it increases the risk of abuse and neglect to children.

There are also startling facts about the increased risk of physical and mental illness for those living in poverty. A child living in poverty is three times more likely to experience mental health problems than one not living in poverty. A child living in poverty is also at a higher risk for experiencing mental health problems and living in poverty as an adult.

Children living in single-parent households, children of teen mothers, and children of social assistance recipients are a greater risk of both poverty and of chronic health problems. Social assistance recipients are ten times more likely to attempt suicide and are less likely to have a regular medical practitioner.

Leaving these factors unaddressed while planning for provincial budgeting will lead to greater stresses on our social safety net and cost more in the long term.

Our commitment

Infrastructure is not limited to roads and energy projects; social infrastructure, including education, child care, family support programs, social housing, income support, mental health services and child welfare are key components in poverty reduction and are essential to healthy communities.

Despite the challenges, we remain committed to families we serve. Even with the increased pressures families face in the economic crisis, Ontario's children need healthy and safe families to grow and develop, and that's why strong families are more important now than ever.

We have begun the process to develop a collaborative service provision plan among the members of the Task Force. We are committed to working with our community partners on creative and pro-active solutions to provide the most efficient and effective services to the people we serve.

Ontario's commitment

In order to maintain service delivery to residents who are adversely affected by the economic crisis, the Task Force requests that the provincial government commit funding to social infrastructure investment as part of its budget planning. This investment will help ensure that resources are available to respond to residents' needs, and provide the resources to serve them during these uncertain economic times. We need to ensure that these individuals are well-equipped to re-enter the workforce.

By investing in our residents, together we are making an investment in the future of the province and the region. This investment will stimulate the economy, increase productivity, and reduce poverty and the strain on the people of Durham Region. As such, we promote a much-needed economic stimulus in social infrastructure, as an antidote to Ontario's struggling economy.

The Durham Economic Downturn Task Force acknowledges that the provincial government is in a difficult position, given the changing economic climate. However, we aim to work in partnership to find sustainable solutions that will help build long-term initiatives to serve the residents of Durham Region during this difficult time. Investing in people during the economic downturn makes sense. We will need those same people as the workforce expands after the recession ends.

Durham Economic Downturn Task Force: Who we are

The Durham Economic Downturn Task Force is a multi-sectoral group of human service providers that broadly represents the community.

The participating agencies represent thousands of staff members and volunteers, and provide services to thousands of families each year in Durham Region, including:

- Social Services Department, The Regional Municipality of Durham: 1,600 staff
- Whitby Mental Health Centre: 1,200 staff, 150 volunteers
- Durham Children's Aid Society: 373 staff, 260 foster families, 150 volunteers
- Durham College: 1,050 staff (full and part-time), over 6,000 students
- Catholic Family Services of Durham: 27 counsellors, 75 volunteers
- Kinark Child and Family Services, Durham: 85 employees and 50 volunteers
- Community Development Council: 18 staff, 150 volunteers
- Oshawa Community Health Centre: 87 staff and 196 volunteers
- Durham Regional Police Service: 839 officers and 239 civilians
- Canadian Mental Health Association

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