

Recession Relief Coalition Hunger Inquiry Backgrounder



About the Recession Relief Coalition

The Recession Relief Coalition is a Toronto-based group of organizations and individuals that formed at the onset of the recession due to concerns about the impact of the recession on Canada's most vulnerable and marginalized residents.

In late 2008, over 260 organizations and 1,100 individuals across the country endorsed the Coalition's first initiative, a call for the federal government to invest funding to prevent cuts to non-profit agencies serving vulnerable communities and to increase funding to support vital social services, including homelessness programs and settlement services.

Since that time, the Recession Relief Coalition has been working to document and draw attention to the real impact the Recession is having on Canadians and the organizations that serve them, in an attempt to keep governments accountable to those affected by the recession and to protect and/or increase government supports.

Recession Over, Situation Still Critical

Although governments armed with reports of GDP growth are declaring the recession over, the situation remains grim for millions of Canadians. Slowly, other figures are beginning to emerge which reveal a far less rosy picture of the nation's well-being.

TD Economics' October 22, 2010 report, "*Toronto's Economic Recovery Leaving Many Behind*" details how, in spite of GDP growth in the GTA that is set to reach almost 5% this year, the recessionary conditions for a sizeable number of the region's residents have extended into 2010, and even deepened. The report notes that despite the 110,000 net new jobs created in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area since September of 2009, the jobless rate has been stuck in the high range of 9.0-9.5% over the past six months and for many of those that have managed to find employment, they have involuntarily taken on part-time jobs (e.g., they are underemployed). Under high unemployment rate conditions, social assistance program demand has climbed to new post-recession highs as people draw-down their assets and/or exhaust their unemployment benefits and in turn, become eligible for this financial support. The number of households looking for assisted housing across Ontario increased by almost 10% compared to 2009. Recent immigrants were hit hardest by the 2008-09 recession; for example, newcomers with a university education were four times more likely to be unemployed in 2009 than native Canadians.

TD Economics expects little improvement in these trends over the next few years in view of prospects for a sharp slowdown in economic growth and moves by governments to rein in deficits, which tend to hurt low-income earners the hardest. Reduced public spending growth will put more pressure on community and charitable organizations to assist those most in need, but will continue to be challenged by an inadequate funding supply to meet heavy demands. Based on the latest data available for charitable giving, overall donations in Canada fell to four-year lows in 2008, just as the recession was beginning to take hold. According to a 2010 Imagine Canada Survey of 1,500 charitable organizations and community groups, more than half are experiencing increased demand for their products and services and/or difficulty fulfilling their mission this year versus last year.

The Daily Bread Food Bank's September 2010 report, "*Who's Hungry: 2010 Profile of Hunger in the GTA*" reported that one year after the recession was officially over and economic growth had returned, use of food banks increased by 15% across the GTA—the largest increase since social assistance rates were cut drastically by the provincial government. As the report notes, food bank use, the inability to be able to afford food, is one way to measure the extent of poverty. When the financial circumstances of a household are strained, choices have to be made between paying rent or putting food on the table. It is the food budget that is usually sacrificed; we can try and eat less food, but we cannot pay less rent. When confronted with these difficult choices, getting food from a food bank becomes a necessity. In this sense, food bank use can be an important indicator of the state of the economy because it can capture any adverse or positive effects that economic or social policy changes have on the amount of money in people's wallets.

The effects of hunger and malnourishment on individuals, families, communities, the health care system, social services system and the economy are incredibly serious. Failure to address and prevent hunger now will have adverse affects on the nation's well-being for years to come.

For example, the costs of type 1 and type 2 diabetes, a disease caused and exacerbated by poverty and the inability to afford sufficiently nourishing food, are expected to skyrocket in the next 10 years. As reported recently in the Toronto Star's "*Poverty Drives Diabetes Epidemic*," "a recent study by the Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) says, in Ontario, the disease will affect 1.9 million in 2020 — that's nearly 12 per cent of the population. Today, 1.7 million Ontarians have diabetes, just over eight per cent of the population. The economic burden of diabetes will be staggering to the health care system and economy. The association's report estimates the costs will jump from \$4.9 billion in 2010 to \$7 billion in 2020. The indirect costs of diabetes — the amputations, blindness and kidney disease — account for nearly 80 percent of Ontario's \$4.9 billion figure today, the association reports. A rise in diabetes-related illness is the predicted outcome of people living in poverty and unable to afford to eat properly."

Exposing the Problems...and the Solutions: The Recession Relief Coalition Hunger Inquiry

Much of the evidence pointing to the seriousness of hunger and poverty in Canada in the wake of the recession has been the anecdotal and undocumented evidence observed and experienced by those who deliver social services and assistance to those in need, as well as research, reports and recommendations that have received little attention. The Hunger Inquiry will examine the situation of hunger by engaging front line workers, social service agency staff, academics, community leaders, and people directly affected by hunger in presenting this experience, knowledge, research and recommendations to a panel of "experts."

The purpose of the Hunger Inquiry is to a) identify the reasons why people aren't able to access enough of the nutritious food needed to maintain and enhance their physical and mental health; b) gather evidence attesting to the problems that arise from hunger and malnourishment; c) produce a report that includes recommendations for action to address the many issues raised through the Inquiry; and d) mobilize a broad base of allies in efforts to address hunger and related issues.

The panelists, who have been selected because of their knowledge about poverty and hunger-related issues, are Joshna Maharaj (Celebrity Chef and Food Activist), Bruce McLeod (former Moderator of the United Church of Canada), Jim Stanford (Economist, Canadian Auto Workers), Gary Bloch (Family Doctor, St. Michael's Hospital), Linda Chamberlain (Dream Team), and Toni Panzuto (Baby and Toddler Nutrition Program Facilitator, FoodShare)

Panelists will develop recommendations based on the evidence they hear from witnesses during the November 23rd Inquiry. A report of the proceedings will be developed and widely distributed so that organizations will be able to use it as a resource to support their food security and anti-poverty advocacy work. The Inquiry's longer-term goal is to encourage further organized action around the issues highlighted by the report and to convince governments to implement its recommendations.

Recession Relief Coalition Hunger Inquiry Panelist Biographies

Jim Stanford is an Economist with the Canadian Auto Workers, Canada's largest private-sector trade union. He received his Ph.D. in Economics in 1995 from the New School for Social Research in New York, and also holds economics degrees from Cambridge University and the University of Calgary. Jim is the author of *Paper Boom* (published in 1999) and author of *Economics for Everyone* (Pluto Press and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2008). Jim writes a regular economics column for the *Globe and Mail*, and lives in Toronto with his partner and two daughters.

Dr. Bruce McLeod is a retired United Church minister. Former churches include Toronto's Metropolitan United Church, and Bloor Street United Church. He has also been Moderator of The United Church of Canada, President of the Canadian Council of Churches, and a Commissioner of The Ontario Human Rights Commission. For eight years he was op-ed columnist for The Toronto Star where he wrote many columns on city issues, such as immigration, welfare and poverty; one column detailed a night he slept among homeless people at Seaton House. He also volunteered for eight months with Pueblito, a village for abandoned children in Costa Rica. In connection with these responsibilities, he has written four books, and been monitor or reporter in Vietnam, South Africa, Haiti, Thailand, Taiwan, Ethiopia, Lubicon Indian land in Alberta and Cree communities in Hudson Bay.

Joshna Maharaj is a busy chef with big ideas! With a simple but thoughtful approach to food and cooking, Joshna creates food with excitement and enthusiasm. With recipes that are diverse, wholesome and delicious, her approach to food is accessible and uncomplicated. Currently, Joshna is working as a freelance chef and writer in Toronto with a regular guest spot on CBC's Steven & Chris. Joshna is also a member of Slow Food, and is constantly engaged in ideas about a truly sustainable food system and culture. With a love of people and an insatiable curiosity, her dedication to good food and food justice fuel Joshna's work with the pursuit of great taste.

Dr. Gary Bloch is a family physician with St. Michael's Hospital and Assistant Professor with the University of Toronto. His practice focuses on the needs of people living at low income and without adequate housing. He is a founding member of Health Providers Against Poverty, the Seaton House Family Health Team, and Inner City Health Associates (a group of physicians working with the homeless across the GTA). He is involved in research on the impact of poverty on health, and frequently runs workshops and lectures on ways health providers can reduce the impact of poverty on the health of their patients.

Toni Panzuto is the program Facilitator of FoodShare's Baby and Toddler Nutrition Program. "As a single parent of a now young adult I have experienced hunger and faced the challenges of securing and maintaining adequate housing over the years. My relationship with Foodshare began in 1995 as a volunteer on the Hunger Hotline (now called "Foodlink"), which enabled me to secure a couple of boxes brimming with healthy fruits and vegetables on a monthly basis. In 1996 I became a Good Food Box volunteer coordinator in South Etobicoke, the area I have resided in since 1995, and I continue to coordinate the box at the co-operative where I currently live. As an anti-poverty activist, I have been active over the years on various committees and Boards such as LIFT, OCAP and CERA. At present, I am a Board member of William Punnett Co-operative and South Etobicoke Legal Services. My volunteer work at LAMP gives me the opportunity to serve on the Social Welfare Reform Committee and as the Chair of the Etobicoke Lakeshore Housing Taskforce, as well as be a member of the West Coalition on Housing and Homelessness."

Linda Chamberlain is a respected community advocate, Peer Support Worker, and member of The Dream Team. The Dream Team is a group of psychiatric consumer/survivors who advocate for more supportive housing in Ontario for people with mental health issues. By telling their personal stories, by conducting and presenting research, and by standing up for human rights, they demonstrate and promote the life-altering benefits of supportive housing. Linda also runs a soup kitchen in the basement of her apartment building and fosters the cats of people with mental illness while they go into hospital.