

MPs from all parties set to tackle poverty

Committee plans to look at Regent Park's success with education program

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OTTAWA—A parliamentary committee is setting out to establish the framework for a national poverty strategy by meeting with groups and individuals across Canada already doing their bit to help the poor.

The Human Resources and Social Development Committee decided yesterday it is high time for a plan, which would ultimately require federal government approval, to tackle the growing problem.

"As the National Council on Welfare and other groups have said, if there is no vision, no plan, no leadership, no resources assigned and no accepted measure of results, we will be mired in the consequences of poverty for generations to come," said NDP MP Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie), a member of the committee.

Martin said the study could lay the groundwork for a "truly national plan" where governments set firm targets, create timelines and report yearly so everyone can see the progress being made against poverty.

"We have been able to achieve an all-party, non-partisan commitment to study poverty over the next number of months," he said.

"It's something I have been working hard trying to achieve for quite some time now to get to a place where all parties would commit to comprehensive national plan to eradicate poverty," he added.

Martin noted that, since the mid-1990s, Ireland has had a national poverty plan, which he says has reduced poverty levels to 6.8 per cent from 15 per cent; he added that Newfoundland hopes to have the lowest level of poverty in Canada by 2016.

Committee chair Dean Allison, a Conservative MP for Niagara West-Glanbrook, told the House of Commons the committee "is about to embark on a very important study of poverty in Canada."

Allison later told the *Star* the committee will benefit from the experience of many groups right across the country.

"I am hopeful that as we are able to talk to people that we will actually be able to find some effective strategies ...," he said.

Allison pointed to one group in particular, Pathways to Education, which got started in 1991 at a health clinic in Toronto's Regent Park.

Now, years after the program started offering academic support, mentoring and financial assistance to young people living in Regent Park, one of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods, the area's high-school dropout rate has plummeted to among the lowest in Ontario.

And the proportion of young people attending college or university has jumped to an astonishing 80 per cent from 20 per cent, while teen pregnancies and crime have fallen dramatically.

"I am very impressed by the organization and the amazing work they have done," he said.

Allison said society may never be able to eradicate poverty, "but if we can find ways to help those who are less fortunate, boy, I'll tell you that would certainly make a huge difference."

Frances Lankin, CEO of the United Way of Greater Toronto, said the combined efforts to tackle poverty will only be complete when Ottawa joins in the fight.

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