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Coalition seeks backing on poverty reduction

But political response to Campaign 2000 strategy less than enthusiastic

KERRY GILLESPIE

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Ontario's political parties didn't rush out and embrace a new call to cut child poverty in half within 10 years.

The New Democrats said they supported many elements of the non-profit coalition's blueprint for reducing poverty, but didn't have anything, for now at least, to say about committing to the targets.

The Progressive Conservatives did not return calls for comment.

The Liberals said they appreciate the suggestions and the dedication of the group and went on to talk about the many improvements they've already made including raising minimum wage, welfare rates and the introduction of a child benefit for all low-income families.

All three parties have agreed to meet with Campaign 2000, a group dedicated to ending child poverty in Canada, over the next few weeks to discuss their poverty reduction strategy, released yesterday.

Nearly one in every six children in Ontario is growing up in poverty.

The group isn't focusing all its efforts on getting political parties to commit to a comprehensive reduction strategy, they're also calling on voters to get involved and demand their candidates, in October's election, make poverty a priority.

Their message to Ontarians: It can be done and it's good for us all.

Quebec has reduced its child poverty from 22.4 per cent in 1997 to 9.6 per cent in 2005. The United Kingdom and Ireland dropped their poverty rates after setting targets.

The goal here should be to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent within five years and by 50 per cent within 10 years, Campaign 2000 said.

Reducing poverty isn't just important for low-income families said Sarah Blackstock, an Income Security Advocacy Centre analyst.

"It would mean healthier, safer, more inclusive communities . . . a stronger more vibrant economy, it would mean all of our children were in classrooms where the kids were able to learn and develop more affectively because the classroom isn't disrupted by the difficulties of hungry, struggling kids," Blackstock said.

Ways to do it include:

Immediately hike the minimum wage to \$10 an hour

Increase and index welfare rates to inflation and increase annual child benefits by \$1,260

Bring in regulated day care, with parent fees based on income, for all kids under 12.

Build 8,300 new affordable housing units and provide 45,000 rent supplements to bring down the cost of existing units.

"If we're serious about ending child poverty in Ontario we need a plan. It seems obvious and yet we still don't have the plan that Ontarians need," Blackstock said.

The plan needs firm targets and must acknowledge that poverty is multi-faceted and so the solution has to be too, she said.

Poverty doesn't happen just because someone has a low-wage job, it's also because they don't have health and dental benefits, can't find affordable day care or housing and can't access training to get a better job.