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No commitments offered on poverty group's targets

But parties to meet with Campaign 2000 officials

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QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

Ontario's political parties yesterday would not commit to the firm targets for reducing poverty that have been proposed in a new report by the non-profit coalition Campaign 2000.

Liberal officials said they appreciate the suggestions and the dedication of the group, which yesterday called on Ontario politicians to commit during the upcoming election campaign to cut child poverty in half within 10 years. The Liberals also talked about improvements they've made, including raising the minimum wage and welfare rates and introducing a child benefit for low-income families.

The New Democrats said they supported many elements of Campaign 2000'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.

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 the poverty reduction plan.

In addition to increasing minimum wage and assistance rates, the government has made it easier to leave welfare and has extended health benefits to those going into jobs without them, Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur said yesterday.

"Is there more to do? Yes, there is," she said. "Our government is determined to help our most vulnerable citizens and we're not just saying it, we have done it and I hope we will be judged by the electorate by what we have done."

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

In addition to its call to politicians, Campaign 2000 is also calling on voters to get involved and demand that their candidates in the Oct. 10 election make poverty a priority.

Quebec has reduced its child poverty rate from 22.4 per cent in 1997 to 9.6 per cent in 2005. The United Kingdom and Ireland reduced 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 "would mean healthier, safer, more inclusive communities ... a stronger more vibrant economy," said Sarah Blackstock, an Income Security Advocacy Centre analyst.

The Campaign 2000 report suggests immediately hiking the minimum wage to \$10 an hour; increasing and indexing welfare rates to inflation and increasing annual child benefits by \$1,260; bringing in regulated daycare, with fees based on income; and building 8,300 new affordable housing units and providing 45,000 rent supplements.