

## VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: An Overview

### *Low-income people and their allies mobilizing for justice*

All around us, low-income people struggle to put food on the table, pay rent and meet other basic needs. Yet we rarely hear from these “invisible people,” or learn about their lives. Meanwhile recent provincial government policies have made their lives even tougher, and unless enough Ontarians speak out, things could get worse in the months and years ahead.

**VOICES FROM THE MARGINS** is a community mobilization effort taking place in the spring and fall of 2019 across Ontario that can help turn this situation around. Low-income people in 10 to 20 communities will share stories of their lives—their issues, goals, and ideas—speaking to a team of local rapporteurs. The working poor, seniors and people on social assistance will be invited to take part. Privacy will be respected. The VOICES project is sponsored by Ontario’s major interfaith anti-poverty organization, the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), working with community partners.

ISARC has carried out several community hearings projects over the past 30 years. The collected stories and concerns expressed by low income people are used in dialogue with MPPs at Queens Park and with policy makers to seek change in a system that stigmatizes and further isolates those already on the margins of our society.

The published stories and recommendations have also been used in community work and social work courses.

The VOICES project will also involve partner organizations, such as:

- Social service providers and partner organizations such as legal clinics, the labour movement and anti-poverty organizations;
- Faith community leaders and members, many of whom work directly with low-income people in foodbank, emergency shelter and other survival programs;

A range of significant outcomes will result from this project:

- Greater awareness and mobilization of people living in poverty and their allies. This would include not only those living on social assistance and ODSP incomes but also students, workers with part-time, temporary and/or contract work, and also low-income seniors;

- A stronger awareness within faith communities of the hardships endured by people in poverty, and deeper involvement in efforts to tackle poverty at its roots;
- New alliances and strategies for local action.
- A range of recommendations to government with specific policy proposals;
- Resources to be used in ongoing advocacy efforts, both with government and opposition MPPs, as well as within faith communities and partner organizations. We see the VOICES project as part of a long-term effort to animate an ongoing advocacy campaign to end poverty in Ontario.

#### How you, your faith community and local organizations can help:

The VOICES project depends on the active support and involvement of concerned citizens, faith groups and community organizations. Here's how you can help:

- Organize a hearing event in your community. It does not need to be a large event; a group of 10 to 20 low-income people speaking to three to five rapporteurs is ideal. ISARC can provide resources and suggestions for others with whom you can work.
- Work ecumenically or in an interfaith grouping to pull together several faith communities to help organize the event and benefit from the stories that will be shared.
- Suggest names of rapporteurs to hear the stories and ask questions in a respectful way. (A rapporteur is a person who has listening skills, empathy and the ability to hear stories without bias or judgement.)
- Provide financial and/or in-kind support. We need funds to help carry out local events, such as:
  - Providing flyers, notices, communications, etc. to extend an invitation to participants (both story-tellers and rapporteurs)
  - Paying for hearing event spaces, (even if a space is provided for free, an honorarium might be appropriate to cover custodial extra duties)
  - Providing snacks
  - Helping with local travel costs especially for participants,
  - Helping subsidize childcare or babysitting costs for participants,

We welcome tax-deductible individual donations which can be made quickly at [www.isarc.ca](http://www.isarc.ca), click on the Donate button in top right-hand corner, and select ISARC from the list of organizations provided.

Please contact us to learn more: email [coordinator@isarc.ca](mailto:coordinator@isarc.ca), or visit [www.isarc.ca](http://www.isarc.ca)