



# Invest in rural resiliency & ADDRESS POVERTY

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## Introduction

Ontario's lakes, beaches, parks, sugar bushes, vineyards and pastoral farmlands draw many visitors from the city. But the scenic playground that urban residents experience in cottage country is not the reality for people who live there all year. Life in many rural communities is very different from that imagined by people who live in cities. (See the Background Statement.)

Rural residents are known for their resilience and independence, and are proud to support themselves. They do not want to ask for help.

## The Developing Crisis

Poverty is reaching crisis proportions in rural Ontario. Rural economies increasingly rely on tourists and seasonal vacationers (campers, bikers, boaters, fishing enthusiasts, hunters and cottagers) as local industries and family farms go out of business. Many people leave rural areas to find work, while those who stay have limited employment options. Too often the reality is hidden poverty, food insecurity, transportation problems, homelessness and under- or unserved mental health and addictions challenges.

In an effort to attract new people to their region and boost tourism, rural municipal governments focus on the scenic and attractive aspects of rural reality—rarely do they reveal the hidden poverty that exists. Rural poverty is dispersed across spacious landscapes along with a lack of services and attention, which helps keep it hidden.

## Make the Basics of Life Available to All

Housing, electricity, heat, water, food and transportation are expensive and sometimes scarce in rural communities. Municipalities and local service organizations lack the resources to provide the web of supports that urban people with low incomes take for granted. Emergency shelters, meal programs, public transportation and water and sewage services are not available to many rural residents. Service providers based in urban centres who allocate services and resources do not understand the scope, depth and impact of poverty in rural communities.

## Root Cause of Rural Poverty

While rural people develop creative solutions with the resources they have, income insecurity is the root cause of poverty. Inadequate income, combined with lack of affordable housing, rising utility costs, food insecurity and scant public transportation, intensifies the experience of poverty in rural communities. The province must raise the rates for Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) to levels that ensure people can live in health and dignity.

People who live in rural communities require/need the same basic services as their urban counterparts. Yet rural service providers with limited resources face overwhelming demand for a broad spectrum of services.

Investing in rural communities is a wise investment in sustaining and boosting rural resiliency. Without adequate rural services, intractable and expensive problems in health care and other social supports will likely increase. Inadequate investment will prompt further migration to urban areas, where rural people used to surviving through social ties and rural resiliency will put further demands on urban social infrastructure.

## We therefore call on the Ontario government to make these immediate investments:

- Raise **social assistance rates** to at least the Basic Income pilot level, and index them to the real cost of living as experienced by poor people.
- Stop the claw backs as people pursue **self-employment** opportunities
- Subsidize **housing** and housing repair.
- Increase subsidies for **utilities** (electricity, heat and water).
- Fund rural **transportation**.
- Fund **community agencies** to improve services to rural people—including food security, mental health and addiction treatment services.
- Ensure people living on low incomes who reside in rural Ontario, in community or in institutions, have **equitable access to justice** through effective, meaningful and quality legal information, advice, and advocacy services.
- Engage rural communities in developing vibrant, healthy and **sustainable communities** that meet the needs of local residents—as well as seasonal residents and visitors.
- Rural communities need better access to broadband to better participate in economic and civic life in Ontario. Immediate action is required to **improve and extend connectivity** across the province in rural areas.
- **Create community hubs** to better connect people and the services they require.

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# Statement on Rural Poverty

Many poor people in rural communities have lived independent lives and been resilient in many ways. Aging and changes in the labour market—plant and business closings, increased precarity of work—have made them more dependent. People in rural communities are perhaps more reluctant to display their poverty. If the degree of their poverty is made public, they risk losing their housing—as inadequate as it may be.

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Many rural people who live in poverty have limited access to the basics of life. Organizations that provide community services in the counties of Prince Edward, Hastings, Frontenac and Lanark report the following:

## Housing

Housing is a major issue. Rental housing is expensive and becoming scarcer. In Prince Edward County, for example, some long-term rental housing is being converted to Airbnb accommodation for tourists visiting local vineyards.

Many rural people own their homes and land through inheritance or lack of rental options. Some live in cottages or other housing that needs repair; they may have nowhere to go. Some live in housing with dirt floors. The federal loan program to repair and rehabilitate rural housing was recently downloaded to provinces and then to municipalities—who do not have money to meet the existing need.

In more extreme cases, people live in heating camps with no heat, plumbing or septic systems. Some do not want service providers to visit them at homes for fear that their property will be condemned. Agency staff working in urban communities who decide on their eligibility have tight guidelines and little understanding of this reality. For example, Ontario's homelessness prevention program assists residents to pay for oil, electricity or propane but not necessarily wood as a fuel. Poor people often heat with wood because it is free if they can cut and split it themselves. However, when they become ill or elderly they may need cash to buy wood.

Homelessness in rural communities is not as visible as in urban communities. For example, in North Hastings some people reportedly live in their cars and go to the local library to use the Internet and to wash. Individuals eligible for social housing must wait six to

eight years. Enforcement of property standards is an issue and recent changes mean that poor rural residents will have less easy access to property standards enforcement by the Ministry of Housing Rental Housing Enforcement unit.

## Utility costs

Utility costs are still high, despite recent reforms and subsidies introduced by the province, and often range from \$800 to \$1000 a month. Many people struggle to pay their utility bills—necessary to keep their house. The delivery fee hurts rural residents.

Electricity, often used for heating, may also be required to operate water and septic systems. In north, central and south Frontenac, only one town has a municipal water system.

North Hastings Community Trust reports that calls for help to get wood for stoves and heating have doubled.

## Food Insecurity

Rent and utility bills must be paid to avoid becoming homeless, so food may become optional in a household budget. Food insecurity rates are high in rural communities. Many people live in “food deserts”—five kilometres or more from a store that may be just a gas station or convenience store. Food is more expensive and of poorer quality when only one store is within a half-hour drive.

Demand at food banks has increased from people with minimum-wage jobs and those relying on social assistance or on a fixed income. Many communities have no local access to food—let alone fruit and vegetables.

Many people do hunt, fish and grow their own food. However if they are ill or elderly, they may need cash to buy food.

## Transportation

Getting to a food bank from many rural communities is difficult, as bus transportation is limited or non-existent. So most people need to use cars—and become desperate if their vehicle breaks down and they can't afford to repair it. Some people hitchhike to get to the food bank or rely on their neighbours.

There is no ODSP office in North Hastings, and the Ontario Works office is 2.5 km from Bancroft.

ODSP pays for rides only to medical appointments; stops at grocery stores are not allowed. One agency provides a volunteer transportation program that costs the agency 50 cents a kilometre—cheaper than taxis and Uber—but a ride to a doctor can cost the agency \$100. The new Ontario Seniors Public Transit Tax credit of up to \$3,000 is available only for public transit services operated by the province or a municipality, which is not viable in many rural communities.

## Seniors

The population of seniors living in poverty in rural communities is increasing. They may have lived there all their lives, downsized or moved from the city to their cottage. An increasing number of widowed seniors now find their single income is not enough to pay for the basics: housing, utilities and food. The increasing stress of this poverty can cause or mask mental health problems, which may go unnoticed by service providers due to the clients' isolation. When they are noticed, multiple health conditions often require expensive treatment and sometimes hospitalization. Seniors are often victimized by unscrupulous vendors and need legal assistance with their consumer and debt problems—as well as help in planning for their future as they age.

## Social Assistance Rates

Provincial social assistance rates are inadequate to cover the costs of housing, utilities, food and transportation for rural people. For instance, a single person on Ontario Works in Hastings or Prince Edward County receives \$721 a month. But the monthly rent average is \$700 month, which leaves \$21 for food, transportation and all other costs. Many people are unaware of their rights and need help to understand them and to ensure their rights are respected and they are not adversely affected by unfair practices.

## Municipal Services

Municipalities do not have the money to support the services that people with low incomes require, because full-time residents and cottage owners pressure them to keep taxes low. Municipalities use a significant portion of their funding to keep roads safe and bridges repaired. The townships are as “poor” as their residents. Bancroft recently increased its water/sewage rates by 53%.

