

PROVINCIAL ELECTION KIT 2011



interfaith social assistance reform coalition



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INTRODUCTION

The provincial election that will take place on October 6, 2011 is an opportunity for each of us to exercise our responsibility as Ontario citizens. Our vote brings with it a responsibility not only to elect a person or a party but also to make that vote an expression of our belief in what that person and party says they are committed to do if elected.

Ontario is Canada's most populous province, with more than 12.1 million residents, about 85% of whom live in urban centers. Many struggle on low incomes and are economically insecure. The 2006 Census showed that of the 11.9 million Ontarians living in private households, 11.1% (approximately 1.3 million men, women and children) had an after-tax income at or below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) established by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008c).

The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) is a coalition representing a wide range of faith - communities in the province of Ontario with the shared hope that together we can contribute to new public policies based upon greater justice and dignity for Ontarians marginalized by poverty. The central message shared by religious communities inspires people of faith to respond to our neighbours in need.

Since its formation in 1986, ISARC has focused on advocacy for the poor in the public arena. These founders, and their successors, believe in the social engagement of religious communities in matters of public practice – deriving from the values of their respective religious traditions through active, thoughtful involvement in the democratic process. ISARC has a strong commitment to assist and empower our religious communities to participate in those democratic processes.

Much of ISARC's work is between elections working with MPPs, other coalitions, religious leaders' forums, social audits by promoting and affirming the moral and ethical issues related to poverty in Ontario.

ISARC's non-partisan strategy aims to raise awareness about the issue of poverty and to build helpful relationships with politicians in communities across Ontario. In addition, ISARC's strategy is to connect the numerous groups participating in local initiatives into a provincial movement toward greater social justice and economic equity for Ontarians. This kit provides information based on our organization's already distinguished engagement with Ontarians to reduce poverty.

Please share what you and your community plan to do in this election season by emailing us at ISARC Working Group – Advocacy, Public Relations & Education at info@isarc.ca. After the election, contact your MPP and remind the person about their platform on poverty and offer to work together locally and provincially.

BACKGROUND

Persistent Poverty: Voices from the Margins presents the findings from the Ontario community based social audit that ISARC organized in 2010. As with fiscal and program audits done by provincial and federal auditors, the purpose of the social audit was not simply to document what poverty looks like in Ontario. The purpose is also to identify changes that need to happen in order to eradicate poverty so that everyone in Ontario can live in dignity.

Persistent Poverty documents the root causes of poverty in Ontario: jobs that do not pay a living wage, income security programs that drive people into poverty and make it hard to break free of poverty, housing that is unaffordable. We heard about the consequences of poverty: hunger, poor health. We heard about the positive impacts that things like affordable, high quality child care that make it possible for parents to earn money or pursue education and training. We also heard about the specific challenges of people living in rural communities.

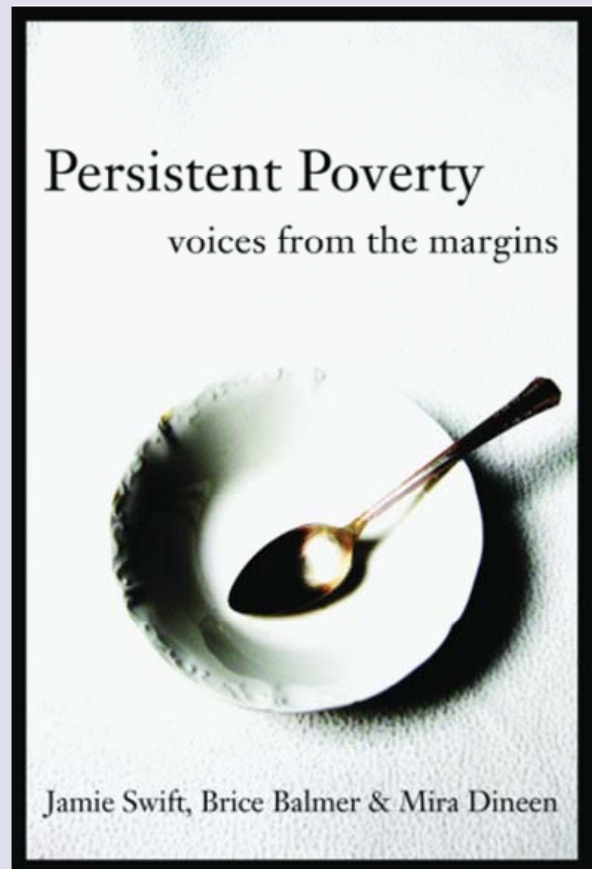
POLICY CONCERNS FROM *Persistent Poverty*

Ontario needs to attack poverty and inequality with greater vigour. Ontarians need to hear from all political parties how they plan to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality. The 2009 Poverty Reduction Act was passed unanimously. That means all three parties in the legislature have made a commitment to consult with Ontarians to set renewed poverty reduction targets after the next election and put in place an action plan to:

- Make substantial headway in eliminating hunger, homelessness and poverty in Ontario – for all people, adults as well as children;
- Begin to close the inequality gap that undermines the health and well-being of all Ontarians.

We will be looking for each political party's plan to make sure:

- Ontario's income security programs are adequate to meet basic needs for people and are designed to provide real opportunity to get ahead;
- Paid work at fair wage and benefits is truly a pathway out of poverty;
- There is an adequate supply of decent and affordable housing for everyone;
- There is investment in community services like high quality affordable child care and affordable public transit.



LIVEABLE INCOMES: real opportunities to get ahead

Social assistance in Ontario still consists of two programs: Ontario Works (OW), for those expected to engage in the labour force, and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), geared to those with a substantial physical or mental health problem that is expected to last one year or more, and substantially limits their ability to work or carry out normal daily activities.

In 1995, social assistance rates were frozen. Beginning in 2005, the current Liberal government has provided annual increases to social assistance rates, totaling 7.16%; however, their positive impact was counteracted by an inflation rate of 8.85%. An additional 2% increase was scheduled for November-December 2008 and rules regarding earnings exemptions and other provision have been improved. However, social assistance rates remain well below the income required to live at or above the LICO.

Ontario's income security programs must provide enough to meet basic needs and be designed to give people real opportunity to get ahead.

- Ontario should increase **incomes for adults on social assistance** by \$100 a month as a down payment on meeting basic food needs.
- **Ontario's Social Assistance Review** should focus on fixing Ontario's income security programs to help people recover from poverty and stay out of poverty.



SUSTAINING EMPLOYMENT: making work pay for everyone

In 1995, Ontario's general minimum wage was frozen at \$6.85, where it stayed for the next eight years. Beginning in 2003, the Liberal government scheduled annual increases to the general minimum wage; it was increased to \$8.75 per hour, and then rose to \$9.50 in March 2009. Since March 2010, the minimum wage has been \$10.25 per hour.

Of greater significance is access to regular full-time hours and benefits. On this score, Ontario faces considerable challenges as the economic downturn takes hold, following years of decline in good employment in Ontario's manufacturing and resources sectors.

After the massive restructuring in the early 1990s, the loss of manufacturing jobs in Ontario continues. Due largely to competition with low wages offered in other countries and a strong dollar over much of 2007-08, Ontario has lost more than 200,000 jobs in manufacturing alone over the past few years. The loss of well-paid, full-time employment, and the increasing number of Ontarians working in temporary and part-time work, highlights the importance of ensuring that employment standards are strengthened and enforced.

Ontario's manufacturing sector has long been under pressure from increasing global trade and the 'race to the bottom' in wages, in consequence suffering plant closures, contracting out to lower wage suppliers, and job losses. Despite concessions in wages and working conditions, the position of workers in Ontario is becoming progressively weaker; this is exacerbated by the legislation that, in 1995, replaced card certification (whereby a union can be created if 55% of workers sign a union card) with the requirement for a ratification vote, a process that can make workers susceptible to intimidation and discrimination.

For those on social assistance, it has been recognized for decades that the social assistance system has built-in disincentives to employment, but these have never been adequately addressed. The current provincial government has made some improvements in this area, such as increasing the child care deduction for social assistance recipients, and modifying regulations, to reduce recipients' concerns that, if they leave social assistance, they will not be able to access the system again. However, these measures do not bridge the barrier.

The ISARC social audit found that for too many Ontarians work is not working. If employment is to be a pathway out of poverty and contribute to human dignity and well-being, we must ensure policies are in place to achieve that.

- The government needs to **poverty proof the minimum wage**. That means that if you work full-time, full-year at the provincial minimum wage you will earn enough to rise above the poverty line. In 2011, that would take a minimum wage of \$11 an hour – which would need to be indexed to inflation in future years. However, the Government recently announced that it would not raise the minimum wage in 2011 – not even to keep up with the rising cost of living.
- **Strengthen labour standards** and enforcement by hiring more employment standards officers and adopting a more proactive approach to ensure that employers are following the rules of the Employment Standards Act.
- The Government needs an **employment and pay equity strategy** to close the gap in employment, earnings and life chances for recent immigrants, for people of colour, women, and people with disabilities and aboriginal people.



A PLACE TO LIVE, A PLACE TO CALL HOME

The current Ontario government has announced its intention to develop a long-term strategy for affordable housing to accompany a poverty reduction strategy. To make a dent in Ontario's affordable housing crisis, the government will need to be committed to making affordable housing a major priority. Much of the existing affordable housing stock is in poor repair and current funding to rehabilitate public housing will need to be multiplied a number of times over to fill the need. Policies regarding public housing also need to be addressed: where, for example, a child reaching the age of majority moves out, the rental unit may be deemed too large for the remaining 'benefit unit' (i.e., the family). This is a major catastrophe for families who may wait years to find alternative affordable housing.

The high cost of housing, particularly in urban areas, argues for higher shelter allowances under social assistance, and a housing allowance for Ontario's working poor as well. In 2007, the provincial government launched a five-year program called ROOF (Rental Opportunity for Ontario Families) that provides up to \$100 per month for low-income working families with children who pay more than 30% of their income for rent. This is a welcome initiative but is far from sufficient: the number of ROOF allowances available is limited to 27,000, and the program does nothing to help those without both earned income and children at home, thus excluding single individuals, couples and most low-income seniors; nor does it address the inadequacy of shelter allowances for OW and ODSP recipients, who are also not eligible for the program.

Significant investment is needed from both the provincial and federal governments for the construction and maintenance of affordable housing units. The 2001 federal-provincial Affordable Housing Framework agreement resulted in the Government in Ontario downloading the responsibility for public housing onto municipalities, which were to find the bulk of the financing if new projects were to move forward. Little new affordable housing was built.

In 2005 a new Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program agreement was reached, but still little was done: from 2001 to 2007, Ontario was the only province to fail to make even modest progress on affordable housing. After a long hiatus, the program is finally beginning to move forward. Units occupied, under construction or in planning approval total 9,722 for rental and supportive units, as well as 1,886 units in the homeownership program for low- and moderate-income renters, and 1,202 units in the Northern Housing component. However, Toronto alone has more than 60,000 people on the waiting list for subsidized housing; the Region of Peel, which borders Toronto, informs new applicants that they, "with the exception of seniors, can expect to wait up to 21 years for an available unit. New senior applicants can expect to wait 3 to 7 years".

The current Ontario government has announced its intention to develop a long-term strategy for affordable housing to accompany a poverty reduction strategy. To make a dent in Ontario's affordable housing crisis, the government will need to be committed to making affordable housing a major priority over the coming years. Much of the existing affordable housing stock is in poor repair and current funding to rehabilitate public housing will need to be multiplied a number of times over to fill the need. Policies regarding public housing also need to be addressed: where, for example, a child reaching the age of majority moves out, the rental unit may be deemed too large for the remaining 'benefit unit' (i.e., the family). This is a major catastrophe for families who may wait years to find alternative affordable housing.

- Ontario's needs a multi-year investment plan to build and maintain affordable housing.
- Ontario also needs a Housing Benefit to close the gap between the cost of housing and what is affordable for households with low incomes.



STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

Investing in child care, in public transit and in community services build the social infrastructure that makes our communities work for people.

Public Transit

Affordable, accessible public transit is critical for getting around when you have limited means. In urban areas, the cost of transit fares can limit participation in community life, whether through paid work, volunteer activities, getting groceries and simply visiting friends and family. In rural areas, a lack of public transit options is a barrier to many public and private sector services as well as day-to-day activities.

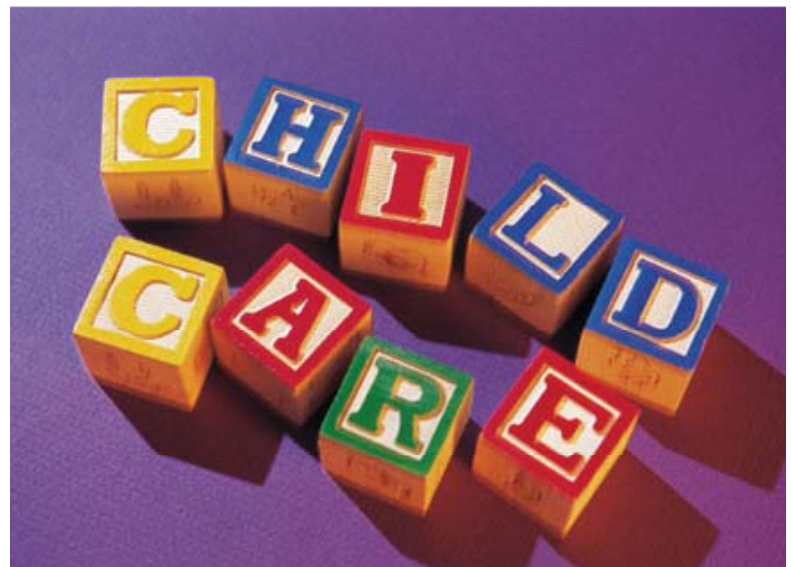
Affordable, accessible early learning and child care

“Despite poverty’s complexity and the myriad ways in which it damages the lives of children and their families, participants at all of ISARC’s hearings raised two interrelated issues: you need a decent job to escape poverty, and, particularly for women, you need decent child care if you want to keep that job.” p. 115

“Ontario’s move to towards a full-day Early Learning Program (ELP) for all four- and five-year-olds is a landmark shift.”p.117

This shift moves Ontario closer to having universally accessible, high quality early learning and child care for every family. However, there are several critical issues the province needs to address to achieve that.

- Many parents need wrap-around care (i.e. before the start of the school day and after the end of the school day) as well as care during school holidays.
- Ontario must ensure that high quality, early learning and child care for children younger than four is adequately funded so that it is not destabilized by the transition of four- and five-year olds to full-day junior and senior kindergarten.



MEETING WITH YOUR PROVINCIAL CANDIDATE

General Tips

ISARC supports a non-partisan approach to prepare for an election. This involves meeting with as many candidates in your riding as possible. People often make the mistake to especially meet only with the individuals currently holding the office of Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP). The politics of elections is not always predictable as it may seem and any of the candidates in your riding could be your next MPP.

ISARC supports a focused conversation with political candidates on the issue of reducing poverty in Ontario. In 2009, the Government of Ontario adopted a Poverty Reduction Act with the purpose to establish mechanisms to support a sustained long-term reduction of poverty in Ontario. Provincial candidates need to be given the opportunity to explain their party's position both on completing and on advancing the poverty reduction strategy.

Preparing for the Meeting

- **Review the candidate's biography.** This helps you get a sense of the person's background and experience in the causes of poverty and innovative solutions. If they are a current MPP, you can find their background information at www.ontla.on.ca. Otherwise, you can check a candidate's campaign website for policy positions.
- **Check local media.** Get access to all types of media that cover the riding including local newspaper and news coverage.
- **Political Communications.** Read any communications that are circulated in the riding by the candidate, and/or their party, e.g. newsletters, their MPP Parliamentary Report.
- **Look for a Champion.** Take the time to identify which candidate(s) could act as a champion for the provincial movement for poverty reduction in the riding and at Queen's Park.

Next Steps

- Send a personalized letter requesting a meeting to your local MPP and other candidates requesting a time to meet and talk with them about poverty reduction in Ontario. (see attached sample)
- Follow up with a call to the constituency office to arrange a meeting. Be sure to ask for a minimum of 30 – 60 minutes.

- At the meeting, be sure to cover the following items:
 - a. Provide the MPP/Candidate with a copy of the ISARC Fact Sheet
 - b. Give an overview of ISARC and/or the province-wide poverty reduction movement.
 - c. Give an update, if applicable, on the local ISARC social audit outcomes
 - d. Celebrate the work they have done in the area of poverty reduction, e.g. voting in the Poverty Reduction Act, raising the minimum wage, funding for programs and services
 - e. Share your personal story of poverty or be the voice of other individuals whose stories you have permission to share. In this way, you can help the MPP/Candidate to understand the issues related to poverty and how important it is to reduce it.
 - f. Present a copy of Persistent Poverty to the MPP along with any other candidates
 - g. Ask the MPP/Candidate to explain in detail their party's position on how the government can help reduce poverty and move the goals of the new legislation forward.
 - h. Make a specific request. Ask the MPP/Candidate to make a commitment to give poverty reduction priority with the provincial budget, election platforms, or to raise the issue in Caucus.
- Follow up with ISARC letting us know that you have met with your MPP/Candidate and what the outcome of the meeting was and to gather any additional information they may have asked for.
- Follow up with a thank you letter to the MPP/Candidate summarizing the issues and what you asked him/her to do. In addition, list any commitments they may have made. Include any follow-up information that they may have requested during the course of the meeting.



ALL CANDIDATES MEETINGS

Organizing an All Candidates Meetings

One of the best ways for a community to promote an engaged democracy is to organize an all candidates meeting. By doing so, the community is sent a message that public debate matters and that religious communities have an interest in the issues discussed. It is an opportunity for religious communities to take leadership in the public arena.

Many religious groups and communities organize and hold all candidates meetings during election campaigns. These are non-partisan events where all the candidates in a riding are invited to share their views and answer questions from the audience. This provides helpful information about where the local candidates stand on issues of concern. Here are the steps to organizing an all candidates meeting:

Getting Organized

Pick a Date. Choose a place, date and time for the meeting. Start early to make sure you have the candidates committed to your event. The best time to contact each candidate is at the very beginning of the election call because their calendars are more likely to be empty.

Partner with other community organizations. Co-operating to host all candidates meetings allows you to share costs, access a broader group of voters, and build partnerships. This also helps to get media to attend when more groups are involved.

Plan the format of the meeting. Decide how long each candidate will have for their opening remarks. This is usually five minutes. Choose the order in which candidates will speak (e.g. alphabetical order by last name).

Decide how long the question and answer period will be, e.g. one hour, and how long to give for each question and answer, e.g. 30 seconds for the question and one minute for the answer.

Decide if the questions will be asked by the moderator or directly from the audience. The only caution is that when questions come from the audience in an “open mic” activity, it’s harder to control the presenters to stay on topic.

Plan how much time the candidates will be given for closing remarks. This is usually three minutes. Choose the order in which the candidates will give their closing remarks, usually in reverse order to the opening remarks.

Choose an interesting and engaging debate moderator that is non-partisan, known in the community, and has strong moderation skills.

Ask the audience to submit questions to the moderator in advance. The moderator will introduce the candidates and moderate questions from the audience. This person will explain the guidelines and schedule for the meeting and make sure the rules are being followed. The moderator must remain neutral and not get involved in the questions or answers. Identify a volunteer to assist the moderator in sorting the questions, perhaps even phrasing them better.

Choose a time-keeper. This person will monitor and notify the candidates and questioners of the time limits. This person will have a stopwatch, gavel or bell. The time-keeper will notify candidates one minute before the end of the time limit for opening and closing remarks.

Send an invitation to the candidates, asking them to participate. Send them the guidelines and format for the evening. Ask them to provide a short biography to help the moderator introduce them. Let them know there will be tables available for their literature.

Advertise your meeting. Use the local media, e-mail lists, websites, networks and partners. Send out the information more than once. Remind the media directly by a media release and by a phone call. Give the date, time, and location of the meeting, and the names of party affiliation of the candidates. Inform your religious community of the meeting through a bulletin insert, e-mail and/or announcement. Other local organizations publicize all candidate meetings – be in their lists.

Set up for the Meeting

Arrange for tables, chairs, and microphones to be set up at the front of the room for the candidates and moderator with clearly visible signs indicating their name and political party. Provide water for the candidates. Have at least one floor microphone for the audience. Provide tables in the hall or foyer for each candidate’s literature.

After the Meeting

Take some time in the days following the meeting to debrief with the organizing team. In this meeting, review and assess the successes and challenges of organizing an all candidates meeting and how your efforts could be improved next time.

Prepare a follow-up media release which includes any quotations and a media contact.

Send thank-you letters to candidates, organizers, partners, and any other contributors.

USING THE MEDIA

The media can be a helpful ally in raising public awareness on issues. A well-written story can gain community support and engage candidates in dialogue. A well-timed story can have a significant impact on a political campaign.

Radio

The biggest daytime radio audiences are for talkback radio. On such shows, you'll only be given a short time to talk, so plan your points and expect to make only a few.

Editorials

The most well-read part of any newspaper or media websites is the letters section, and politicians use it to gauge support for issues. A letter to the editor is a good way to raise an issue and engage in public debate. Some key points for getting a letter to the editor published include:

Keep your letter short and simple (no more than 200 words)

Relate it to a previous story, letter, editorial, or feature that the paper publishes (make imaginative links if necessary)

Plan your first sentence carefully – if it is dull the editor may read no further; if it's catchy you're in with a chance

A simple letter pattern could be to state:

what you support or disagree with
what evidence or examples can offer support to your view
what can be done about it

Social Media

Use Facebook and other social media to advertise upcoming candidates meetings; urge people to get out to vote; let others know about ISARC Election Kit as they consider their options; discuss election issues

CANDIDATE REPORT CARD - Questions

The sample questions that follow are based on immediate public policy concerns of ISARC. They reflect the mission of the coalition to work for poverty elimination. The questions have been placed into a format of an election Report Card. The Report Card lets you “grade” each candidate on their responses to these issues related to poverty. Suggested grading scale is: A = Excellent, B = Very Good, C = Good, D = Poor, F = Fail

ISSUE	QUESTION	GRADE	
		ISSUE KNOWLEDGE	QUESTION RESPONSE
Income Security Programs	How will your party ensure that Ontario’s income security programs provide enough support for people to meet their basic needs for housing, food, transportation, clothing and other day-to-day expenses?		
	Do you support a \$100 a month healthy food supplement for adults receiving social assistance?		
	What will your party do to fix the social assistance rules (like very low asset limits) that bind people in poverty and to transform Ontario’s income security programs so that they offer real hope for people to get ahead?		
Sustainable Employment	Are you committed to poverty-proofing the minimum wage so that if you are working full-time at minimum wage you earn enough to at least reach the low-income cutoff?		
	What will your party do to ensure that labour standards are enforced and updated to reflect changes in Ontario’s labour market (e.g. the rise in contract labour, part-time and temporary work.)?		
	What will your party do to close the gap in employment, earnings and life chances for disadvantaged groups?		
Affordable Housing	What will your party do to increase the number of affordable housing units built in Ontario every year?		
	Does your party support the development of an Ontario Housing Benefit to close the gap between the cost of housing and what is affordable for low income households?		
Building Stronger Communities	What will your party do to meet the early learning and child care needs of Ontario families?		
	What will you party do to help municipalities create and maintain public transit systems that are accessible and affordable for users?		

Introductory Letter to MPP - DRAFT

Date

MPP Address

Dear <name>

As a member of the Provincial Legislature, you are probably aware of the needs of people with low-incomes in your riding of <insert riding>. As a person deeply concerned about social justice and economic equity, I appreciate your support of issues affecting poverty, both locally and across Ontario.

I/we would very much to schedule a short meeting with you to provide more background about some of the challenges facing people living in poverty and tell you about some of our solutions for improving people's lives. Of particular importance to us is to make substantial headway in eliminating hunger , homelessness and poverty in Ontario – for all people, adults as well as children.

I would like to thank you in advance for you time both for reading this letter and for meeting with me/us sometime over the next few weeks. I will follow up with a staff member in your constituency office to set up a meeting. Again, thank you for your time and your interest.

Sincerely,

Thank You Letter to MPP - DRAFT

Date

MPP Address

Dear <name>

I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for both your time and your interest in learning more about the challenges facing people living in poverty in Ontario. I was very pleased that you agreed that this issue should be <reiterate to what they agreed, e.g. make poverty an election issue, raise issue in caucus) and I am hopeful that our issue will be addressed.

The critical issue of <summarize issues> ...reminds us that we need to be sure that every person has the support they need to take themselves out of poverty and plan for the future. It is important that our elected officials partner with families, agencies, religious communities and government to find solutions to the critical issues facing people living in poverty.

<clarify or add any information discussed at the meeting>

I/we hope that you will keep these issues in mind as we move forward.

I sincerely appreciate your time and your consideration of these important issues. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact me at <your phone number> or by email, <your email>

Again, thank you for your time.

Sincerely,