

**Poverty Reduction Working Group of Nipissing District**

**Meeting with Monique Smith, MPP of Nipissing**

**July 7, 2009**

**Do the Math Survey, Put Food in the Budget Campaign**

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**Present:** Monique Smith, MPP of Nipissing  
Amber Livingstone, Special Assistant  
Jim Sinclair  
Sister Priscilla Solomon  
Tawnia Robinson

**Package of materials for attendees:** “Do the Math” survey, *Poverty Fact Sheet* (Feb 2009, PRWG), *Liveable Incomes* section of PRWG May 2008 Report (including social assistance caseload counts, examples of social assistance incomes for common family types, examples of housing affordability gaps for social assistance recipients).

Monique Smith agreed to allow the PRWG to share this information publicly.

**Survey Completed - Yes**

Monique and Amber had worked through the survey together prior to our meeting.

**Areas where they struggled while completing the survey:**

**Food** costs – their estimate was \$100/month, based on the diet of a single woman. Amber mentioned that in the past, she has lived on \$60/month for food by cutting meat out of her diet. The group acknowledged that \$100/month may be cutting it close for a healthy diet.

**Transportation** costs estimated at \$500/month – which would allow for a used car. Monique noted that having a vehicle may not be a necessity for people living in the city. The group discussed the isolation that rural residents can face due to a lack of a vehicle.

- ➔ Monique and Tawnia made note of local improvements in transportation for rural residents, i.e. Red Cross transportation program for seniors, Callandar Bus service to North Bay (as part of Ontario’s Aging at Home Strategy)

**Internet** cost \$25/month – Monique did not necessarily see having access to the internet as a necessity. She mentioned a few places in North Bay and surrounding communities where free internet access is available. The group acknowledged that high demand of these terminals and transportation barriers put their accessibility in question.

**Pet** costs \$25/month– Monique did not see having a pet as a necessity, though Amber did.

### **Our MPP's Survey Results**

**Monique Smith, MPP for Nipissing** completed the Do the Math survey and acknowledged that social assistance rates **do not add up**.

This MPP calculates that, a person in **Nipissing** minimally needs **\$1221** of income each month to live a healthy life and to participate with dignity in our community and surrounding area.

**Monique's calculation:**

**\$1881/month including car and questionable necessities (i.e. YMCA fee, internet, pets)**

**\$1221/month substituting car expense with buss pass and excluding questionable necessities**

**How does your calculation compare to the rate that one receives on Ontario Works or ODSP? (Tawnia)**

**Monique: "It's no surprise. My calculation was a lot more than the allowances provide".**

### **Discussion on the Healthy Food Supplement**

Monique regarded the issue of healthy nutrition as "controversial". She shared her apprehensions about the proposed \$100/month Healthy Food Supplement:

- 1) **Concern based on misuse of the Special Diet Allowance in the past** which "exploded" the funding demand from something like 1.2 million to 35million – this has made healthy nutrition a controversial topic
- 2) **Cost** – She talked about her "sobering experience as part of the Treasury Board". She said there just isn't enough money to support all existing programs and more money isn't coming in. She also mentioned that OW and ODSP are open programs (difficult to predict recipient numbers and tough to budget for)

We explained that, unlike the Special Diet Allowance, the HFS would be universal -- intended for all adults on OW or ODSP (not requiring eligibility or approval by a third party i.e. doctors). We mentioned that the HFS is an alternative to dramatically increasing social assistance rates to provide immediate relief to those who struggle on inadequate incomes. Monique mentioned the increase in social assistance rates in the last budget and acknowledged that it “may not be much, but it’s something”.

We explained that while we are pushing for an HFS to secure better nutrition for social assistance recipients, we realize that an extra \$100/month could reduce the housing affordability gap that exists in North Bay. We referred Monique to the findings presented in our report which demonstrate the significant gap between the shelter allowance portion of a social assistance recipient’s income and the average cost to rent an apartment in North Bay.

### **Discussion on Indexing Shelter Allowance to Market Rent Cost**

Jim referred Monique to the PRWG’s recommendation to align social assistance shelter allowances with the cost of local market rents by indexing allowances to average rent costs. Monique brought up a possible repercussion of this suggestion -- explaining that if shelter allowances were indexed to market rent costs, North Bay could experience an influx of social assistance recipients from other areas and see an overall increase in OW and ODSP caseloads.

The group agreed that this may be a valid concern. Jim asserted that this may be all the more reason for a universal \$100/month HFS which would avoid the above mentioned repercussion while improving the local situation.

### **Brief Discussion on Hosting a Housing Consultation in North Bay**

Monique brought up the opportunity for a local consultation. Tawnia explained that the Nipissing District Homelessness Partnership is the lead in planning for a local consultation. Lana Mitchell will be contacting Monique to make arrangements – aiming for a consultation in late November.

Monique is keen to host the event.

A few other points of discussion:

- Monique highlighted a few local housing developments that are taking place currently
- Monique asked us to watch for the impact that the Ontario Child Benefit is expected to have in the lives of families
- Jim will be interested to see how the Charles Pascal’s Early Learning Report influences what plays out locally

## **Meeting OUTCOME → Letter to Minister of Community and Social Services Madeleine Meilleur**

Monique offered to write to Minister Meilleur voicing our group's concerns around inadequate social assistance rates and recommendations for improvement – HFS. Monique will cc the PRWG on this letter.

### **Thank You**

The PRWG acknowledged Monique's willingness to meet and discuss critical issues affecting Nipissing residents and thanked her for her open ear and time. We also mentioned that we feel it is our group's role to bring such issues and possible solutions to the attention of Monique – she agreed and thanked us our time.

### **After Meeting Thoughts:**

The PRWG delegates that attended the meeting were pleased with the meeting, discussion, and opportunity to highlight our local needs and recommendations. While it is not hopeful that Monique Smith will publicly support the implementation of a Healthy Food Supplement, we are thankful for her acknowledgement that current social assistance rates are not adequate to live a life of health and dignity.