



Northwest Territories Poverty Progress Profile

OVERVIEW

Subsequent to consultations with community members, non-government organizations, the business sector and Aboriginal governments, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) released a framework for a territorial poverty elimination strategy. *“Building on the Strengths of Northerners: A Strategic Framework toward the Elimination of Poverty in the NWT”* focuses on collaboration and core areas of need in order to address poverty.¹ While the NWT enjoys the highest GDP and income per individual per capita, 15.9% of individuals struggled with low-income in 2010,² and the number increased to 17% in 2013.³ It is important to note that incomes vastly differ between the major centres where mostly non-Aboriginal people live and smaller communities where the majority of the population is First Nation, Inuit and Metis.⁴ The territory has 33 communities, many of which are remote and difficult to access, and has the highest rates of homelessness, crime and addiction in the country.⁵ The framework has yet to establish measurable goals and timelines for priority areas, but the government has declared that, “There is no place for poverty in the NWT.”⁶

*Statistics Canada has yet to produce reliable data for the Northwest Territories, including the three measurements of poverty (LIM, LICO, MBM).⁷ Therefore, this document will portray an approximation of poverty in the NWT based on available data.

Plan Components and Highlights

The vision of the framework is, *“Building on the strengths of our people and communities, Northerners will have access to the supports they need to live in dignity and free from poverty as active participants in community life.”*⁸

The five core components of the framework are:

- 1) A clear vision for poverty reduction efforts in the NWT;
- 2) Five key “pillars for action”: priority areas where the GNWT has pledged to play a leading role and where efforts will be focused in order to reduce poverty;
- 3) Corresponding goals under each priority area that establish a focus for poverty reduction;
- 4) An overview of current initiatives that relate to key priorities as well as opportunities for action; and
- 5) A description of the roles and responsibilities of partners who want to make these outcomes a reality.⁹

The five identified priority areas will each have a subsequent action plan (to be developed):

1) Children and Family Support

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Goal: Children and families lead healthy lives free from poverty in a safe and nurturing environment.

Current Initiatives Include: child breakfast programs, initiatives to prevent violence, pre-natal and breastfeeding programs, overall childhood health, childcare services, early years development and family support.

Plans for the Future: increase early childhood education and care programs and affordability of services, encouraging access to pre-natal services, and raising awareness of support programs.¹⁰

2) Healthy Living and Reaching out Potential

Goal: NWT residents have access to the supports they need for healthy living and reaching their full potential.

Current Initiatives Include: addictions day-programs, programs to engage youth in conversations on mental and physical health, focus on childhood obesity and physical activity, learning and employment supports for persons with disabilities, as well as literacy and adult education programs.

Plans for the Future: assist individuals and families in finding appropriate services, eliminate program barriers and reach more vulnerable populations, connect parents with their children's education.¹¹

3) Safe and Affordable Housing

Goal: Everyone has a roof over their head and a safe and affordable place to call home.

Current Initiatives Include: a public rent scale, initiatives to make home ownership more widely available, a rent supplement program, maintenance of public housing stock, emergency shelters and transitional housing, securing on-going support for social housing.

Plans for the Future: ensure greater available of quality affordable housing, develop a "northern approach to Housing First", make housing more accessible for those in need.¹²

4) Sustainable Communities

Goal: Sustainable communities managing their resources based on current need while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations.

Current Initiatives Include: harvesting and trapping programs for adults and youth including assistance options, community gardens, support for traditional crafters and the arts, creation of a new economic opportunities strategy, programs to help find employment and/or remove barriers to employment, skills development and training, employment assistance.

Plans for the Future: invest in a skilled labour force, improve infrastructure and the cost of services, support traditional economies, develop local sources of energy and food.¹³

5) Integrated Continuum of Services

Goal: NWT residents receive a continuum of integrated services according to their needs.

Current Initiatives Include: coordinating programs and services across ministries, launched renewed childhood development strategy, community family violence programs, more government officers to assist with community outreach.

Plans for the Future: improve support for community organizations including funding, better coordination of stakeholders,¹⁴ and streamline government services.

Next steps:

- Develop implementation plans using a collaborative approach – everyone has a role to play
- Build a comprehensive monitoring, reporting and evaluation plan - Anti-Poverty Framework Performance Measurement Plan with strategic outcomes and performance measures to guide implementation

Community Engagement in Plan Development and Implementationⁱ

Beginning with consultations that were initiated by civil society organizations in 2009, the framework was developed in collaboration with the Government of the Northwest Territories, Aboriginal governments, non-profit organizations, the business sector and persons living in poverty. The GNWT established a Steering Committee involving members from civil society, Aboriginal and government representatives along with representatives from the federal government to guide the process. This group consulted widely with community members over a two-year period through roundtable discussions, by soliciting feedback on plan developments, through an online survey and via visual story-telling.ⁱⁱ In total, more than 250 people from across the territory participated in the consultation process.¹⁵

MEASURING PROGRESS

Statistical Indicators of Poverty in Northwest Territories (unofficial measurement tools)

Table 1. Variety of metrics that can indicate poverty.¹⁶

Table 2. Taxfilers in Low Income and percentage of households below \$30 000 income.¹⁷

Table 1.

ⁱ The government noted that results of the consultations were compiled into two documents that laid the groundwork for the strategy, [“No Place for Poverty: Anti-Poverty Workshop Report”](#) developed by Alternatives North and the YWCA (2010), and [“What we heard from Northerners about poverty”](#) tabled by the GNWT in 2011.

ⁱⁱ The online survey and visual story-telling was not an initiative of the Poverty Reduction Committee. It was a project developed by Income Support and did not involve outside partners.

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Year	Income Assistance Cases (monthly avg)¹⁸	Households Experiencing Crowded Conditions (6+ people)¹⁹	Senior High Graduates²⁰	Household Food Insecurity²¹
2007	2,024	-	407	35.4%
2008	2,067	-	451	34.6%
2009	2,402	6.7%	459	31.0%
2010	2,314	-	426	31.0%
2011	2,313	5.6%	408	36.4%
2012	2,240	-	-	-

Table 2.

Taxfilers in Low Income (After Tax) and % of Households Below \$30 000

	% of Taxfilers in Low-Income (After Tax)		Below \$30 000
	All	Lone-parent Families	All Households
NWT Total	15.9%	39.2%	16.4%
Beaufort Delta	23.6%	39.7%	25.4%
Sahtu	19.1%	40.8%	22.4%
DenCho	18.1%	35.8%	22.7%
South Slave	16.1%	43.0%	18%
Tli cho	28.0%	53.8%	33.8%
Yellowknife	10.3%	32.3%	9.4%

Views From Outside the Northwest Territories Government

While consultation on the framework remains a feature of the process, the strategy to eliminate poverty has not been without criticism. The framework comes four years after 29 organizations called for a plan to eliminate poverty in the territory.²² Alternatives North, one of the anti-poverty organizations on the ground in NWT, noted in a press release, “The completion of the strategy is a step forward, but implementation will be the big test. We look forward to working with others on actions that will make a difference in the lives of people living on low incomes”.²³ At a subsequent meeting in October of anti-poverty activists who participated in the No Place for Poverty Coalition, agreed on certain priority areas of the strategy: publicly funded daycare, piloting Housing First and reducing emergency shelter use, and

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creating an Aboriginal anti-poverty roundtable. What they are waiting for is to see is action on the ground.²⁴ Community Advocate, Arlene Hache points to the failed daycare subsidy saying the GNWT could fix the problem immediately with a simple policy change. “The fact that only 45 families in the entire NWT access the daycare subsidy should be a wake-up call to politicians.” As income disparity grows and the costs of living outpace annual income increases, implementation of the strategy will be the important next step.²⁵

Notes on Critical Thematic Areas

- 1. Human Rights:** Human rights principles were not explicitly used in crafting the framework, however, during the consultations human rights were acknowledged, “it was agreed that all of us have a basic human right to adequate food, shelter, education, self-determination and freedom from discrimination.”²⁶
- 2. Income Support:** Monthly caseload in 2010 was 1,429 with average benefits totaling \$2,313. The GNWT budgeted \$15.8 million for the income assistance program for 2012/13.²⁷ The Northwest Territories Child Tax Benefit is available (children under 18 years of age) for eligible families. The benefit could reach as high as \$27.50 per month per child.²⁸ Overall, the GNWT spends \$140 million on 16 income assistance programs.²⁹ Having said that the food allowance for a family of four living in a remote community where food costs are at the extreme, can be set at \$8.45 per day per person.ⁱⁱⁱ Following a report from the Office of the Auditor General, the GNWT accepted recommendations to clarify policy, comply with regular audits, improve staff training, and program evaluation.³⁰
- 3. Housing:** In February 2012 the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation announced \$2.3 million in funding for BETTY House, a transitional housing project for women and children with 30 suites available for women and women with children to live in for up to three-years.³¹ In July 2013, the City of Yellowknife signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the YWCA who will own and operate the transition house. The one, two and three bedroom units at BETTY House (Better Environment to Transition in Yellowknife) will be below market rent and help to alleviate the strain the shelter for women who are homeless in the city.³² In 2012/13 the federal and territorial governments also invested a total of \$4,780,000 in affordable housing in NWT supporting 148 projects.³³
- 4. Education:** The high school graduation rate in the NWT is 56%, 20% below the national average. Approximately 43% of adults in NWT have literacy scores below the level needed to attain “a job in today’s knowledge based world”; 70% of people are level 3 and below (4 & 5 are considered advanced).³⁴ Only 22% of NWT residents have a university degree or diploma.³⁵ The GNWT has a

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on the GNWT Income Assistance Policy Manual, a family of four in Aklavik, northern NWT receives a monthly food allowance of \$1,048. http://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/files/pages/246/incomeassistancepolicymanual-oct2012final_0.pdf

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Student Financial Assistance program for post-secondary education to help build skills and knowledge. In 2011-12 the government spent \$12.4 million on the program, assisting 1,570 full-time students.³⁶ In October 2013 a new framework for education was introduced into the legislature titled, "*Education Renewal and Innovation Framework: Directions for Change*" intended to support both educators and communities. In the coming months an action plan will be finalized and detail funding, timelines and implementation plans.³⁷ In the 2013/14 budget \$150 million was committed by the GNWT to supporting K-12 education.³⁸

- 5. Early Childhood Education and Care:** The GNWT offers a Child Subsidy Program to parents in financial need. In 2010-11 the GNWT contributed \$200,000 to the program helping 45 recipients (in the entire NWT) during that time frame.³⁹ Currently there is a deficit in the number of childcare spaces for children under 4 years of age compared to need. In 2012, 1,916 childcare spaces were available in six major regions, while there were 3,310 eligible children.⁴⁰ In June 2013, the GNWT renewed their 10-year child development plan with a focus on prenatal health through to child five years of age. The plan, "*Framework for Early Childhood Development: Right From the Start*" will receive \$1 million in funding from the GNWT⁴¹ and focus on increased accessible to services and supports, enhanced programs, and improved integration of the child development system.⁴² Built on the previous plan launched in 2001, *Right from the Start* will consider gaps and challenges that need to be addressed such as through funding and data collection.⁴³
- 6. Health Care:** The 2013/14 budget has allocated \$1.5 million for the mental health plan, *A Shared Path Towards Wellness*, that was launched in June 2012.⁴⁴ This will complement the \$9 million the government spends annually on mental health and addictions programming. The funding will support current addictions programs and also initiatives aimed at youth considered 'at-risk'. The three-year action plan is based on a "population health approach", which considers overall health: social, physical, cultural and spiritual.⁴⁵ The government also committed \$142,000 to a child vaccination program in the 2013/14 budget.⁴⁶
- 7. Employment Support:** The unemployment rate in NWT is at 8.1% - an increase from 2012 when it hovered around 7.6%.⁴⁷ This rate may not change as the NWT is expected to have the weakest regional economy this year, however this will shift to the positive in over the next five years.⁴⁸ The minimum wage remains at \$10/hour since April 1, 2011,⁴⁹ however the government established a Minimum Wage Adjustment Committee in 2013 featuring members from civil society, government, business and labour. The committee is tasked with providing recommendations to the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment as to what level a new minimum wage should be.⁵⁰
- 8. Food Security:** Overall household food insecurity in NWT is 15.2%, compared to 12.3% of Canada. This is an increase of over 5% since the recession in 2009.⁵¹ While there are seven school breakfast programs in the territory serving 323 children,⁵² these programs receive no territorial government funding and are run by non-profit organizations.⁵³

THE BOTTOM LINE

Initially, discussion of poverty reduction strategies in the NWT was a divided consultation process that resulted in two separate reports, one produced by Alternatives North, a community-based social justice organization and one produced by the GNWT. Subsequently, the framework for a poverty elimination strategy was developed through a collaborative approach that recognized all stakeholders have a legitimate voice and role to play. The framework did not take a human rights approach, however, the consultation did ensure that individuals living in poverty were included, which is a key principle of ensuring human rights. Critical to the success of this process will be the development and implementation of action plans that include measurable goals and timelines. Without that level of detail it will be difficult to track progress. With a strong grassroots push for accountability and continued public commitment from the government, the plan has the potential to demonstrate progress if the principles of monitoring, evaluation, and inclusion remain at the forefront.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

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