

**Presentation to the Standing Committee on Community Services  
April 4, 2017**

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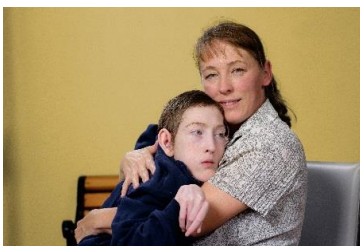
**This is Glenn**

Glenn worked all his life at the airport in Sydney until he fell and crushed his spine on a concrete curb. He likely won't ever work again and his doctor has classified him as disabled. Income Assistance and disability don't provide enough for him to eat so he relies on the food bank in Glace Bay. It's how he *survives*. His day-to-day life is about survival.

**Glenn is one of 44,000**

Glenn is one of 44,000 Nova Scotians who relies on a food bank, and the Glace Bay Food Bank is one of 146 member agencies that we support with food. Each day our 5 trucks are out on the road delivering over 7,000 Kgs of food, all of which comes from community donations. While it sounds like a lot 7,000 Kgs amounts to less than 3 days of food per month per client supported. There is no Plan B should that public support change.

People from all walks of life are affected by hunger:



Tracy is a single mom and former teacher who had to quit her job to be a fulltime caretaker for her son.



Kenneth is a student at St Mary's University who worked 2 jobs and still couldn't make ends meet, so he relied on the campus food bank.



Keith is a senior who struggled with mental health challenges and not only found food at a local soup kitchen, but purpose through volunteering.



Laura is a single mom who moved to the Valley so her son with special needs could have better support. While proud and determined, she needed the food bank while she looked for work.

These are just five people. There are so many more. And the number continues to increase.

For more than 30 years, we've helped hungry Nova Scotians meet a very basic need by distributing donated food to our provincial network of 147 food banks, shelters and soup kitchens. We've evolved through the years to meet the increasing need, but we are now at a point where we can't accept any new agency applications.

With the support of volunteers who outnumber staff 11:1, and generously donated food from the community, we have an operating model where a \$2 donation is enough for us to deliver 3 meals worth of food anywhere in the province. While the operating model is efficient, we are challenged to keep up as the number of clients needing support continues to increase.

## How Nova Scotia Stacks Up

Last year food bank use in Nova Scotia increased 21% as reported in the annual national HungerCount survey. The highest amongst all the provinces. HRM saw a 49% increase.

The number of individuals supported by food banks in Nova Scotia who identified Income Assistance as their primary source of income, was 11% higher than the national average of 45%.

Nova Scotia now has the third highest provincial child poverty rate in the country and the highest in Atlantic Canada. 1 in 5 Nova Scotian children are living in poverty.

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/2016-report-card-child-and-family-poverty-nova-scotia>

Child poverty in Nova Scotia

## Food Alone Won't Do It

Our mission is “To feed Nova Scotians in need and to reduce that need”. With public support, we do pretty well in keeping up with the first part - feeding Nova Scotians in need, but “reducing the need” is a tougher nut to crack.

After 30 years we know that food is essential. It enables a conversation, which leads to help and opportunity. Having food will always be part of the solution - how can anyone do anything on an empty stomach? But we can't feed our way out of the problem.

Last July, we reached out to the community with a critical appeal as we were down to days of inventory and for the first time in recent years, we were facing the unthinkable scenario of having empty trucks. During the critical appeal, we had MLAs doing food drives, which was very much appreciated. But it's not enough. We need you to use your influence, experience and leadership to:

- Help create a shift in political attitude that it's unacceptable to have 16,000 kids rely on food banks, as well as the many families and individuals who are trying to break the cycle of poverty
- Put commitment behind implementing a sustained strategy to address the underlying causes of food insecurity
- Help increase public awareness of poverty and hunger so poverty is a priority for people
- Make poverty and hunger a “politic free zone” and work together to support initiatives that will make things better for people

In seeking donations and support from the community, periodically we meet people who say to us “I don't support your organization because I think doing that lets government off the hook.”

## **From Survive to Thrive**

The photos I showed you are of people who use or have used food banks. They talked about surviving when we met them, and you can hear their stories as told by them on our YouTube channel. All of them are hugely grateful for the timely support they received. We see that “thank you” translate into a life-long commitment to help others, to volunteer, to help create change and awareness. Some are our volunteers and Board members. Some are our donors. Some are business leaders in our city.

To help those who are hungry is smart social policy that has an awesome return on investment. And that doesn't include savings in health care and related costs. We need to do more than help people survive - we need to help people thrive.

## **Where We Go from Here: Income Assistance Reform**

Of the five stories I shared with you, more than half of these individuals are on Income Assistance or were on Income Assistance at some point. That's an accurate representation of the status quo. More than 50% of those accessing food banks report Income Assistance as their primary source of income. There are lots of opportunities for change and this is a big one.

We're going to keep telling the stories of those who need or needed help, to raise awareness of the impact of hunger, and hopefully increase public intolerance of the issues and status quo. To tell the impact of what happens when you help those in need, and what happens when we don't. We are truly at a crossroads.

I would ask you to help us do that, and to be bold in your ESIA transformation.

Across the country social assistance, welfare or income assistance is a maze of checks and balances, rules and regulations ... built on a mistrust of people who are struggling to maintain dignity. The transformation needs to put more compassion back in the system, finding the balance between accountability and the processes that support a vulnerable sector of our communities. The challenges as we see and experience them include:

- Better communication with those on Income Assistance or applying to be on it, with less punitive measures.
- Paying closer attention to single adult households and couples with no children as this is a group that is increasingly looking for support from food banks. Those households with children have the benefit of the Canada Child Tax benefit, and we are starting to see the positive impact of the recent changes.
- Taking an approach that looks closer at more than just the labour market, given that a significant number of people using food banks, and receiving income assistance, are unable to work.
- Increase the special diet allowance. We need to make it possible for vulnerable people to have a more healthy diet.

- Helping to change public perception of who needs help and why. We need to eliminate the stigma.
- Reinstate transportation allowance, or work with municipalities to make transportation affordable. Poverty and hunger create isolation, and vulnerable people become more isolated and marginalized. Access to transportation will help people engage in community, volunteer, take food home, and visit friends and family.
- Give people an opportunity to give back

## **Other Opportunities for Change**

**Food waste:** We live in a province where 1 in 21 Nova Scotians require help from a food bank with more being food insecure, while millions of dollars of food is thrown out filling up our landfill sites. An increasing number of jurisdictions are putting into place incentives and policies that are changing this dynamic in dramatic ways.

## **One Last Story**

We met a man named John last week as part of our continued review of how food banks support their clients and the challenges that they face. John's story started out an awful lot like Glenn's – he worked all his life, made a good living and then an accident changed everything.

John has been trying to survive on Income Assistance and disability for over 20 years, and the system has failed him. He has numerous health problems. He talks candidly about having no control over his own life, struggling with the punitive nature of the system that prevents him from moving forward. Glenn has been on Income Assistance for 2 years. Is this where he'll be in 20 years? We can see how the story will unfold if nothing changes.

What's getting in the way?

Too many people don't understand the reality of living in poverty ("People are just lazy". "What we need is just a good employment strategy"). Too many of us tolerate poverty as part of our society - something that can't be fixed and will always be with us. Something that is not on the political agenda, perhaps because too many of us don't value those who are marginalized or hungry.

We can do more, and more of it better. Let's start by being intolerant of the status quo – a province with the highest percentage of hungry people.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some stories and what we see, and in advance of your leadership to help change it.