

Getting Back to Balance: Our Response



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Submitted by



Introduction

As a charitable organization that advocates on behalf of people struggling with chronic hunger and poverty, we have a vested interest in the government's mission to address our growing deficit. The solutions adopted will have a direct impact on the 40,000 Nova Scotians who require food assistance each month. The impact on low income families must be a positive one—one that does not take any more money out of the pockets of families who already have so little.



FEED NOVA SCOTIA was established 25 years ago to respond to the hardships experienced during the recession in the early 1980s. Through the prosperity and economic boom of the last decade we have seen the depths of poverty grow for some families and many new families showing up at the doorsteps of food banks for the first time. We know this as a provincial organization that collects nationally-recognized data through HungerCount, our own client registry and anecdotal evidence. We know—after 20 years of commitments to eliminate poverty and no sign of reprieve—the old solutions do not work. The only way we will see real progress is through intentional, committed and innovative strategies.

If poverty is the end state, then the road to becoming impoverished follows many different routes. Government must be aware of the people who live in poverty, understand how they ended up in that position and appreciate that different situations require different approaches. One-size-fits-all programs do not work.

For example, a family who believed they had a secure income until the plant where both parents worked shut down would require a different solution than a single man whose mental health challenges prevent him from maintaining a full-time job. These

situations cannot be resolved with the same approach. The family would benefit from short-term assistance to help them through that period of difficulty and prevent long-term dependence on assistance, whereas the single man requires long-term assistance that still enables him to live with dignity.

Many of the families who are supported by social assistance will always need support—they are not currently, nor will they ever be, financially self-sufficient due to various circumstances out of their control. However, with adequate support they can fulfill their potential and contribute to their communities living their life with dignity, safety and hope.

Families who have the potential and opportunity to improve their financial situation must be supported in their efforts to do so. Those who are not on social assistance, but are limited by inadequate fixed incomes (e.g. pensions) need to have access to programs and services that will enhance their lives, and families who are at risk of poverty need to be supported in ways to minimize the risk of long term dependence on 'the system'.

When discussing ways to reduce the deficit, government must take the varied situations of those living in poverty into consideration and come up with solutions that are people focused—solutions that reduce and prevent the number of those struggling.

This is not something that can be put on hold until the economy improves.

The impact on low income families must be a positive one—one that does not take any more money out of the pockets of families who already have so little.

Hope is absent from the households of many Nova Scotians who experience hunger and poverty. Too often we see hardships, limitations and lost opportunities become a way of life and something that gets passed on from generation to generation.

Questions and Answers

To help break the cycle of poverty and replace hardships with the hope that is needed for a better life, we recommend that government commit to the following actions in regard to the four questions put forth in the Getting Back to Balance feedback form.

What investments should be made today that will help grow the economy in the long term?

To assist families in securing more income, invest in child-care programs that are accessible, flexible and affordable and that meet the needs of single parents, parents who do shift work and families with two working parents.

Invest in accessible programs that promote wellness and prevention (e.g. recreation, addiction support, home care). Low-income families often cannot access current wellness and prevention programs because of program criteria, cost of participation or lack of transportation. Therefore, minor physical challenges become major medical crises. Investing in wellness and prevention will reduce hospital stays, surgeries and pharmaceutical costs.

What should the government do to increase revenues and reduce spending?

Put measures in place to protect low-income households from increased taxes and user fees.

Evaluate government programs based on their real outcomes. Identify those that continually fall short of budget projections and re-assign surplus elsewhere.

Ensure infrastructure funds are reviewed and approved by staff and not elected officials, by adhering to the process that dictates politicians are responsible for determining priorities, directions and mandates; and civil servants are responsible for program delivery.

What changes should be made to programs and services? Are there things government should do better, stop doing or do more of?

Redesign the Employment Support Income Assistance (ESIA) system so that it supports families, rather than impedes them from becoming self-sufficient, active contributors to the economy. We recommend expediting the review of the ESIA program and make revisions to:

- Enable families to identify and pursue solutions to their financial challenges.

- Increase allowable household earnings before claw backs. This will allow people to work without fear of being penalized for additional income.
- Introduce support mechanisms such as short-term repayable loans to assist with one-off mortgage/heat payment crises. This would reduce the instances of families moving to long-term social assistance as a result of a short term financial challenge.
- Introduce intake, monitoring and eligibility processes that support transitions to self-sufficiency while responsibly reducing the rare instances of program abuse.

Design programs (in terms of both accessibility and delivery) to meet the specific needs of their target group—one size does not fit all.

Reduce duplication of services/expenses by improving interdepartmental communication and collaboration.

Use publicly-owned facilities more strategically. For example:

Increase accessibility (e.g. hours and restrictions related to insurance) to schools to build a healthier society through wellness, adult education and community programming.

Challenge publicly-funded infrastructure to incorporate green strategies to reduce operating expenses.



How soon should government bring Nova Scotia's finances back to balance?

As soon as possible, but not at the expense of low-income families. The

province must consider the impact the decisions will have on the 40,000 people who depend on food assistance programs each month. These families are also operating on a budget that is in deficit.

Final Thoughts

We do not have a long list of solutions, but we believe they exist and encourage the government to take our recommendations into consideration when seeking them out. The way government chooses to address the deficit will affect families right now who are struggling and it will have a direct impact on the hunger and poverty rates among Nova Scotians down the road.

Government can choose to implement the same measures taken by previous parties such as increasing taxes and cutting social programs. Government can choose to continue the practice of the last 30 years by saying poverty needs to be addressed, but not right now. Or government can choose to act now.

Addressing poverty is something that cannot be put off any longer. The provincial government must commit to being a national leader in addressing the deficit in a fiscally responsible and people-focused way. We ask that government be innovative and confident in finding new solutions that will address this problem without leaving families living in poverty even further behind. Thank you for the opportunity to share our recommendations. We would like to express our willingness to be a part of similar discussions in the future.



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