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Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy: A step in the right direction

Halifax, Nova Scotia, April 9, 2009 -- The Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy, released on April 3, should be received with optimism. It was not very many years ago that a provincial poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia was only a distant hope. When, in 2007, FEED NOVA SCOTIA was asked by the Nova Scotia Government to participate in the Poverty Reduction Working Group (PRWG), it was still unclear how the issues the group met to discuss – the reduction and prevention of poverty in Nova Scotia – would inform policy decisions. The release of the Poverty Reduction Strategy is an indication that a productive dialogue and subsequent action around the needs of low-income Nova Scotians is underway and is certainly an encouraging first step towards addressing the problems of poverty and hunger in Nova Scotia.

In 1984, FEED NOVA SCOTIA was established to provide emergency food assistance to Nova Scotians in the short term. After 25 years of supporting Nova Scotians living with food insecurity, and witnessing a continued need for the services provided by food banks and meal programs, we know that short-term assistance is not enough to break the cycle of poverty. The Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy emphasizes the kind of long-term approach that FEED NOVA SCOTIA believes is essential to lifting Nova Scotians above the poverty line, supporting their dignity and working to eliminate their perennial worries about how they'll find safe and affordable housing or where their next meal will come from. We are pleased that the recommendations of the PRWG so obviously influenced the decisions and directions of the Strategy. This level of community involvement must continue throughout the further development, implementation, assessment, review, and revision of the strategy.

The Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy includes the laudable goals of enabling and rewarding work by investing in training and job creation, improving the supports for those in need by (albeit slightly) increasing income assistance allowances in line with the rate of inflation, and focusing on children by making the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and the Low Income Pharmacare for Children Program available to more families. But the strategy does have its shortcomings. FEED NOVA SCOTIA is concerned that the short-term measures are not enough to meet the immediate needs of the most vulnerable Nova Scotians. For instance, the proposed reforms to the Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) Program don't go far enough to put money in the pockets of the people who need it right now. Indexing income assistance rates to the rate of inflation will not go anywhere near far enough to lift individual and family incomes above the poverty line. Even with the proposed increases, Nova Scotians will be unable to afford a steady diet of nutritious food and will continue to rely on food banks and meal programs to make ends meet. While the investment the strategy promises to make in housing infrastructure – \$59-million over three years to expand and upgrade affordable housing – is a welcome response to the current housing crisis affecting low-income Nova Scotians, it does not help everyone who is unable to afford to keep their homes warm. The current Heating Assistance Rebate program does not help those who are unable to pay for heating costs up front; these Nova Scotians are still faced with the 'heat or eat' dilemma.

Notwithstanding these areas of concern, FEED NOVA SCOTIA looks forward to a continued relationship with the Nova Scotia government as the Poverty Reduction Strategy is developed and implemented. Above all, we believe that meaningful collaboration with community groups and individuals, including the people being targeted for the services outlined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy, is crucial to its success. The problems of hunger and poverty are complicated, but there are solutions. The Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Strategy is an important first step towards making those solutions a reality.