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### With politicians in election mode, now is the time to secure a decent living for all

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Earlier this year, an impressive list of community leaders – including three former premiers from all parties – united with other leaders in an open letter calling on Premier Dalton McGuinty and Prime Minister Stephen Harper to follow the "fair deal" road map laid out by the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults. In a full-page newspaper plea, they urged senior levels of government to ensure "a decent living for all Ontarians."

Announcements on new income security measures surfaced soon thereafter. But with a provincial election and a new federal session on the horizon, now is the time to review expectations for the fall and to encourage governments to achieve the goal of ensuring a decent living for all.

It will be all the more important if the woes that have recently beset world markets result in tougher economic times for Canada. Our social safety net has been fair game for cuts following recessions, as we saw in the 1990s. If times get tough again, the affordability of our safety net programs may become a topic of debate. We must ensure that we stay the course and continue with the promising start we see today.

In Ontario, the most important safety net budget announcement concerned the implementation of an Ontario Child Benefit. Starting with a modest down payment in July, the program is set for full implementation in 2011. Activists have called for the program to be fully implemented faster and they remain watchful to ensure that no children will be left out in the longer term.

They are also calling on all parties to use the momentum of the Ontario Child Benefit as a springboard for a full-fledged poverty reduction strategy. A dental program for the working poor is an important beginning and it now looks like the province will act on repeated requests to inject funding to set up badly needed clinics to help low-wage earners get the dental care they need.

Yet several important questions remain.

For the Ontario government:

Outdated employment standards regulations require sprucing up to reflect the realities of today's labour market. Will the government respond and will it hire the necessary enforcement staff and prosecute repeat offenders?

People who find themselves on social assistance should not be forced to give up their life's savings because they have hit a rough patch. A single person cannot now save more than \$560 without becoming ineligible for benefits. Will recipients be allowed to retain a modest amount of assets so that they have a cushion to ease their transition back into the labour market?

The move to raise the minimum wage to \$10 an hour has been heralded as recognition that a hard day's work deserves a fair day's pay. But will the province speed up its schedule of minimum wage increases to allow low-income wage earners to gross at least \$350 a week for a 35-hour week by 2008?

Children in care of a Children's Aid Society who leave care at 18 need help with their transition into adulthood. Will the province standardize the rates of subsidy across the province for 18- to 20-year-olds who can no longer access the services provided for children whose parents no longer take care of them? Will they extend these subsidies to age 24?

Quality early learning and child care alongside access to affordable housing are essential components of Ontario's social architecture. Will action be taken?

And lastly, Ontario is the only jurisdiction in North America that requires municipalities to fund an open-ended set of programs with finite revenues. Will the province finally find a way to relieve cash-strapped municipalities from paying for Ontario Works (welfare) especially now that it has announced that disability payments will be uploaded?

For the federal government:

The original five-year plan for the national child benefit – heralded as one of Canada's most effective anti-poverty tools – ran out in July without mention or fanfare. Will the federal government put a new plan in place and revitalize its child benefit policy?

Wage earners continue to pay into Employment Insurance but most Ontarians have less than a one in four chance of ever collecting a cent if they become unemployed. Will the federal government introduce fairness to the EI system?

The Canada Social Transfer has still not been resolved 11 years after the demise of the Canada Assistance Plan, which it was designed to replace. Will the federal government look into implementing a properly funded Canada Social Transfer or consider a shared-cost program with provinces once again?

As we await more details on these programs in the next round of federal budget legislation in the fall, we look forward to answers to these fundamental questions.

The federal government's response to the task force's recommendations was modest. The 2007 budget included a narrow Working Income Tax Benefit to help social assistance recipients attain work, and a new registered savings program (Registered Disability Savings Plan) to allow family members to save for a nest egg for their loved ones with disabilities.

The Working Income Tax Benefit has been already scaled down from the original plan to help the working poor make ends meet so that it now only helps people leaving welfare. It leaves out the poor who are working now.

The benefit has been designated as a potential recipient of future federal budgetary surplus dollars through a program called "Advantage Canada." Will new federal funds from budgetary surpluses be used to boost the Working Income Tax Benefit and to help more of the working poor achieve a decent standard of living?

As the weather turns cool and harvest colours make their appearance, let's hope that governments sign on to an agenda to assure "a decent living for all."