

# Poverty can be beaten, if steps taken: advocate

By Stephen Petrick

THE INTELLIGENCER

Ontario can reduce its poverty rate by 25 per cent within the next five years if it follows the right steps, according to a noted anti-poverty advocate.

Those steps include reforms to welfare, an increase in the minimum wage, more affordable housing and — more importantly — a fundamental shift in the way people living in poverty are perceived, said Marvyn Novick.

The retired Ryerson University professor and leader in the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction group was the keynote speaker at an Affordable Housing Action Network forum, held Thursday at St. Thomas Anglican Church.

Novick said too many people still view people living in poverty as personal failures, despite the fact that an alarming number live below the poverty line. In Ontario, the number is nearly 1.3 million.

"It's time to look that contention in the face and say you are historically and structurally wrong," Novick said. "The collective failure embedded in poverty is the collective failure of society."

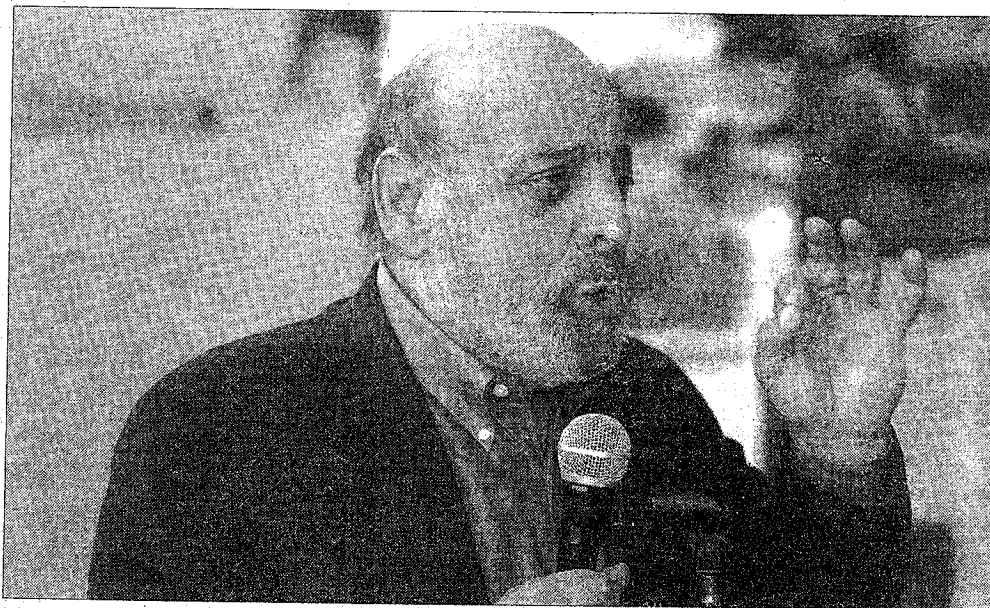
Novick said the Ontario government is expected by the end of the year to release a blueprint on how to reduce poverty.

The 25 in 5 Network hopes to see in an increase in minimum wage, to \$11 an hour by 2011; an increase in the maximum annual Ontario Child Benefit payment to \$1,500 per child and a \$100 per month food supplement in 2009 for adults on social assistance.

He also said one of the easiest things a government can do to reduce poverty — and improve its economy — is to invest in affordable housing.

Such projects employ local people, he said, "plus you do a public good."

The 25 in 5 Network is calling for the province to construct 8,000 affordable housing units each year, as part of a poverty reduction mission.



INTELLIGENCER PHOTO BY STEPHEN PETRICK

Marvyn Novick speaks to guests at the Affordable Housing Action Network forum.

Novick said all of the goals are realistic, pointing out that many other provinces and American states are working on poverty-reduction missions already.

Although the moves will cost the government money, it has an obligation to help people escape poverty, he said, even if it means going into short-term debt.

"It can borrow prudently," he said. "That's the key term."

He said the government must take the same stance in did during the post-Second World War era when it borrowed money to ensure veterans would not return home to live in poverty.

He also said Ontario has the "fiscal space" to do it, pointing out that in 1999-2000, for every \$1 of revenue the province received, 17 cents went to pay off debt.

In an interview following the speech Novick said municipalities can play a role by passing resolutions supporting poverty reduction.

"Many municipalities have gone on record saying to the premier, we support a serious

poverty reduction strategy," he said. "The other thing they can do is begin to support local initiatives. If people are working or food scarcity or transit difficulties, municipalities can get involved."

The session was attended by dozens of social workers and anti-poverty advocates.

One such advocate noted that no elected officials from Belleville or neighbouring municipalities appeared to be present at the seminar.

"It would be helpful if they got a copy of Marvyn's remarks," said Michele Leering, executive director of the Community Advocacy and Legal Centre, as she looked around the room.

She said she was touched by Novick's speech and believes a 25 per cent poverty reduction in five years is realistic.

"It's like running a business. If you set objectives that you can see and decide they are valuable things to do, you can do them. But you have to have the political will to do it."

[spetrick@intelligencer.ca](mailto:spetrick@intelligencer.ca)