

Trust shines light on rural poverty

By Sarah Sobanski

Non-permanent residents are being asked to look behind the scenes of their cottage communities in a new poverty report by local resource groups.

North Hastings Community Trust, with the Hastings Prince Edward Poverty Roundtable and other poverty support groups in Frontenac and Lanark counties, have released the Invest in Rural Resiliency: Address Poverty report.

"Poverty is more hidden in a rural area," said Community Trust program co-ordinator Jane Kali drawing attention to the area's seasonal work struggles where the economy slows down dramatically in the winter months. She explained that rural areas need the support of urban centres and its people as allies.

"I know this from coming from the city, being a camper or a tourist. You come from the city, you don't see the poverty, you just see the beauty and the mountains and all that," she said. "[We're] trying to raise awareness for those living in an urban setting [of] what is behind the scenes here. Who's pumping their gas? Who's at the checkout when they go to the grocery store? What is the reality of those folks that they're seeing and the folks that are really hidden and isolated?"

The two-page report came out on International Poverty Eradication Day earlier this month. It details a poverty crisis in Ontario, the root causes of rural poverty and calls on the premier to help.

Kali said the "majority of people in North Hastings are on some kind of social assistance" because of the lack of available jobs "something she puts under the umbrella of "income insecurity." She said people are on employment insurance and then find themselves on Ontario Works when that runs out.

"Often folks are also traumatized with mental health and addictions and unable to work " so on [the Ontario Disability Support Program] " or because of physical disability, and those rates are just appallingly low," she said touching on one of the calls of the report. "One of our requests to end poverty is to raise social assistance rates. I think the key thing to pull out of this report is that income insecurity is the root cause of poverty."

The report also calls for subsidies for housing and utilities costs. It calls for funding for rural transportation and rural community organizations as well.

"I know a lot of people stuck in the bush " no vehicles, no food, their house falling down around them," said Kali.

She said there should be more support for rural areas considering the support rural areas give to urban centres.

"We're talking about wind farms, big solar farms, we're talking about food, we're talking about our lumber, mining has always been in rural areas," she said. "There's a real disconnect between the urban and the rural in terms of recognition of where all the stuff comes from. It comes from us, so support us."

Kali said she hoped the report, and the collaboration of the groups in the future, would lead to change.

"This is an effort to try to get support to increase our rural resiliency? We are a really resilient, creative, caring, compassionate, awesome community but we need more resources in order to build our capacities and grow our resiliency."

The report is available on Facebook at North Hastings Community Trust.