

Presentation by David Northcott
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To the Senate subcommittee on Cities
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Honourable Senators, committee staff, observers and journalists,

My name is David Northcott and I am the executive coordinator of Winnipeg Harvest, the food bank serving Winnipeg and other communities in Manitoba.

Thank you for inviting us to be at this table today.

We commend the Senate for:

- The work of this subcommittee on social issues facing Canada's cities;
- The work on rural poverty by your colleagues on the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry;
- The Croll report of 1971; and
- The 1997 report by Senator Cohen, *Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada*.

The alarm is still ringing.

Services provided by Winnipeg Harvest

Winnipeg Harvest was founded in 1984 to respond to two conditions: hungry people and surplus food. We believed it was wrong for Canadians to live with hunger in a country with so much. Our goal from the beginning has been to meet the immediate need by feeding people, while working for long-term solutions to reduce the need.

Manitoba food banks provide food to more than 43,000 people every month, almost half of them children. In Winnipeg, the food is delivered to more than 39,000 people through 300 agencies in local neighbourhoods, more than 60 per cent of them based in churches and other faith institutions.

Of those families using Winnipeg Harvest, fewer than half rely on welfare as their source of income. About 15 per cent work, but do not earn enough money to buy the food they need for themselves and their families. Others get income from pensions, disability payments, employment insurance or the alternative economy while many report no income at all.

Many of our clients, despite facing hardships in their own lives, volunteer their time and energy to help others through Winnipeg Harvest. We couldn't do it without the more than 270,000 volunteer hours they give every year.

While redistributing food to people who need it remains the top priority for Winnipeg Harvest, we work to give access to:

- Free income tax returns for those with incomes under \$30,000 (in partnership with a volunteer from the Canada Revenue Agency.)
- Redistribution of personal care products and household goods.
- Provision of meals and snacks through day cares and other agencies.
- New and developing programs to meet the distinct needs of people from First Nations, African and refugee communities.
- Training for life and work skills.

Advocacy

Winnipeg Harvest has also begun a program of advocacy for our clients and other low-income Winnipeggers. There are three aspects to our advocacy program.

- Teaching low-income people to advocate for themselves on welfare, housing, rental and other social issues that touch their lives.
- Systemic change: Working with like-minded groups to urge senior politicians and bureaucrats to make the system more fair.
- One-to-one advocacy to help families access the social services to which they are entitled, provided by NGOs, governments and the private sector.

When I think about what's wrong and what's right about Canada, I always think about Big Bill.

Big Bill was a long-time client and volunteer at Winnipeg Harvest. He lived in a downtown hotel. He couldn't always use the shower down the hall because it didn't always work. He wore all his clothes all the time, because he knew somebody would steal any that he left in his room.

As a result, Big Bill struggled with hygiene and many other issues. But he still came to help others at Winnipeg Harvest who were even less fortunate than he was.

Overnight, his life changed! He was clean. He wore a new set of clothes and a new sense of self-esteem. What happened?

He turned 65. Suddenly, the system that had treated him so badly began to respect him and his income needs as a citizen. He got access to decent housing and he could afford to buy groceries to cook in his own kitchen.

This proves that, when we want, we have the capacity to design and deliver a system that works and values the citizen. Why can't we do the same every day, for every Canadian?

The Refundable Family Tax Benefit

Canadians are justly proud of this country's achievements in social programs.

- Canada and Quebec Pension Plans
- Guaranteed Income Supplements
- Old Age Security
- Employment Insurance
- Workers' Compensation
- Access to education
- Welfare
- Medicare

These are all steps taken by federal and provincial governments on behalf of all Canadians.

Food banks were meant to be a temporary solution. Winnipeg Harvest has always wanted to close its doors in a Canada where no one ever went hungry again.

More than 20 years after the first food banks were founded, we have learned that Canada needs the political will to change. Former NDP Leader Ed Broadbent's motion to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000 was a noble attempt. But it had no legislative teeth.

Instead, we have seen the growth of a philosophy that the marketplace would solve all social ills. It didn't work. Those in the upper echelons grew richer, while economic growth provided jobs for some people on welfare. But those jobs did not provide high enough income and many of those people continue to rely on food banks.

In Manitoba, the welfare rates for shelter have been frozen for 15 years. When inflation is factored in, the buying power of Manitoba's poorest citizens has been reduced by 35 per cent over that time.

The result is the terrible choice faced by two-parent families, single mothers, people with physical and mental disabilities or mental illness, people who need education and training and others who have been forced by circumstances onto welfare:

Feed themselves and their kids or pay their shelter costs.

Money that should have gone to food is used to pay rent and utilities and the food budget is stretched by using a food bank. It's only a partial solution. Our clients receive only enough food for four or five days out of a month.

What would be a more lasting and appropriate solution for Canadians living in poverty and living with hunger?

Senators may want to revisit the work I cited a moment ago: The Croll Report. In it, Senators of the day recommended that Canada develop a guaranteed annual income.

The term “guaranteed annual income” has fallen out of public discourse, so let’s rename the proposal the “refundable family tax benefit.”

The GAI or RFTB needs to be evaluated in light of the need demonstrated by food banks over the last 25 years.

People are still hungry.

The principle is simple: Every Canadian deserves an adequate standard of living, simply because they are Canadians.

All Canadians who fill out an income tax form would pay tax above a certain income level, and get money back below a certain income level, regardless of whether or not they had paid any income tax in the first place.

Our philosophical commitment to medicare is that the least wealthy of us will receive the same medical care as the wealthiest, because we are all looking after each other.

Canadians’ first thought is that they have already made the same commitment on food and income. The social safety net should save their friends, family and neighbours from hunger and poverty.

But they also know that people fall through the social safety net all the time. That’s why they are so incredibly generous to organizations such as Winnipeg Harvest. Canadians know they must try to achieve through charity what governments have failed to achieve – an adequate standard of living for all.

We would be overjoyed to close the doors of Winnipeg Harvest because we knew that all our former clients now had an adequate income and were no longer living with hunger.

We thank you for inviting Winnipeg Harvest to make this presentation. In return, I invite Senators to visit their local food banks to see what NGOs and faith communities are doing each day in their communities to reduce hunger.

We are committed to the same Canada as you – a Canada that is hunger-free.