

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Honoured by my cabinet appointment

This past week has been busy and exciting. I was deeply honoured by the trust placed in me by Premier Kathleen Wynne in appointing me as Ontario's Minister of Housing and the Minister Responsible for the Province's Poverty Reduction Strategy. It has been more than 20 years since the Ministry of Housing has been a stand-alone ministry, which highlights the importance our government places on this area.

Affordable housing has always been an issue I have championed. As far back as my days on the Aurora Council, I advocated that we need to do more. Increasing affordable housing is critical to reducing poverty in Ontario ? the two are closely linked. By creating this stand-alone ministry the province can now continue its efforts, with our partners, to build more affordable and social housing. This will also aid in the government's work to eradicate homelessness in Ontario. The new ministry will lead the province's negotiations with the federal government on new social housing agreements, and implement the province's commitments in the Climate Change Action Plan related to affordable and social housing.

One of my responsibilities for the past two years has been as the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister Responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy. Now, as I move into the position as minister for this portfolio, I look forward to continuing to work for some of Ontario's most vulnerable citizens. Addressing poverty is a priority to the government of Ontario. A province such as Ontario, should not have 1.57 million people living in poverty. We need to adapt public supports and investments in education, housing, health care, mental health, jobs, training and other services, so that everyone reaches their full potential and is a contributing member of society.

I would like to thank the people of Newmarket-Aurora for their support. I am excited by this new responsibility and look forward to helping our government make a difference in the areas of housing and poverty reduction.

York Region Food Network

On June 16, I attended What's the BIG idea 2.0, the event was hosted by the York Region Food Network at the Town of Newmarket's municipal office. I spoke on the provincial plans for a basic income pilot. From my own research I have learned a few interesting and important things about ?Basic Income? programs. They are complex and there is no basic definition. However, these programs are generally understood as a cash transfer from the government to families or individuals to ensure a minimum level of annual income.

Pilot projects done around the world, including Canada, U.S., Sweden and Finland, have shown there is no single way to implement a basic income pilot. Results of the pilots are intriguing. Proponents say basic income programs can do everything from decrease domestic violence, to increase graduation rates for young men to improve the health of children. But we need to do our own research through a pilot project to ensure the concept will work here in Ontario. The government committed to do this as part of our 2016 budget, and we will provide updates as we move along.

The second topic that I addressed was on food security. In November 2015, Food Banks Canada released their HungerCount 2015, its annual report on hunger and food bank usage across Canada. It presents results from an annual study of more than 4,000 food banks and other food programs across every province and territory. The report gives us a good national picture of the problem of food insecurity and hunger.

The report does show there has been a drop in food bank usage in Ontario since 2014, but there is still a clear need for support for the most vulnerable. The report identified some recommendations to reduce poverty and food insecurity. They included implementing the new basic income guarantee, enhancing training supports and improving access to literacy programs.

Additionally, the Daily Bread Food Bank publishes its own annual report called Who's Hungry? This report illustrates another problem seen in food security. It reports that food bank usage has shifted and the inner suburbs have seen a 45 per cent increase in food bank use, while the inner core has seen a 16 per cent decrease during that same time period. These two reports show how complex food security can be.

I am looking forward to working closely with the federal government in creating a national housing program. We need to do more at the federal level to specifically address poverty. Following Ontario's lead to deliver a child tax credit is an excellent step forward for the federal government.

I know that there is much more work that we must do. The more we know about the problems Ontarians face, the more responsive and fiscally responsible we can be with the policies we develop. By working together, we are making a real difference in people's lives, not just around the province but in the amazing riding of Newmarket-Aurora.

I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at

www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org.
I look forward to hearing from you.