

Women leaders deliver affordability message to Prime Minister



Women leaders from York Region descended on Aurora's Royal Rose Gallery on Friday afternoon for a roundtable on affordability issues hosted by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy.

Participants gathered at the community hub, located on Yonge Street just south of Wellington, for what they thought was an opportunity to convey their thoughts to the local Federal representative, but it was also a chance to get word directly to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who came in as a surprise guest.

Throughout the event, Prime Minister Trudeau took the opportunity to go from table to table and engage in conversation with attendees, who included directors of service organizations, business owners, and more.

"This gives us a chance to mingle a little bit but also refocus right now, even though it is the holiday season, or maybe because it is the holiday season, on affordability," said MP Taylor Roy before the PM's arrival. "I know everyone is either struggling or knows someone who is or we have neighbours or friends."

As Chair of the Liberal Women's Caucus in Ottawa, the MP says she has "a little bit more of a voice to speak on behalf of women" to lawmakers in the House of Commons, and to encourage the Government to do more.

"I personally am very proud of our government and its track record in terms of women," she said. "When I talk about women's issues, it's not just because I think we need equal pay, we need equal rights and we need to protect ourselves; it's not only for that. I think women participating fully in our economy, in our society, makes our country a better place."

"This is not self-interest. You look now around the world and you see economies that are growing. They are growing through the increased participation of women. In our country too, since we put in the early learning and child care program, women's participation in the labour force has increased and that builds our GDP. It builds many things. It is an economic issue as well as a social justice issue in my mind."

Ahead of the PM's arrival, MP Taylor Roy told *The Auroran* it would be "good for him to hear firsthand from women on the economy, on economic issues."

Participants had no shortage of concerns they wanted to deliver the MP, and ultimately, the Prime Minister.

"This gives us an opportunity for us as community organizations to come together and share what we know of women living in the community and the affordable crises we're seeing," said Liora Sobel, Executive Director of the Women's Centre of York Region.

?One of the biggest barriers we're seeing is the cost of living, as per the event. Women are struggling who are in situations of intimate partner violence to leave those situations and stay out of them due to affordability issues and the high cost of living, especially when children are involved in this situation. The government is making some great improvements with respect to bringing down the cost of childcare but in addition to that we need to create more spaces.

?While it is more affordable, getting children placed into child care in order to help the parent, the mother, into the workforce has been challenging. Another thing is the economic development of jobs and positions for women in the community and creating more opportunities to get women into more skills and trades as opposed to what we're seeing with a lot of entry level employment for more sustainability in terms of that.?

Elaine Adam, a retired teacher, said she was particularly concerned with the impact affordability issues were having on seniors.

?My concern is senior women, affordability, poverty. A lot of women stayed at home and looked after the family and do not have access to proper pensions, and another thing too is social isolation,? she said.

Similar issues were raised by Frances Reinholdt, Vice President, Clinical Operations, for the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe.

?I think the reality is, for us, the economic issues, the challenge of just getting through day to day, coupled with how difficult the cost of living is right now ? the societal issues, the pressures. People are struggling with their mental health and we have to be really thoughtful of how do we ensure people can access low barrier, immediate supports for things like depression, anxiety, and in the context of the work we do, we work with the vulnerably housed; we work with people who are really struggling to access the basics day to day. There's a lot of conversation around creating opportunities for housing, which is so significant, especially in York Region. It is very expensive up here, and to rent and get the requisite services, it just isn't available.

?I think the other piece we need to be very thoughtful about is that access is different for different people based on just sort of where they are positioned in society and there are so many newcomers and communities that just don't have any access ? how do we ensure equal opportunity for those folks to get services? It's incredibly important.?

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