

Synopsis of 2nd Plenary Session at the 2016 OC AGM & Conference

Building Bridges – Creating Connections to Reduce Poverty

The speakers for the 2nd plenary session—Building Bridges – Creating Connections to reduce poverty—were Karen Glass and Laura Cattari. Karen is the Executive Director for the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office in Ontario and has over 20 years of experience in social policy. Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy—Realizing our Potential—aims to be a comprehensive and flexible approach to reduce poverty in the province. At this plenary Karen gave us an update on objectives achieved and goals established since Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy was introduced in 2014. Karen reviewed the 4 pillars of the current strategy: breaking the poverty cycle with a stronger focus on families; employment, income security and support of meaningful work; ending homelessness and evidence based policy development. The evidence based policy development combines experience, expertise and evidence, and is implemented through cross-ministry collaboration and coordination.

Laura Cattari was our second speaker in this plenary. Laura is a writer and community advocate and Vice President with the Board of Canada Without Poverty—an organization calling for sustained action to combat the structural causes of poverty in Canada. Laura was nominated in 2013 as a Woman of Distinction in Hamilton, Ontario. Laura continued on the subject of evidence based policy development and human rights and reminded the audience that the International Convention on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights was ratified by Canada on May 19th, 1976. Economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) include the rights to decent work, an adequate standard of living, housing, food, water and sanitation, social security, health, and education. ESCRs are thus as essential as the freedom of expression or the right to a fair trial for ensuring human dignity.

Laura then outlined Bill 185, Ministry of Community and Social Services Amendment Act (Social Assistance Research Commission), 2016. Bill 185 is a bill to form a standing research commission to define regions of Ontario on the basis of economic geography and determine the cost of living in different parts of Ontario. Annually, it will make recommendations on social assistance rates and consider supplementary costs for those with disability.

The Commission will also periodically look at:

- (a) the interaction between assistance and precarious employment;
- (b) the treatment of child support payments; and
- (c) the interaction of benefits with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.

The Commission will be comprised of 9 experts, including one person with lived experience of Ontario Works and another person with lived experience of the Ontario Disability Support Program. Laura has been invited to be one of these experts. She closed by saying that she will stay in touch with CFUW and will ask for our support in the adoption of Bill 185.