MAKE POVERTY HISTORY
MANITOBA

Brief to the Executive Policy Committee

Our Winnipeg Plan

July 14, 2010

Presented by: Harry Wolbert

Good morning, Mayor Katz and Councillors. Thank you for the invitation to attend today. We believe the future of our city is important to all Winnipeggers.

My name is Harry Wolbert. I am co-chair of the Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities, one of the member groups of Make Poverty History Manitoba.

Make Poverty History Manitoba is a coalition that brings together many different groups committed to changing public policy to achieve a Manitoba without poverty. One of our main goals is to see all three levels of government implement comprehensive poverty reduction strategies with targets and timelines for outcomes. We have listed our members in the Appendix.

We begin by noting briefly that the Our Winnipeg report, in its final form, is in tiny typeface. It would be helpful to Winnipeggers with visual disabilities and seniors to have all City documents published in at least 14-point font or to have a "large type" version available.

Make Poverty History Manitoba compliments the City on the process by which it went about developing this document. Public service staff genuinely engaged with the community. Make Poverty History Manitoba and the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council worked together with the staff of *SpeakUp Winnipeg* to organize the Poverty Roundtable.

Many of our members have also actively participated in various other forums that have taken place throughout the process.

Many of the recommendations from the Poverty Roundtable were captured at some length by the staff. But in subsequent versions, some of the recommendations have disappeared or been watered down. The words "poor" and "poverty" rarely appear in the final document.

Other sections have been hedged around by qualifications.

One such qualification we noted on p. 86, going by the numbering on the City Council report, the beginning of Section 03, Quality of Life.

The report spends three paragraphs explaining why the City has such limited responsibility for poor people. It quotes the Constitution of Canada and the City of Winnipeg Charter to defend its position.

The report cites four examples of areas in which the federal and provincial governments have responsibility and the City, it says, doesn't: Health, education, housing and social assistance.

The report ignores the fact that City jurisdiction impinges on the citizens of Winnipeg in all four of those areas.
Health – The City employs health inspectors to enforce its bylaws, including safe food handling at restaurants and the non-smoking bylaw.
Education – The City collects the taxes for the school boards, which is another level of local government, not federal or provincial.
Housing – The City participates in the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative and the Winnipeg Housing and Rehabilitation Association.
Social Assistance – When City inspectors closed down an apartment block two Januaries ago, they threw dozens of people living on social assistance onto the street.

We call on the City to take responsibility for its poorest and most vulnerable citizens, including by acknowledging the role it plays in these four areas.

That used to be the way it was for Aboriginal people and newcomers. Because federal legislation governs some aspects of their lives, the City used to disavow any responsibility for either group. We note approvingly that the many references in this report to Aboriginal people and newcomers contain no disclaimers about how they are somebody else's responsibility.

The City has outgrown that excuse with Aboriginal people and newcomers.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if the City treated poor people the same way? As full citizens?

Having said that, the rest of the section has some excellent ideas.

For instance, we fully support the recommendation on p. 88 that the City develop a comprehensive program to assist low-income families to participate in recreational opportunities. We await details and budget lines showing how the City will achieve that objective.

In particular, we welcome Direction Four on p. 89, under Opportunity:

> "Work within municipal service areas as a collaborator on poverty reduction"

Followed by the first enabling strategy:

> "Participate in a community-led poverty reduction strategy that involves a cross-section of residents, community organizations and all levels of government."

In addition to this and the other enabling strategies identified in the draft plan, Make Poverty History Manitoba recommends:

The City of Winnipeg release a comprehensive municipal poverty reduction strategy with targets and timelines outlining the various actions it will take within its mandate to reduce poverty and social exclusion in Winnipeg.

Several Canadian municipalities have implemented comprehensive strategies in support of poverty reduction. Make Poverty History Manitoba believes Winnipeg should be no exception.

A comprehensive strategy would consider actions to meet defined objectives in the following areas:

- Housing
- Income security
- Child care

- Education
- Neighbourhood and community approaches
- Transportation
- Recreation
- Disability supports and
- Health

As I said a moment ago, debates about governmental jurisdiction are sterile. A poor person living in substandard housing needs help, not a constitutional debate.

Such a comprehensive plan could also recapture and incorporate the priorities that were established by poverty groups during the Poverty Roundtable held as part of the *SpeakUp Winnipeg* process.

Make Poverty History Manitoba and our many partner groups stand ready to assist the Mayor, Councillors and public servants in working together with the community to genuinely help the Winnipeggers who most need it.

We also wish to make a positive comment about the City's LiveSAFE policy, which is a separate document, but is referred to on page 58 of this report. This policy was developed in consultation with the community and has been adopted by City Council. It contains many policy proposals we agree with.

Our only questioning of the policy would be in its aim to "address the root causes of crime..." Make Poverty History Manitoba believes it is more effective and more humane to address the root causes of poverty.

The emphasis on addressing crime rather than poverty may be based in part on polls that show crime is always an important issue with the public. The Mayor and Councillors may be interested in another poll – especially in an election year – that shows that poverty is also a significant issue to Winnipeggers.

The poll, conducted by the United Way, showed that more than three out of every four Winnipeggers had been affected by poverty – either personally or through someone they directly know.

More than 80 per cent called poverty in Winnipeg at least "quite serious" and more than 12 per cent identified it as the "most serious issue facing our community."[i]

A few more notes and comments on the Our Winnipeg report:

Page 93, Section 03-2, Vitality, the report notes "Everyone needs food to eat..."

What are the implications of that? The report talks mostly about community gardens, which is one important, but limited response.

Winnipeg Harvest is a member of Make Poverty History Manitoba. It wants to close its doors in a Winnipeg and a Canada that are hunger-free. What will the City of Winnipeg do to help Winnipeg Harvest, and our community, achieve freedom from hunger?

We do note that some of our member groups are part of the Winnipeg Food Policy Working Group. It has been working with City staff to try to get the City to establish a Food Policy Council in order to achieve a just and sustainable food system in Winnipeg.

Page 28, Our Winnipeg, Context plus Opportunities, touts the growth of service and construction sector jobs. But how much do those jobs pay? Is the City willing to show leadership by paying a living wage to all its employees, including those hired as outside contractors?

We recommend the City adopt the policies outlined in the report: *The View from Here: How a Living Wage Can Reduce Poverty in Manitoba,* published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The report demonstrates the advantages of living wage policies that have been adopted in other jurisdictions.[ii]

I would like to refer to another report*: Mending Canada's frayed social safety net: The role of municipal governments,* published by the Federation of Canadian Muncipalities.[iii]

The FCM report highlights two major areas as components of municipality-funded "social infrastructure" that are glaringly absent from OurWinnipeg: homelessness and child care.

There's no mention of the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative. Is it coming to an end? Nor is the word "homeless" used anywhere.

The crisis in child care in Winnipeg isn't reflected in the Our Winnipeg report. Centres are being built and spaces opened up left and right. But those spaces are

not filled because of a city-wide staffing shortage caused by the low wages paid to child care providers, most of whom are women.

Perhaps the City has a role to play in working with other levels of government to agree on an early-childhood strategy.

As the FCM report notes on page 48, "the cost of child care remains an obstacle to many working families," especially in single-parent households.

I leave you with a final thought. We propose that City Council adopt the following goal as an overarching objective:

In 10 years, Winnipeg will become the most inclusive and accessible city in the world.

Adopting that goal would bring out the best in all Winnipeggers. This city could be a leader and a role model for the rest of the world.

Make Poverty History Manitoba appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the planning process. We look forward to partnering with the City as we all work towards achieving a Winnipeg without poverty.

Thank you.

Appendix

Members of Make Poverty History include:

- The Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg
- The Canadian CED Network
- The Canadian Federation of Students
- The Canadian Mental Health Association – MB Division
- The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba
- Global College
- Islamic Social Services Association Inc. Canada
- Just Income Coalition
- Manitoba Child Care Coalition
- Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities
- Manitoba School Boards Association
- Mount Carmel Clinic
- Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence
- Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba
- Right to Housing
- Rossbrook House
- Social Planning Council of Winnipeg
- St. Andrew's River Heights United Church
- The United Church of Canada Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario
- University of Manitoba Students' Union
- UN Platform for Action Committee – Manitoba
- West Central Women's Resource Centre
- Winnipeg Harvest, and
- Women's Health Clinic.

[i] *Poverty in Sight: A Winnipeg Perspective,* published by the Urban Exchange of the United Way, available for free download at: http://www.mycitymysay.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/UrbXPovertyRpt_2009_web1.pdf

[ii] *The View from Here: How a Living Wage Can Reduce Poverty in Manitoba,* published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, available for free download at: http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/reports/docs/The%20View%20From%20Here%20_1_0.pdf

[iii] *Mending Canada's frayed social safety net: The role of municipal governments,* published by the Federation of Canadian Muncipalities, available for free download at: http://www.fcm.ca//CMFiles/QofL6En_Embargp1KGE-3242010-6436.pdf