

Province pledges to reduce the number of children in poverty

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Ontario's Liberal government has given advocates for the poor and powerless some of what they wanted. Last week, the province released an anti-poverty strategy that pledges to reduce the number of children in poverty by 25 per cent over the next five years. And on Monday, it announced related changes to employment laws that will give people filling temporary jobs rights most other workers take for granted. The strongest criticism of the long-awaited strategy came from people who argued discrimination is a cause of poverty and must be separately attacked. Deb Matthews, the minister who led the effort, had predicted the response would be very positive. "For the first time ever the government is actually measuring poverty and reporting on poverty," she said last week, explaining the province decided the best way to break cycles of poverty is to focus on children. "Governments will measure things that they want to change." Embracing the "25 in 5" goal, long pursued by the province's social planning advocates, is ambitious. In Toronto alone, the number of children below the poverty line grew by an estimated 19,480 to 161,410 - or 31.3 per cent - from 1997 to 2005. The plan's major spending will boost the Ontario Child Benefit, after school and family literacy programs, the Youth Opportunities Strategy, the provincial rent bank program and community hubs in Toronto. But despite the promise "all low-income families will see the benefits of this strategy," advocates for minorities over-represented among the poor said it "risks failure by ignoring the root causes of poverty." Children are "only one strand of poverty," so the strategy tackles only part of the problem, said Atulya Sharman, representing the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario. "Unless you name there is a problem of racial inequality in this country, how are you going to deal with it?" asked Sharman, part of the Colour of Poverty coalition he said is convinced this discrimination can be beaten by establishing an employment equity program and a more inclusive curriculum in schools. (Ontario had an employment equity law from 1993 to 1995.) The strategy, however, does say Ontarians need to "respect and respond to the diversity of poverty," and acknowledges "certain people are at higher risk of poverty" including immigrants, single mothers, people with disabilities, aboriginal peoples and visible minorities.

Tuesday's announcement of new Employment Standards Act legislation promises to improve rights for those working for temporary help agencies, whose ranks, advocates say, are more likely to include immigrants and visible minorities and women. Among other things, it should make employment standards more frequent and for temp agencies, limit to a six-month period the practice of denying client companies the chance to hire temporary workers on a permanent basis. The province said it already has passed a regulation ensuring "elect-to-work" employees - an exceptional category many temporary workers find themselves in - will get public holiday pay. That's no small victory, considering the extra two paid weeks a year "pretty significant for a lot of people we work with," said Deena Ladd, co-ordinator of the Workers Action Centre, which lobbied the province to review employment laws. Ladd said the province hasn't yet addressed other precarious "contract" work the WAC has said can result in cleaners, telemarketers and other employees making less than minimum wage. The group is planning to host meetings in January in areas with a high concentration of temp agency workers, such as Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke to review the bill.