NEW VOICES

Mennonite new life centre

Fall 2011 Volume 3 Issue 2

Health equity for immigrants

Why immigration is bad for your **health** and how that can change.

The Social Assistance Review

Everyone agrees—**social assistance** in Ontario needs to change. But how?

A fair chance at fair work

Ontario needs newcomer workers. They need **decent jobs.** Why doesn't it all work better.

Confronting drop-out rates

Significant differences in **educational** achievement between diverse groups.

Bright Ideas for a BETTER Ontario

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Message from the executive director

Election debate on a proposed tax credit for businesses who hire immigrants has inflamed a politics of division – setting the interests of immigrants against those of native born Ontarians. It doesn't have to be that way.

Long after the election has passed, Ontario has to work for all of us. Our collective future depends on it. Across the province, 30% of us were born outside Canada. In Toronto, it's closer to half the total population. Reducing disparity improves overall outcomes in education, health and the economy.

Offering incentives for immigrant employment is not about taking job opportunities from others struggling with the impact of the recession. It's about gathering all our strength for a successful recovery. By next year, it is projected that we will be 100% dependant on immigrants for net labour force growth.

In this issue of *New Voices*, our internationally trained contributors offer new inspiration and practical proposals for mobilizing the full potential of Ontario – increasing academic success rates for immigrant youth, ensuring newcomers enjoy the health and wellness necessary to make their full contributions, and improving access to employment opportunities commensurate with the skills and experience of diverse job seekers.

As Jojo Geronimo reminds us in his opinion piece, now is the time to stand together. Hope is better than fear, unity is better than division. Elections are about choices – about framing the values and the vision that will guide us into the future. That future, however, is built day by day, week by week, year by year, through the efforts and contributions of all Ontarians.

We need the skills and voices of all to build a better, brighter Ontario. Editorialist Karl Flecker, of the Canadian Labour Congress, encourages us to dream big, to imagine the possibilities that could emerge from better matching provincial needs – needs for infrastructure and public resources – with provincial resources – the wealth of underutilized expertise in immigrant communities.

Let's dream big. Let's stand and work together for an inclusive, just and generous Ontario.

T. Chute Molina

Tanya Chute Molina, Executive Director

Casting your ballot makes a difference:

Creating a provincial vision for everyone--including newcomers.

Karl Flecker is the National Director of Human Rights/
Anti-Racism with the Canadian Labour Congress.

Soon you will be in a queue, waiting for familiar faces from your neighbourhood to scour electoral lists with a ruler until they find your name. You take the ballot, and head for the cardboard shield – it's a moment when your mark can make a difference.

An important question needs to be asked before we get there. How will those applying for the job of provincial governance advance an agenda that considers everyone's interests and particularly those new to town?

Will candidates consider that Ontario is the destination of the vast majority of those seeking to make Canada their new home? Will they pay attention to the fact that more than 50% of newcomers to Canada are here to work; that just over 30% are family members and a shade more than 10% are refugees?

Will your neighbours know that nearly 70% already speak English, almost 5% can talk with you in either official language and the remaining quarter bring a host of other language skills with them?

Will we acknowledge immigrants come with extensive education, diverse and needed work experiences? Nearly 90% of those planning to work here have post secondary education, diplomas or trade certificates.

For those clinging to discriminatory notions that immigrant's international education have less value or application here, it's time to reconsider the value of diversity. The Conference Board of Canada found in a recent study that at every level immigrants are associated with and bring increased innovations to Canada. Whether it's an increase in the number of patents, more research chairs in academe or boosting international trade – thank immigrants.

An innovative provincial government would recognize that comprehensively utilizing the intellectual capacity of newcomers will benefit us all.

As our population and workforces ages, immigrants are the ones who will replenish our numbers and grow our workforce. By next year it is projected we will be 100% dependent on this community for net labour force growth.

Despite the abundance of electoral messages that either boast how well, or decry how poorly the province is doing – there is little doubt we must ensure newcomers are active participants in a persistently precarious global economy. Immigrant's extensive education, diverse skills and international experiences can help us stay afloat. Even Immigration Minister Jason Kenney has said that "Canada's post-recession economy demands a high level of economic immigration to keep our economy strong."

Leading up to that moment in the voting booth Ontarians must ask who has a plan to better welcome and integrate newcomers into our neighbourhoods?

What would that plan look like? In this issue of *New Voices*, immigrant journalists offer insightful recommendations for improvements in health, education, employment and income security.

Here's one more possibility – one that matches unused skills with unmet needs. Across Canada, at least 124 billion is needed to fix our crumbling water systems, transportation, community and social infrastructure. Ontario is near the front of the line for these much needed investments.

At the same time, we have a huge cohort of under-utilized talent with international training and skills. Many are familiar with the business of building bridges, transport systems and social infrastructure. Ironically, they came here to build a new life and contribute to building the country but too many are more likely to be parking cars, working part-time in retail, or driving cabs.

We can do better, simply by investing strategically in people - specifically investing in those colourful newcomers who have come to build something.

Consider our options: For every billion dollars spent on tax cuts, 5,600 jobs can be created. For every billion spent on physical infrastructure projects, 15,800 jobs can be created. For every billion spent on public services (health care, child care, education, integration and settlement services), some 20,000 jobs can be created.

What do you think will best help us out of this recession/ depression - why not colour our way out with purpose?

Imagine the economic, social and community benefits we would all reap, with a plan that purposefully linked community infrastructure needs with the skills sets of civil engineers, architects, biologists, health care and social workers, skilled trades and construction workers who have cut their occupational teeth in some of the busiest places in Asia, regions of the Pacific, the Middle East or Africa.

Doesn't your moment in the election booth deserve a vision that will build a better, more diverse and inclusive Ontario?

Health equity for immigrants

Why immigration is bad for your health—and how that can change.

Immigrants to Canada generally arrive here in good health—in fact, their health is typically better than that of the general Canadian population. This is no accident. Immigrants and refugees must pass a medical admissibility exam, whereby the doctor confirms that they do not pose a danger to public health and will not be a burden on the Canadian health system. However, community workers and researchers have noted that the health of immigrants starts diminishing once the settlement process begins.

"The first three months are like a honeymoon. The high-rises, the highways, the freedom... immigrants are in awe of these", says Gulshan Allibhai, Cross-Cultural Coordinator at the Canadian Mental Health Association.

But reality quickly sets in, says Allibhai. "Some medical professionals do not make a connection with mind, body and soul," she says. The many stresses associated with immigration and settlement go unnoticed though they are major contributors to anxiety and depression. These in turn can trigger diabetes, thyroid-related diseases, hypertension, elevated cholesterol and other conditions. In a preliminary study on "Migration and Diabetes", Access Alliance, a Toronto-based, multicultural health and community service provider, says stress is one of the biggest contributors to diabetes among migrants.

Indeed, the Public Health Agency of Canada acknowledges that "we need to look at the big picture of health .... health is determined by complex interactions between social and economic factors, the physical environment and individual behaviour."

To be effective, health promotion strategies must address these complex interactions. The Toronto settlement agency CultureLink, for example, attempts to address both affordability of transport, and the need for physical activity with their bicycling awareness program aimed at newcomers. Francisco Vidal, Assistant Manager at CultureLink, notes that healthy living is affected by numerous factors.

"Newcomers need culturally sensitive mentors as most of them are not familiar with our sports and programs which are structured with deadlines for each season," he says, as an example. "When they fail to register in time, they lose out for the whole season."

The need for culturally appropriate, nutritious food for newcomers is another major factor in immigrant health.

"The government should provide incentives to small farmers to grow vegetables that immigrants use, to make them affordable," says Rhonda Teitel-Payne, Urban Agriculture Manager at The Stop Community Food Centre's innovative Green Barn, in Toronto. Culturally sensitive health promotion is a step in the right direction. But it is not enough.

"We are now increasingly talking about health equity, which is a welcome move from talking about 'serving diverse communities' because it helps us to focus on underlying causes," explains Subha Sankaran, a Health Promotion Consultant with Health Nexus. Indeed, whether we're talking about nutrition, physical activity, primary health care, chronic illness prevention or poverty, getting at inequalities through policy is critical to improving health outcomes.

Jackeline Barragan, Community Health Programs Manager at Black Creek Community Health Centre points out that "accreditation processes and the requested Canadian experience put most newcomers at a disadvantage which in turn induces stress and anxiety caused by unhealthy living conditions." Lack of English fluency, appropriate information, affordable child care, or convenient public transport act as further barriers to immigrants getting medical support, adds Barragan.

"Sadly, recent immigrants, including refugees to Canada,--most of whom are people of colour--are running headlong into the health-threatening effects of Canada's weakening welfare state," explains Dennis Raphael, Professor of Health Policy

Health equity seeks to reverse a trend whereby immigrants arrive healthier but end up less healthy than the average Ontarian. at Toronto City Hall.

and Management at York University. "They are experiencing very high levels of low income and poverty, precarious employment, and increasing housing and food insecurity."

One solution, suggests Barragan, is to expand access to Ontario's Community Health Centres (CHCs), a model that specifically addresses the social determinants of health with programs tailored to the cultural diversity and socio-environmental priorities of the local community. Fully funding all CHCs announced by the Government of Ontario in 2005 would improve access to health care for diverse communities, especially those without OHIP coverage. Currently, only 4% of Ontarians have access to a community health centre.

Other health equity advocates have additional recommendations – like increasing social assistance **rates*** to reflect families' actual needs for spending on nutritious food, housing and other essentials for health—The Stop's community programs manager, Amanda Montgomery, argues that this would require at least a $100 monthly increase from current rates.

Dianne Patychuk, a social epidemiologist and health equity consultant, echoes concerns with the erosion of the welfare state, and argues that health equity depends on a renewed commitment to social services, together with a conscious focus on diversity.

Patychuk welcomed the 2010 Excellent Care for All Act, which aims to improve quality, patient experience and sustainability in the health care system—but is skeptical about how it will address existing inequities. "Lack of incentives to increase access to language accessible services, lack of reporting of health inequities, the three-month wait for newcomers to get health insurance coverage, the complicity with and lack of standing up against federal immigration policy, lack of effort to address the un-affordability of housing for people on social assistance, all of these also need to be corrected."

*For more ideas on improving social assistance, see Endrit Mullisi's article on p. 6

Sandhya Ranjit is a freelance writer with experience in reporting, corporate communications and corporate social responsibility. Projects in disaster rehabilitation, education and health that she carried out as a corporate social responsibility manager with the company Wipro Limited have touched many lives in communities in India. She also served as as volunteer chair of the same company's Prevention of Workplace and Sexual Harassment Committee. As a writer, Sandhya attempts to give voice to the voiceless as her way of helping society. Her passion is sustainability and her hobbies include gardening, reading and walking.

Health care for all—from the very start

Most newcomers and refugees start off with a handicap as adequate health care is not provided to them from the very beginning. Landed immigrants have a three-month waiting period to access health care under OHIP. Refugee claimants can access only basic coverage for emergency medical treatments and other essential medical services through the Interim Federal Health Program. Non-status immigrants do not get any health coverage until their status is determined – except at CHCs. The delay in getting access to health care often means a prolonged delay in their inclusion into the labour force--and the social costs that go with that.Newcomer-serving agencies have now come together to form the Right to Health Care Coalition to advocate for the elimination of the OHIP wait period along with bringing refugee claimants too under the scheme. They have launched a postcard campaign to put this issue on the electorate's radar.

Social Assistance Review

Everyone agrees—social assistance in Ontario needs to change. But how?

All poverty is soul-crushing. Usually, it slips into your life slowly, gradually becoming part of your life. I benefitted from Ontario Works (OW), one of Ontario's social assistance programs, for a year. Now, OW exists to offer not only financial but also employment support to those in temporary financial need. And yet, a harsh message seemed to come along with my monthly cheque: "that's all we can give to you, survive but don't be comfortable".

During 2009-2010, Ontario spent about 6.6 billion on social assistance (6% of the provincial budget). The social assistance system—including OW, the Ontario Disability Support Plan and Employment Insurance—provides important supports for people who for one reason or another are in serious financial need. And yet, it's extraordinarily difficult to survive on social assistance, which does not cover even a basic needs budget in Ontario. And punitive regulations around other earnings can make it hard for people to move from social assistance to real work.

That's largely why the province has appointed a Commission to review Ontario's social assistance system. Frances Lankin, one of the commissioners, is a respected community leader with long experience in anti-poverty work in Ontario. The other, Munir Sheikh, is a public servant renowned for the integrity of his decision to resign as Chief Statistician of Canada upon cancellation of the long-form census. So we should expect a thoughtful, informed review of the system.

Numerous other leaders in the anti-poverty movement also had a say in how the review was set up, its mandate guided by the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy: "the most promising way to improve outcomes for people receiving social assistance is to substantially improve their employment

Many social assistance recipients feel trapped by poverty. The Ontario Social Assistance Review seeks to open a window on a brighter future.

opportunities and—as a second and essential part of our task—to provide adequate income security to those who cannot work."

This rings true for me. We came to this country to feel safer and secure. Early on, when savings ran out, we resorted to social assistance to get by. I asked several friends: almost all applied for social assistance within their first four months in Canada. It bought them time to update or upgrade their skills with trainings, workshops and college. None was happy being on assistance. The Colour of Poverty campaign, a coalition that looks at the racialization of poverty in Ontario, confirms my feeling: immigrants only come to social assistance as their very last resort.

The Conference Board of Canada reported recently on a new increase in the gap between rich and poor. More than 12 per cent of adult Canadians live in relative poverty. And newcomers disproportionally bear the burden of poverty. And yet, only around 14 per cent of primary applicants for social assistance are newcomers with five years or less in Canada. Among newcomers receiving OW, refugee claimants make up about seven per cent of primary applicants and sponsored immigrants represent less than one per cent . So although we may have to resort to OW for a time, Ontarians are not paying taxes to support immigrants; on the contrary, we come here to contribute to society. As quickly as we can, we move on with our lives.

RESPECT

Devi Graceni, a new immigrant who is studying to improve his chances at work in Canada, describes a "complicated relationship" between newcomers and social services staff. "I wish I could receive more information and think that the caseworkers shouldn't be reserved in offering this information to newcomers." Is Graceni an exception? No! Caseworkers must focus more clearly on finding ways to help, not just on confirming eligibility for benefits.

The Colour of Poverty Racialized Communities Consultation report to the 2011 Ontario Social Assistance Review recommends hiring more caseworkers to reduce workloads, ensuring plain language information is available to recipients, and making sure workers receive regular training in cultural sensitivity and anti-oppression, among other measures.

INCOME SECURITY

The relationship between social assistance and program beneficiaries must be more than a small monthly cheque. Low wages force newcomers to keep resorting to social assistance. Even the discussion paper informing the review presents situations where people are better off on social assistance than working with low wages. This is why many resort to welfare while they update their skills with Canadian-based **education***. It's both difficult and expensive being poor—take high transportation costs to get to low-wage jobs, and the extra fees on bank accounts under $1000, for example.

TRANSITION TO THE WORKFORCE

The 2010 Ontario Budget noted: "the review is an integral part of the government's longer-term vision for a transformation of social assistance that would increase people's opportunities for work and guarantee security for those who cannot work." Affirming this vision for their work, the Commissioners have stated: "We are committed to developing recommendations to ensure that more people can be helped to work, and are thus helped to lift themselves and their families out of poverty". Highly-trained newcomers don't need more training—we need paid job opportunities. Toronto's Investing in Neighbourhoods program, which supports community service organizations to create transitional employment for individuals on assistance, is a great idea that should be carried into the new and improved social assistance system across Ontario. Still, it offers only part-time employment. Income in general is not improved, considering the increased spending on transport and child care. The Mennonite New Life Centre advocates building on programs like this to establish a comprehensive program of full time paid internships, a much more effective route to regular employment.

Key recommendations:

• **Eligibility and accessibility:** Reduce asset limits, so people needn't deplete all resources before turning to social assistance. Eliminate the automatic denial of social assistance to sponsored immigrants and decide cases on their own merits. Provide professional interpretation services for meetings with case workers.
• **Rates and benefits:** Increase assistance to cover the true costs for healthy diet, shelter, transportation, clothing and childcare needed to support transition to employment. Adjust rates regularly for local inflation. Make drugs, dental and eye coverage available to all low-income individuals/families—don't tie them to social assistance.
• **Employment services:** Increase emphasis on employment services, including individualized employment counselling and job development. Facilitate access to relevant, high quality education/training programs, paying attention to language, childcare and transportation needs.
• Access to employment: Provide recipients with opportunities to gain paid workplace experience. Support employers to create internships and transitional employment opportunities.
• **Transition to employment:** For those moving into paid employment, implement gradual reduction in social assistance that does not punish job-holders with part-time and low wage jobs, and that allows people to rebuild personal resources for long-term economic sustainability.
• **Link social assistance reform to Poverty Reduction Strategy:** Develop coordinated approach to social assistance, housing, health, mental health, childcare, etc to better achieve the ultimate goal of poverty reduction.

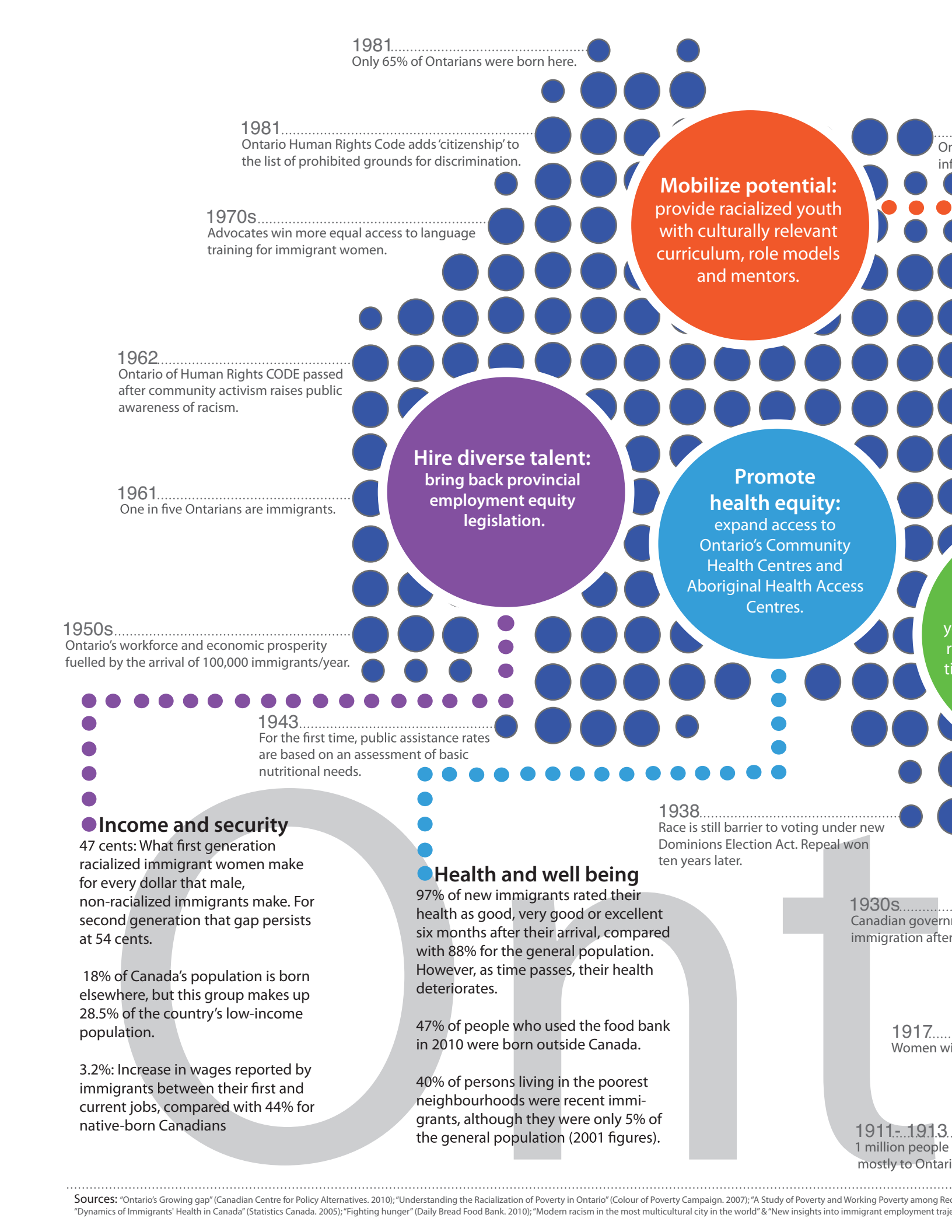
Whoever is elected this autumn won't be one who earns less than $22,000 a year, won't be someone on Social Assistance. Won't be one of us. And as new immigrants like me can't even give their vote in favour of the changes that would improve social assistance programs in Ontario, I can only hope that candidates will carefully consider our expert opinions and recommendations. Expert because they are based not only on the facts, but on our lived experience as well.

Endrit was born in Albania and has lived in Toronto for nearly 2 years. He immigrated to Canada as a skilled worker, with 13 years' experience in NGOs.

A believer in self-education, he also holds a B.Sc in food chemistry. '

He loves to be involved in social and holistic initiatives and in his limited spare time writes songs or articles, takes photos, plays with his daughter or reads. Dismayed at the difficulty of finding work in Canada, Endrit updated his skills, enrolled in George Brown College and volunteered before landing his first job. A member of the Mennonite New Life Centre's Newcomer Speakers Bureau, Endrit believes his voice is not only for singing--but also for speaking on behalf of those who can't.
You can reach him at immigrantvoice@gmail.com

*For more on the challenges facing internationally-trained professionals in Ontario, see Olufemi Shodunke's article on p. 10



Sources: "Ontario's Growing gap" (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. 2010); "Understanding the Racialization of Poverty in Ontario" (Colour of Poverty Campaign. 2007); "A Study of Poverty and Working Poverty among Rec
"Dynamics of Immigrants' Health in Canada" (Statistics Canada. 2005); "Fighting hunger" (Daily Bread Food Bank. 2010); "Modern racism in the most multicultural city in the world" & "New insights into immigrant employment traje

Building the Future

Education

80% of students expelled from Ontario schools are from racialized groups.

51% of recent immigrants to Canada had university degrees in 2006, compared to 19% of the Canadian-born population.

33%: A university degree from abroad is valued at just one-third that of a degree held by a Canadian born resident. Two thirds of university educated immigrants are underemployed.

Employment

50% of employers surveyed required Canadian work experience, or discounted the value of work experience gained in other countries.

40%: In an experiment with GTA employers, applicants with English-sounding names got almost 40% more call-backs from employers than those with Chinese, Indian, or Pakistani sounding names.

7.7% of all recent immigrants were among the working poor in 2004, compared to 2.7% for other working-age Canadians.

1986
ntario Healthy Communities Coalition begins formally and gradually draws in newcomers.

1988
First comprehensive social assistance review recommends childcare separate from social assistance.

1993
Ontario's Employment Equity Act achieved through dialogue with policy makers (but repealed in 1994).

Create internships: provide newcomers, outh and social assistance ecipients with opportuni-ies to gain paid workplace experience.

2002
Ontario Public Health Association argues for a community food security approach to inform public health.

2006
Four non-status students apprehended at school by immigration officials, leading to protest and public education on right of all children to attend school.

2007
Statistics Canada report reveals that new immigrants are increasingly living in chronic poverty.

ment increases restrictions on
stock market crash of 1929.

2009
Auditor General's report critiques exploitation and abuse of temporary migrant workers.

in the right to vote in Ontario.

2010
IVote Campaign calls for municipal voting rights for all permanent residents in Ontario.

immigrate to Canada,
o.

2011
Ontario provincial election.

cent Immigrants to Canada" (HR &SD Canada. 2007); "Work First' and Immigrants in Toronto" (A. Mitchell- New Economy (SANE) project, University of Toronto; "The Housing Needs of Immigrants and Refugees in Canada" (CHRA. 2007); ectories" (Ren Thomas, M.A., Ph.D. 2009).

A fair chance at fair work

Ontario needs newcomer workers. They need decent jobs. Why doesn't it all work?

Surveying the future: building our provincial labour force depends on immigration.

When Olalekan Onilude quit his senior position at the Nigerian Federal Institute of Industrial Research to come to Canada, it was with high hopes that his 'Skilled Worker' status would bring an even better life for himself and his family.

"As a foreign professional with over a decade and a half years of experience, I thought coming to Canada would be easy for me to get a job and integrate into the system," he says. And yet, despite his two masters' degrees, the father of two has struggled to find a decent job in his field since he arrived in June, 2010. Like some two-thirds of university-educated immigrants, when he's able to find work, he ends up in jobs requiring far less education than he has.

Newcomers to Canada have long had a higher unemployment rate than Canadian-born workers. And the recession has widened the gap. By spring of 2011, a team of researchers from York, Ryerson and the University of Toronto found that the jobless rate for recent newcomers had climbed to almost 15%, while even established immigrants have an unemployment rate 2-2.5% above that of Canadian-born workers. Chronic underemployment leads to poor **health*** and poor social integration.

A recent study by the Wellesley Institute and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that, even in good economic times, racialized Canadians earn only 81.4 cents to every dollar paid to non-racialized Canadians. And of course, newcomers and racialized workers (those who might be born in Canada but who are non-white) are concentrated in the lower-earning, more precarious work situations that have become all too common in recent years.

Despite this, the proportion of the economy that depends on the labour of newcomers and racialized Canadians continues to grow. Within a decade, in fact, 100% of net growth in the labour force will depend on the contributions of new Canadians.

Most employment programs for newcomers focus on job search skills. "The most successful methods of finding work in Canada involve having a strong social network and solid English language skills for cold-calling exercises, information interviews, networking events etc," says Ann Evans, Senior Manager of Employment Services at Neighbourhood Link Support Services.

Newcomer job seekers are at a clear disadvantage. They often have the knowledge and experience to do the job, but lack the know-how and know-who to get their foot in the door. University of Toronto researcher Izumi Sakamoto says a trusting environment is critical to teaching such "tacit knowledge."

This is what Onilude found in a bridging program on green economy. Bridging programs, internships and professional mentoring are all effective ways of developing the contextual knowledge and professional network required to land career related employment.

Robert McLellan, also from Neighbourhood Link, agrees: "Create more internships, testing mechanisms and training opportunities for newcomers to establish a benchmark of skills, [support newcomers to] upgrade to Ontario standards where necessary, and streamline the process of entry into the workforce."

The Mennonite New Life Centre would go even further. The Centre's 2010 Participatory Action Research brief, *Newcomer Skills at Work: Policy Recommendations for the City of Toronto*, sets out clear directions for

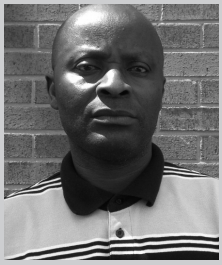
the municipal government that could translate well province-wide. The Centre's Adriana Salazar argues, for example, that Ontario businesses should implement equity principles to ensure a percentage of new hires are newcomers and stop asking for Canadian references. She also advocates for increased monitoring of precarious work situations, where newcomers and racialized workers all-too-often end up.

"The enactment and implementation of provincial employment equity legislation," she adds, "will provide newcomers with the needed support to overcome hiring barriers, while benefiting employers and society as a whole." At the federal level, such legislation has had important success; most notably, perhaps, in the banking industry.

"In 2005, RBC Economics found that if all new Canadians were fully employed, at their level of education and experience, earning equal pay to someone born in Canada, personal income would increase by $13 billion a year," said Gordon Nixon, the President and CEO of Royal Bank of Canada, in a speech last year.

"We are leaving economic growth—never mind fuller lives and stronger communities—on the table."

Underemployment means shattered dreams for two thirds of university educated immigrants, and lost productivity for Ontario.



Olufemi Shodunke, a Nigerian community Chief, is a trained print journalist who holds a Higher National Diploma in Mass Communication and a Master in Communication Arts degree.

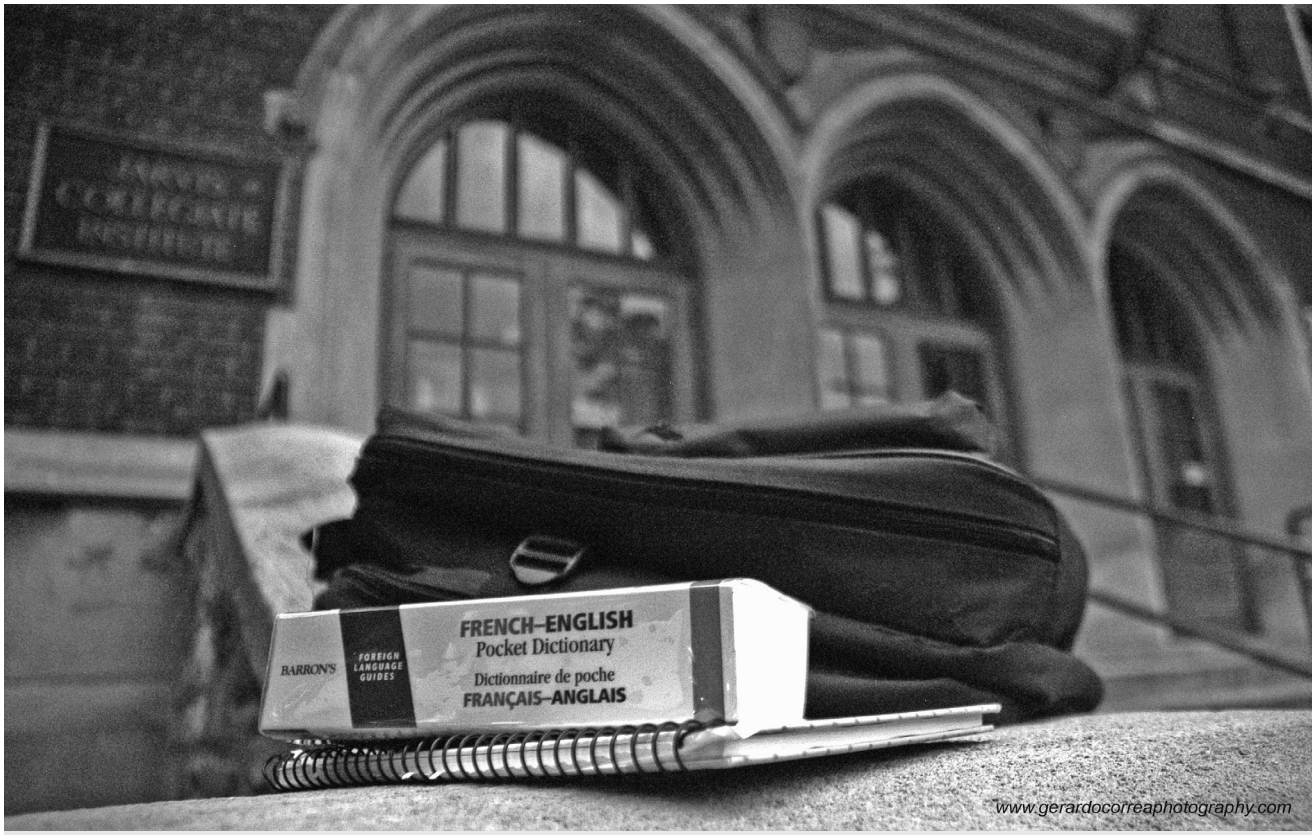
Olufemi worked at the *National Concord, The Comet, The Nation* and finally at *Nigerian Compass*, where he rose to become the Deputy Editor and Acting Editor of the Sunday edition. Through over a decade and half in journalism, Olufemi has won 16 awards including Best Reporter of the Year; Best Tax Reporter (Ogun State) – 2003 and 2004; Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Most Outstanding Reporter (2004, 2005 and 2006); and Rotary Vocational Excellence Award, 2004.

Olufemi, twice Chapel Chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists, suffered detention, beating, harassment, threats and gun attack as a result of his investigative reporting, and narrowly escaped a four-man gun attack, subsequently fleeing Nigeria and seeking refuge in Canada. He is happily married to Deaconess Adenike Oluwatoyin Femi-Shodunke and has three children: a boy –'Kayode—and two girls–'Jumoke and 'Funmi.

**For more on how poverty affects health, and new ideas for improving newcomer health, see Sandhya Rajit's article on p. 4*

Confronting drop-out rates among newcomers and racialized students

Only 60% of Latino students in Toronto complete high school in less than five years.



Lost potential? Ontario schools must go beyond the Eurocentric lens to successfully engage diverse students and families.

That's what Rubén Gaztambide found in a study – *Proyecto Latino*-- published in January of this year.

"It is concerning. We know that forty percent of those students that identify themselves as Latinos don't finish high school in a period of five years," says Rubén Gaztambide, an assistant professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

"We don't know why they don't graduate," Gaztambide says. "It can be that they left the country. It can be that they finished high school later. What we know is that we don't have any record of what happened to them."

In March, the Toronto District School Board voted to establish a task force to examine the same problem among students of Portuguese origin, whose graduation rate sits at 66 %.

The worst numbers are of those students born in the Caribbean, who have a dropout rate of 45 %, according to *Post-High School Pathways of Immigrant Youth*, a study commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO-an arm's-length agency of the Government of Ontario established to improve the postsecondary education system in the province) and published in October of 2010. The study tracked a group of Grade 9 students from 2000 to 2006.

The HEQCO study also revealed that only twelve percent of Caribbean students confirmed admission to a university, compared to 42% of English Canadian students. However, some groups fare better: 72 % of East Asian students go on to university

The significant difference in educational achievement between groups has been a frequent subject of research in the United States and Canada. In both countries, as the HEQCO study points out, the success of Asian students, and specifically Chinese youth, "is often attributed to ethnic capital"—presumed or stereotypical characteristics

such as compliance, diligence, industriousness and an emphasis on the importance of learning.

But individual characteristics are clearly not the only predictor of success – or failure. Not surprisingly, many students interviewed for *Proyecto Latino* spoke about the importance of the involvement of their families to overcome the challenges of newcomers in a school system that, most of the time, doesn't help them to integrate.

Alejandro, a tenth grader from the Dominican Republic, told researchers that "my grandmother... she want[s] to see me graduate and with a good profession like a good job. I do it for her mostly.... Really, she is the reason why I go to school."

David Hughes is president and CEO of Pathways to Education, a non-profit organization that has had notable success helping youth in low-income Toronto neighbourhoods graduate from high school by providing after-school tutoring, mentoring and financial support.

"This program, Pathways, was really a community **health*** program. It was designed as a community health program to create healthier communities. Not only physical health but economic health, social health, social unity," Hughes explains.

The results obtained by Pathways to Education suggest that the problem of high dropout levels isn't intractable.

In the same way that Hughes speaks about the importance of "healthier communities" and "social unity", Gaztambide believes that the key to success is "community involvement" and changes in how schools engage parents and students. To succeed, communities must not only be "well-established", but "well-organized" as well.

Gaztambide believes that there isn't yet a commitment to sustainable solutions from the Ontario government or the TDSB.

Nevertheless, new ideas are beginning to emerge, such as the creation in Toronto in 2008 of the city's first "Afrocentric" school. Following a model implemented in some jurisdictions in the United States, the school was approved, despite a strong debate, "to try a new approach" to solve the higher dropout rates of black students, says George Dei, past chair of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Dei said in a 2009 interview with *U of T Magazine* that "Afrocentric education sees schooling as a community endeavour, which means that parents, students, administrators, educators and governments share in the responsibility to ensure success. In the existing system, students are treated as individual learners. We want them to see themselves as a community of learners with a responsibility to those who are struggling."

Recommendations included in *Proyecto Latino* are similar to the "Afrocentric" school vision, where the "Eurocentric lens" is substituted with a vision that affirms the history and culture of the student community, while offering relevant and positive role models.

For example, students interviewed for *Proyecto Latino* called for "more courses in Latin American history and culture in the curriculum", as well as more extracurricular activities rooted in Latino culture.

Julio César Rivas is a journalist born in Madrid, Spain.

After working in newspapers, magazines and television in Spain, in 1993 he travelled to Central America where he followed the end of the armed conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala and was present during the Zapatista uprising in the south of Mexico. In 1996 he moved from Guatemala to Toronto and since 1998 has worked for Agencia EFE, Spain's international news agency.

As EFE's correspondent in Canada, Julio César has covered international events like the Summit of the Americas (2001), G8 and G20 summits in Canada and USA, several American presidential elections, the seal hunt on the East Coast of Canada and every major political, cultural and social event in the country.

** For more on a holistic vision of community health, see Sandhya Ranjit's article on p. 4*

HOPE IS BETTER THAN FEAR...

Jojo Geronimo is a Board Member of the Community Alliance for Social Justice, and and a member of the Social Justice Committee at the Mennonite New Life Centre.

In the dying days of summer, a message of hope went out from a man coming to the end of his journey. His message is a challenge to "the unfairness of an economy that excludes so many from our collective wealth." It was also a call to a common vision "to build a more inclusive and generous Canada."

Jack Layton's words swept across city and country, sending wave after wave of hope and optimism, blossoming into flowers and chalk messages on sidewalks and squares. They also resonated among us, in our communities of immigrants, affirming our struggle for fairness and the collective vision for social and economic justice *for all.*

ENDLESS reports and commissions have painted a stark picture of the growing gap in wealth, income, and quality of life: a picture of economic polarization and social division, along lines of race, gender, and immigration status. We have in our midst a small island of plenty, in a widening sea of poverty, precariousness, and vulnerability. Reinforcing this gap is a hardening anti-immigrant bias which separates those who have power from those who have not.

The vision "for a more inclusive and generous Canada" would call for no less than a re-affirmation of a social contract that had been the defining character of Canadian society and politics, now shredded these last 30 or 40 years by corporate neoliberal policies. It calls for political will to restore the legitimate role of government as an instrument for economic equity. It will require, in the long haul, the building of a broad movement for social change. It will demand – in the months before the election – the crafting of a people's agenda that will rally the forces of hope, justice, and democracy across our province.

With elections around the corner, Ontario stands at a crossroads. Now is the time to stand together, a time for social solidarity. But the task of re-building cannot be done without education, organizing, and mobilizing. It cannot be done without the grassroots engagement of our communities, immigrant or otherwise, whose hearts and hands will be the architects and builders of a more just and inclusive Ontario.

In this context, *New Voices* re-affirms a vision of inclusion and fairness, of rallying together for progressive policies in education, employment, health, and social assistance. For this election is a battle over minds and hearts. Opposing forces are even now vying to win over hearts - and votes. The outcome of the next election will either be a consolidation of privilege for the few or the re-affirmation of community; of xenophobia against the many or justice for all.

For now is the time to assert, through our votes, that "hope is better than fear; optimism better than despair."

Widening the circle is better than circling the wagons to criminalize asylum seekers. Building more schools is better than building mega prisons. Opening doors to internationally trained immigrants is better than barring them from Ontario's professions and trades; utilizing their skills is better than denying our province needed services.

Protecting our public assets is better than privatizing them. Strengthening health and social programs is far better than eroding them through deficit-cutting measures that only shift the tax burden from the rich to the poor. Re-building our social safety net is more effective than leaving our health and welfare to market forces with its cycle of boom and busts, bulls and bears. Putting our faith in community is far wiser than trusting "the law of supply and demand".

All this is a matter of choice: either we are building community or we are expanding corporate power. Don't believe the lie we can't afford our social programs – we can if the rich pay their share. Don't be fooled by the promise of tax cuts – that's how they will divide and conquer us. Say no to the myth that the private sector is "more efficient" and government is wasteful – just look at the financial mess left by banks and investment firms. Don't fall for the agenda of "law and order" – it merely protects the mighty from the many, threatening democracy.

Don't let them say immigrants are stealing our jobs and straining public services – that's just scapegoating. Don't let the smallish vision of big corporate interests take over our big bold dreams of an inclusive, just, and generous Ontario.

Social justice is better than social upheaval. *New Voices*, with all our readers, stand together to build a better world, for all. To this, we stand committed.

TAKE ACTION

Expand access to Community Health Centres Now
I need health care close to home for my family and my community
Ontario's Community Health Centres
Les centres de santé communautaire en Ontario
Community Health Centres (CHCs) and Aboriginal Health Access Centres (AHACs) provide high quality care and make our health care system more affordable and sustainable. This provincial election, they call on all political parties to commit to fully funding all CHCs announced by the Government of Ontario in 2005. They also call on to commit to giving 250,000 more Ontarians access to CHCs and AHACs by 2015.
This election sign the petition calling for expanded access to Ontario's Community Health Centres and Aboriginal Health Access Centres at http://www.ahc.org
UNPAID WAGES, UNPROTECTED WORKERS
Taking Action Against Wage Theft
Recommendations for Change
• Enforce Employment Standards in Ontario Workplaces
• Update Labour Laws to Protect All Workers
• Increase the Minimum Wage to Bring Workers Out of Poverty
• Equal Status and Protection for All Workers Regardless of Immigration Status
WORKERS' ACTION CENTRE
www.WorkersActionCentre.org
25 in 5: Network for Poverty Reduction
www.25in5.ca
A Call to Action on Poverty in Ontario
Ontarians are looking for leadership on:
• Income security programs that ensure basic needs are met and give people real opportunities to get ahead, with a firm commitment to ensuring the Social Assistance Review process proceeds;
• Paid work at a fair wage that accommodates disability, is equitably accessible, and provides a real pathway out of poverty;
• Social infrastructure that establishes a foundation for inclusive communities, including decent, affordable housing options, high quality affordable early learning and child care, a strong and equitable public education system, as well as vibrant community programs and affordable public transit;
• Targeted strategies that recognize the heightened risk in specific regions and neighbourhoods, and among such groups as people who have disabilities, racialized groups - both Aboriginal people and people of colour, women, lone-parent families, and newcomers.
As the October provincial election approaches, 25 in 5 calls on all Ontario political parties to make the reduction and eradication of poverty a key election issue and to clearly outline their commitment and concrete plans to tackle poverty in our province.
Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
The Commission is tasked with carrying out a comprehensive review, and providing specific recommendations and a concrete action plan for reforming the social assistance system to the government in June 2012.
Hearing from stakeholders and communities with a perspective on social assistance is an important part of the review.
They'd Like to Hear from You:
✓ Make a Comment
✓ Fill out the Workbook
✓ Send in a Submission
http://www.socialassistancereview.ca/wed-like-to-hear-from-you

In this issue of New Voices, internationally trained writers shed new light on the path to a brighter and BETTER Ontario. They invite us to move forward together, to realize the full potential of our diversity, for the good of all Ontarians. The choice is ours...

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