



Points of View on **BASIC INCOME GUARANTEE**

for Prince Edward Island

PEI Working Group for a Livable Income
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A BIG 2024 Breakthrough Is Possible



Marie Burge works with Cooper Institute, a member of: the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income since 2003; Coalition Canada basic income - revenu de base, founded in 2019; and Basic Income NOW, Atlantic Canada, organized in 2021.

PEI basic income demonstration program will benefit the whole province

Marie Burge

JAN

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The PEI Working Group for a Livable Income is beginning its 21st year as a community promoter of livable income for all PEI residents. Over the years the ever-growing number of community groups, willing politicians, economists, and the media voices, have become engaged in the basic income guarantee venture.

The public release on November 22, 2023, in Charlottetown of *A Proposal for a Guaranteed Basic Income Benefit in Prince Edward Island* gave people a new hope that basic income could actually happen. The proposal provided a clear, evidence-based framework for the PEI Government to support negotiations with the Federal Government on a province-wide Basic Income demonstration program. It is affordable and promises to eliminate poverty and to contribute to social and economic progress

for the entire population. All people will benefit from Guaranteed Basic Income.

Adequate income for all improves conditions in the province for everyone.

LEGISLATIVE MOTION

People in PEI who follow the guaranteed basic income process know that the next step is squarely in the hands of the PEI Government. It is essential for PEI to initiate and maintain discussions and negotiations with the Federal Government.

So, the people's most-asked, and perhaps most-skeptical, question in the past two months is: Why is nothing happening?

But some things are happening. On the political level, the Honourable Barb Ramsay, PEI Minister of Social Development and Seniors opened up a communication with her federal counterpart the Honourable Jenna Sudds, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. As well, MLA Sidney MacEwen presented motion #80 to the PEI Legislative Assembly, signed by Minister Ramsay, before the fall sitting closed. The motion strongly proposes Guaranteed Basic Income.

Across the country, a consensus is building that Canada needs Guaranteed Basic Income and that the country has the resources to make it happen. Moreover, it is becoming clearer that Prince Edward Island is considered an ideal

PEI is considered an ideal launching place for an eventual countrywide program.

launching place for an eventual countrywide program.

PETITIONING OTTAWA

Across Canada, under the lead of Coalition Canada basic income—revenu de base, promoters of the PEI Demonstration Program are gathering signed petitions for MPs to present in the House of Commons. To date, MPs who have agreed to present petitions represent Waterloo, Kitchener-Conestoga, Yukon, and Charlottetown.

The petition reads: "We the undersigned citizens and residents of Canada, call upon the Government of Canada to begin immediate negotiations with the Government of Prince Edward Island to develop and implement a Basic Income Guarantee demonstration program in the province of PEI that will be administered, monitored, and evaluated for at least five years."

Another petition in circulation adds the following "and to partner with other provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments who would like to implement basic income demonstration programs in their province or territory."

Back to PEI. The government of Prince Edward Island must be insistent in continuing its approach the federal government. The PEI Legislative Assembly has a duty to back this approach. And the everyday people of PEI, need to raise their voice and create the Government's political will to make a province-wide 5- to 7-year basic income demonstration program a reality for Prince Edward Island.

Poverty a Predictor of Health



Susan Hartley, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, an educator, and a member of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income.

Basic income would help restore crumbling PEI healthcare system

Susan Hartley

FEB

07

PEI's healthcare system is crumbling, the number of unhoused people is growing rapidly, and 1 in 4 islanders who are low income are children. It is clear that we need significant changes in our broader social system. We need change that supports better health outcomes for all of us and addresses the number one contributor to poor health: poverty. Guaranteed basic income is the most effective way to eliminate poverty and is the type of change we need to reverse inequalities in our communities.

In simpler words, and to quote a friend, "How do we fix our healthcare system? Have healthier people." To take this answer further, "How do we have healthier people? Tackle poverty."

BARRIERS TO WELLNESS

I am a member of the Working Group for a

If poverty disappears, the health effects of living in poverty will also disappear.

Livable Income—a group that has advocated for a guaranteed basic income for decades

—and a healthcare professional who has worked within the current system for over thirty years.

Early in my career as a psychologist I worked in an inpatient psychiatric unit for adolescents. The team of experts who treated them on a daily basis was extensive and expensive. Very quickly I realized that the vast majority—more than 80%—of the youth receiving this expensive inpatient health care had experienced significant barriers to wellness early in their lives: poverty, food insecurity, discrimination due to race or gender identity, abuse, family violence.

Indeed, I often tell my psychology students that in the over 30 years of practice the majority of my clients would not have had to seek mental health services if their basic needs, or their family's basic needs, had been met earlier in their lives.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The research on the relationship between poverty and poor health outcomes supports my decades of observation: poverty is the strongest predictor of poor mental and physical health.

Further, it demonstrates that if poverty disappears the health effects of living in poverty will also disappear. A Basic Income Guarantee

(BIG) is the opportunity that will eliminate poverty and increase mental and physical well-being for those who otherwise would be facing poverty. As well, having basic needs met actually protects health and increases the overall quality of life.

Not only does this make logical sense, it makes economic sense as the health-care costs related to poverty-induced ill health will be vastly reduced as will hospitalizations, and the overwhelming demand on our emergency departments, clinic visits, and outpatient care related to mental and physical health.

INVEST IN HEALTH

Without adequate investments in the health and well being of all Islanders the demand on our health care system will not decrease. PEI currently has the worst access to health care in Canada and a program such as Basic Income Guarantee could reverse that trend in the short, medium and long term.

If we have an opportunity to reduce the stress on our healthcare system and at the same time improve the health outcomes and quality of life for the 40% of people living below the poverty line in PEI—would we not take it? By implementing a BIG demonstration program, PEI has the opportunity to show the way forward to improving the health of all people living on the island.

I think we'd agree that this is a good and just idea.

No Job Protection for Musicians



Carlie Howell is a musician, educator, cultural worker, and member of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income. Photo by Marcela Boechat.

PEI would benefit if hard-working artists could access basic income guarantee

Carlie Howell

FEB

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In the realm of professional music making, a silent struggle permeates the lives of many talented individuals—we can't afford our careers in music.

I am a 41-year-old professional bassist, vocalist, arranger, composer, digital media artist, educator, community arts facilitator, and, most recently, harm-reduction worker. If it sounds like a lot, it's because it is.

Through 25 years of navigating a music career, I've averaged 80–100 hour work weeks practicing, composing, rehearsing, performing, teaching, marketing, grant writing and more. Many of my colleagues share similar stories, wearing multiple hats to sustain their primary career as artists. This is not a boast—many people across countless industries and income

brackets work long hours—it's a confrontation of the idea that basic income is a handout for those unwilling to work hard. It's one of many misconceptions that the PEI

Working Group for a Livable Income has been endeavouring to change in their 20+ years of advocacy.

DEFINITION OF WORTH

I've seen this stigma in my own community, amongst people who could benefit from this program. Our capitalist society and contemporary gig economy teach us that our hustle defines us, often equating our worth with our financial success. And so, as the cost of doing our jobs increases while our income sources shrink, we stay quiet and hustle harder than we can healthfully sustain.

In the mid 2010's, I experienced an acute mental health crisis; I was working too many jobs, and in several situations where the treatment was inappropriate, but couldn't afford to quit. Ultimately, I had to resign from everything to take an unpaid, unguaranteed mental health leave. I've seen many talented musicians step away from the arts as a result of similar uncertainty, people with powerful

The pandemic amplified how critical music is for our community and cultural wellbeing, while revealing just how vulnerable making music for a living really is.



stories to tell through their art, but for whom the risk is too great.

How can we quantify that risk? The 2016 census indicated that 52% of artists were self-employed, compared with only 12% of all Canadian workers. Census analysis found that the median income of musicians (\$17,900) was 59% lower than the national median income (\$43,500.)

SOCIAL SAFETY NET

I was attracted to PEI because of its thriving music scene, but also because of its progressive attitudes towards systemic change, made more attainable by its small population. I make better money per gig here than in Toronto, I have excellent band mates and bandleaders, and my mental health is served by a slower pace of life. But, like most freelance musicians, I have no HR department, no healthcare benefits, and no access to EI or job protections like parental or mental-health leave. The pandemic amplified how critical music is for our community and cultural wellbeing, while revealing just how vulnerable making music for a living really is.

We're not asking for a hand-out, we're asking for a social safety net so we don't have to leave music behind to put food on the table, or sacrifice our mental health to pay the rent. For musicians on this island, a Basic Income Guarantee offers so much more than a financial baseline—it could provide basic dignity, safety, and equity for all.

Offering Food for Thought



Lauren King operates Soleil's Farm in Bonshaw with their partner, Soleil Hutchinson. Lauren is a member of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income and the board of the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative.

Why PEI agriculture and farmers need a basic income guarantee

Lauren King

FEB

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As a 33-year-old farmer, I've watched my circle of farming peers dwindle in size over recent years. According to Statistics Canada, the average age of farm operators on the Island is 56. As many farmers approach retirement, our pool of young farmers is also shrinking. What's at stake? The future of a resilient local food system.

If you ask ten different farmers, you might get ten different answers to "what's the biggest challenge you're facing today?" While it might not be a traditional solution to challenges faced by farmers, a wide-reaching program that could have huge benefits for PEI's agriculture sector is a Basic Income Guarantee program (BIG). BIG would provide an income floor, with benefits that extend beyond the individual to

community-level impact.

CHALLENGING LANDSCAPE

A Basic Income Guarantee would support new farmers entering the field. The learning curve is steep: establishing markets and building systems while navigating a rapidly changing climate, while the cost of land and capital investments have skyrocketed. BIG would offer a safety net to allow new farmers to focus on business and skill development without their livelihood depending on being profitable immediately, in an industry with slim margins at the best of times.

Alleviating some financial stress could support the mental health of farmers. As farming becomes harder and riskier, we need increased support for new entrants. BIG could have a huge impact for new farmers finding their footing on a challenging landscape.

A Basic Income Guarantee would also benefit farm workers. Farm workers are typically employed seasonally with minimal benefits, making it challenging to expect returning employees. Farm workers are skilled, and having returning workers increases a farm's capacity. Farm workers are essential to our food system, and BIG would support seasonal workers who deserve a viable livelihood doing this essential work.

Basic income guarantee has the potential to strengthen our local food system.



VULNERABLE LOCATION

BIG has the potential to strengthen our local food system. Erratic weather, global supply chain issues, recalls, and increased fuel costs are all felt in bare shelves and price hikes at the grocery store. As an island that has had a bridge (and subsequent box stores) for less than 30 years, we know the importance of a strong local economy. Recent years have shown us just how vulnerable we are. We need a strong local food system now, and into the future.

To be sure, BIG shouldn't replace existing agricultural funding and supports, such as insurance or climate adaptation programs. The provincial and federal governments need to work together on implementation, but the proposal shows it is possible without middle-income earners bearing the cost.

As a farmer I'm concerned. I've watched in recent years as farmer friends change careers, and not because they no longer want to farm. Instead, it's because the challenges have become too much, and work-life balance has felt impossible. How many farmers do you know who work off-farm in order to make ends meet?

A Basic Income Guarantee on PEI would allow many farmers to give farming their full attention. And with the problem solving that's required to keep up with current challenges, it definitely needs our full attention.

Eliminating Poverty Is Possible



Trish Altass is a member of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income, research coordinator with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, partner at Leading Impact Consulting Inc., sessional instructor at UPEI, and a former Member of the Legislative Assembly of PEI.

A basic income guarantee implemented in PEI would benefit everyone

Trish Altass

FEB

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Poverty makes people sick. This reality not only puts additional strain on the individual and on our already precarious healthcare system, but makes it more difficult for those experiencing poverty to thrive and sustain employment in a competitive labour market. Anyone who has experienced the dread of not knowing if you will be able to pay your rent or afford to put food on the table for your family, knows the absolute stress and harm this causes.

Being able to consistently meet one's basic needs is essential for maintaining mental and physical health and well being. Even if you have not personally experienced living in poverty, we can all imagine how difficult it would be to maintain a job when you can't afford comfortable shoes, or healthy food, or repairs

on your car to get there.

UPGRADED SKILLS

A guaranteed basic income would provide an unconditional income-tested cash transfer to adults living in families with income under a certain threshold. In previous demonstrations of basic income, such as the Mincome program in Manitoba in the 1970s and the recent but short-lived Ontario basic income pilot, not only did most people continue to work for pay, but many took the opportunity to go back to school, retrain, and improve their future life chances. In the evolving knowledge-based creative economy where we are also seeing an increased need for skilled workers in construction and trades, creating a foundation from which more people can gain needed credentials is a benefit not only for individuals and families, but for our economy and society.

CYCLE OF POVERTY

But can we afford a guaranteed basic income? The recently released report “A Proposal for a Basic Income Benefit for Prince Edward Island” shows that we can. This report uses a new approach by applying the census family which decreases the overall program cost by almost 40% while continuing to effectively reach those living in poverty. Additionally, a significant

Poverty is not simply an individual trouble, but a far-reaching societal issue that has negative repercussions for everyone.



amount of public funding and resources are currently allocated to social assistance administration focused on first identifying the deserving from the not-deserving poor, and then monitoring those deemed deserving to ensure they continue to be “deserving” of support. This means-tested approach traps people in a cycle of poverty by providing low-level supports that keep people below the poverty line, and creates disincentives to work for pay by simultaneously creating fear that one could lose what little support they have access to at any moment.


REDUCED COSTS

A basic income simplifies access by creating a floor below which nobody can fall. Administering a basic income through our taxation system would drastically reduce costs while supporting our skilled and caring public service to work to their full potential and focus on helping people succeed and live well.


Poverty is not simply an individual trouble, but a far-reaching societal issue that has negative repercussions for everyone. We must stop blaming and shaming those experiencing poverty and recognize that we will all be better off when everyone can live with basic health and dignity. The elimination of poverty is possible.

A guaranteed basic income is the way forward, and PEI is the best place to start with a 5 to 7 year demonstration project that will involve a rigorous evaluation process from day one.

PEI Working Group for a Livable Income

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A basic income guarantee for PEI would affect healthcare, artists, agriculture, and everyone. And a basic income guarantee for PEI is possible!

This series of five commentaries by members of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income was published in January and February 2024 in the Charlottetown *Guardian*.

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