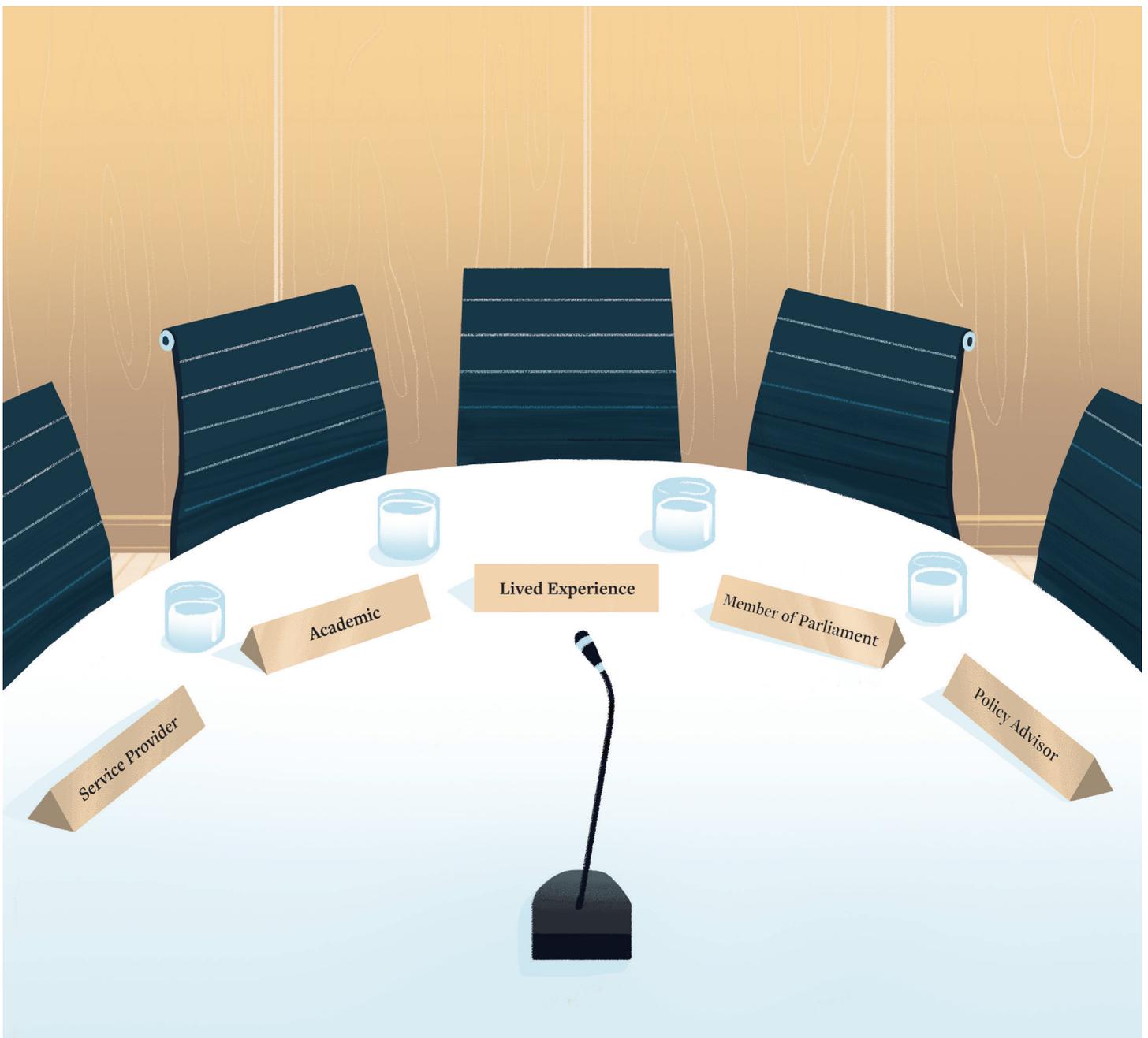


# Voice of Experience

OCTOBER 2019

Engaging people with lived experience of poverty in consultations

by John Stapleton and Bee Lee Soh



## Metcalf Foundation

The Metcalf Foundation helps Canadians imagine and build a just, healthy, and creative society by supporting dynamic leaders who are strengthening their communities, nurturing innovative approaches to persistent problems, and encouraging dialogue and learning to inform action.

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## John Stapleton

**John Stapleton** is a Toronto-based social policy analyst who has published over 65 articles and studies following a career as an Ontario public servant. He teaches public policy and is a Commissioner with the Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario and a volunteer with West Neighbourhood House and WoodGreen Community Services. He is past chair of the Board of West Scarborough Community Legal Services and is a member of the expert panel on income security for The Council of Aging of Ottawa.

## Bee Lee Soh

**Bee Lee Soh** is an anti-poverty activist and community volunteer. She is a member of the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Lived Experience Advisory Group and served on the federal government's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty – providing expertise to the first National Poverty Reduction Strategy. In 2016 she received the Samara Everyday Political Citizen finalist award and in 2017 was awarded the Canada 150 Medal.

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# PART ONE

## INTRODUCTION

On August 21, 2018, the Government of Canada released “Opportunity for All – Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy.” In his letter of transmission to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development, the Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos, said:

We heard from members of my advisory committee, drawn from Canada’s incredible range of social, cultural and economic backgrounds. We heard from academics and researchers. We heard from people working on the front lines of tackling poverty. Most importantly, we heard from Canadians with lived experiences of poverty.<sup>1</sup>

As the Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos acknowledges, the engagement of Canadians with lived experiences<sup>2</sup> of poverty in government consultations on poverty reduction is critical to these consultations. But as hard as governments work to try to include people living in poverty as full participating members in their consultation processes, there are many barriers that continue to impede their participation.

This paper explores what these barriers and impediments are. The inspiration for writing this paper came from my experience of working with Bee Lee Soh on the federal government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty. Bee Lee Soh is the author of Part Two of this paper, which contains a first-hand account and reflection of her experience participating on the federal government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty. In Part Three and Part Four I draw upon Bee Lee Soh’s experience to suggest ways in which government entities, wanting to conduct effective consultations with people with lived experience of poverty, can address barriers to participation.

In August 2017, Bee Lee Soh was named to the federal government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty as a designated person with lived experience of poverty. She was chosen from over 400 people who submitted

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/strategy.html#h2.2>

<sup>2</sup> We use the term lived experience(s) of poverty to refer to individuals who are either currently living in poverty, such as Bee Lee Soh, or who have past experience of living in of poverty.

This report...is intended to illustrate how many requirements of participation, including access to both goods and services, are increasingly unavailable to people living in poverty.

...only people with lived experience of poverty...can accurately anticipate whether a particular intervention to reduce poverty will actually achieve its intended purpose. They are also the experts in *unintended* consequences of poverty interventions.

applications. She was endorsed by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office at the City of Toronto to sit on the committee.

This report is not meant to be critical of government policies or procedures that inadvertently act as barriers to participation. Rather, it is intended to illustrate how many requirements of participation, including access to both goods and services, are increasingly unavailable to people living in poverty. With input from Bee Lee Soh, I have organized the issues — faced by individuals living in poverty when engaged by governments in consultations — into five thematic categories.

Governments value participants with lived experiences of poverty in consultations as these individuals have expertise in the myriad of challenges and the intricate details of how daily life is lived when one does not have the resources to fully participate in all aspects of community life. Moreover, they have deep insights, not available to program experts, as to how recommendations for reform will actually “play out” in their lives once implemented. Put succinctly, only people with lived experience of poverty, such as Bee Lee Soh, can accurately anticipate whether a particular intervention to reduce poverty will actually achieve its intended purpose. They are also the experts in *unintended* consequences of poverty interventions.

We hope that this report will provide practical considerations for a wide audience who are interested in conducting, or are involved with, consultative processes involving people living in poverty. Ultimately, we hope it will be a valuable resource to various groups who want to engage the full participation of people with lived experience.

### **Bee Lee Soh**

Bee Lee Soh is an anti-poverty activist who works tirelessly for her community as well as the community at large. She lives in northern Scarborough where she is an active community volunteer. Her income is less than \$10,000 a year, which is less than half of any recognized poverty measure.

Bee Lee is a member of the City of Toronto’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Lived Experience Advisory Group and served on the federal government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty. In 2016 she received the Samara Everyday Political Citizen finalist award and in 2017 was awarded the Canada 150 Medal.

She is an active member of many community networks including: People with Lived Experience caucus of the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness, Toronto Newcomer Council, Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy Resident Advisory Group, Toronto Food Policy Council, Scarborough Food Network, Commitment TO Community (C2C), Scarborough Civic Action Network, Scarborough Poverty Animator Network, Power in Community: Fighting for Affordable Homes,

Voices of Scarborough Advisory Group, Social Assistance Coalition of Scarborough, Steeles-L'Amoreaux Strength in Partnership (SSIP), Workers Action Centre, Friends of Regent Park, and Friends Helping People End Poverty. Bee Lee is also actively involved in TTCriders, Fair Fare Coalition, and Scarborough Transit Action.

Bee Lee is a frequent speaker at rallies, town halls, forums, on panels, and at community city budget events. Bee Lee mobilizes and mentors other residents to stand up and advocate for themselves and their communities. She is frequently seen deputing at City Hall about affordable housing issues related to high market rents; long waiting lists for social housing; the regulating and licensing of rooming houses; transit issues including affordability, accessibility, and better services in the inner suburbs; and issues of access and equity for affordable nutritious food. Housing, transit, and food security are her top three priorities.

## PART TWO

# PARTICIPATING ON THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON POVERTY

*By Bee Lee Soh*

### The nomination process

I knew about the federal government's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty through the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) of the City of Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy Office. The community development officer in charge of the LEAG emailed us that the federal government had a call-out for nominations to the advisory committee.

There were many criteria for applying to the Ministerial Advisory Committee: you have to be a citizen, be able to meet a one-year commitment, be able to advocate, and be really experienced on poverty issues.

Although I knew about the nominations call-out, I took no action. I thought: who am I to apply to the government advisory committee? "Advisory" must be for the "big shot" who knows the issues well. Not for me who is just starting to get involved and to understand what a poverty reduction strategy is! But the call-out kept coming into my mind, and near the application deadline I decided to email the LEAG community development officer (CDO).

I emailed the CDO and cc'd the manager of the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy Office and asked if the City can nominate somebody who's part of the LEAG. The CDO emailed me back and said yes, so I emailed and asked the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office to nominate me.

There were four people in the LEAG who asked City staff to recommend and nominate them. The CDO scheduled us to meet for an interview because staff didn't know much about our individual experiences. The CDO was not able to do my interview because she was busy interviewing another LEAG member so I was interviewed by the student intern.

After the interview the CDO was supposed to write my nomination letter but she got too busy, so the manager of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office took over and wrote it. I didn't know until later that I had actually been nominated by the manager.

At the end of March, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty nomination application came to a close. I was bombarded by everybody asking me whether I was selected. I said to each of them, I wish I knew the answer but I have no idea, I haven't heard anything from the government.

It was a long two months silence after the nomination application deadline.

## The selection process

### The federal government contacts nominees

One Friday at the beginning of June, I received an email from Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) asking me to provide my home address. When I saw the email, I thought maybe they needed to see home addresses to make sure candidates are spread from across the country, and not all from the same province or city. So I emailed them my home address. But as soon as I emailed them, I received another email asking for my phone number.

When I saw the request for my phone number, I did not have time to respond because it was 5 o'clock and I had to shut down the community centre computer. Unfortunately, the community centre is closed on weekends so I had no access to a computer until Monday. But on Monday, before I even emailed them, I saw another email in my inbox asking me again to provide my phone number. I replied and told them: "I do not have a phone. I am not able to own a phone and pay the bill!" I also told them that the best way of communicating with me is by email, but to give me some time to reply because I don't have a home computer.

I suggested that if they need to talk to me in person, the best way would be to provide me a toll-free number so I can make an outgoing phone call from the drop-in centre. (Later I found out that even if I make a 1-800 number call from the drop-in centre the call will not go through. It is blocked because the phone can't recognize if it's toll-free or long distance.)

They replied back and said that asking for a phone number is just part of the assessment procedure to make sure they have up-to-date contact information. If email is the best way to communicate with me, then they will use email. They also said that unfortunately ESDC cannot supply toll-free numbers for calling them.

After that email exchange, I didn't hear back. It was totally silent for some time.

Suddenly one day I received an email from my nominator saying: "Congratulations! They are looking for your number." I was puzzled with the word "congratulations." My mind was thinking: does this mean I was selected?

"I replied and told them: 'I do not have a phone. I am not able to own a phone and pay the bill!'"

Then the next day I saw another email from my second nominator saying: “I got a call from the government and they are looking for you and want your phone number so they can contact you.” In her email she told me to get in touch with the government but she didn’t give me a contact number. She also suggested that I get in touch with her.

### **Issues with outgoing long-distance calls**

“...I got an email from the ESDC that said:... ‘We are emailing this because we cannot get ahold of you. Are you accepting this offer?...’ And again they asked me to give them my phone number so they can contact me.”

I called the second nominator but she wasn’t in the office. I decided to email her that I got her message. It took me two days to finally get ahold of her. She said she had the government number but it was long distance. She offered to call for me but the problem was she hardly ever makes long-distance calls, so first she needed to find the code for a long-distance call. I told her that I’d wait, but by the end of the day she still couldn’t find the code.

Before I left the community centre, after waiting hours for the second nominator to find the long-distance code, I got an email from the ESDC that cc’d the manager of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office. It was July 28 — my birthday. The email (the greatest birthday gift I ever received!) said: “Congratulations. You are selected. This email is to inform you your nomination for membership to Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty was successful. We are emailing this because we cannot get ahold of you. Are you accepting this offer? Please confirm as soon as possible if you are still interested in being a member of the Committee.” And again they asked me to give them my phone number so they can contact me.

I replied back and said: “Thank you very much for selecting me. Yes. I accept this offer to be a member of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty.” And I also mentioned again that I don’t have a phone or a phone number!

### **Issues with incoming long-distance calls**

Near the end of August, ESDC emailed me and asked me to give them a phone number so they could call me because they needed to explain the contract to me on the phone. They wanted to answer any questions I had and make sure I understood the contract. I told them I don’t have a phone number to give them. The drop-in phone number for client use is only to make outbound local calls, not incoming calls. I asked them to email me the contract. I said I would look at it and if I had any questions I would email them back for clarification. They accepted this approach to email the contract because there was no other choice.

They sent me a contract to review and sign. The contract included detailed terms and conditions of participation. It was very long with a lot of “big” words which for me were hard to understand. Thankfully, a thoughtful staff member sent me another email with a simplified version and I was able to understand and sign back the contract.

### Privacy concerns regarding email documentation

After I signed the contract, they emailed again and said they needed my Social Insurance Number (SIN) but I'm not to email it for security reasons. They wanted me to call them and tell them my SIN. I went to the community drop-in centre and asked a staff person if I can make a long-distance call to the government using her phone. I explained that the government asked me to send my SIN by phone, not email, for security reasons. I told her: "This is very important. I need to make this call for them to process the contract." She said: "Talk to me tomorrow." I went back the next day and she dialed the number for me.

### Preparing to participate and travelling to Ottawa

Near the end of September they finally emailed that we were going to have our first in-person committee meeting. The ESDC assured me that no financial burden would be placed on me that could prevent participation. Committee staff said they would handle all the accommodation and travel arrangements, book the airplane ticket and hotel, and also provide me some advance cash for meals and taxis. In preparation, there was a lot of paper work including many forms to fill out and send back and forth.

I really appreciated the committee staff for all the help they provided. Without their help it would have been very hard for me to fully participate.

### In Ottawa

The first in-person meeting was three days long with a fully packed agenda. The first day was the inaugural meeting of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty. We learned about the role of the committee, the poverty reduction strategy engagement process, and developing a Canadian poverty reduction strategy. There was also a photo session.

Following the first day there was a documentary film screening in the evening. The film, titled *Us and Them*, by filmmaker Krista Loughton, was on poverty and homelessness. I was very moved by the film. The haunting experience of homelessness gripped me and I couldn't control myself as my voice choked and my eyes filled with tears when I echoed what I saw in the film and shared my own homelessness experiences. After the film screening, Minister Duclos came to me and hugged and thanked me for sharing my experiences.

The second day was a full day of workshops. It featured a series of presentations by academics and researchers from across Canada and abroad to discuss poverty with a specific focus on data, indicators, and gaps as they relate to the federal landscape. The topics of discussion included basic needs,

"I really appreciated the committee staff for all the help they provided. Without their help it would have been very hard for me to fully participate."

social inclusion, equality of opportunity, setting poverty reduction targets, and Canada's income security system.

The third day was a national poverty conference. It brought together a multidisciplinary group of individuals and organizations who have supported efforts to date towards developing a Canadian poverty reduction strategy.

Staff proposed I take on the voluntary role of facilitator for a breakout session titled Reporting on Results. It focussed on how the government can ensure open transparency in its efforts to reduce poverty. It also addressed how to keep Canadians updated on the implementation, and on lessons learned and progress made towards overall targets and indicators. I was supported by staff who helped guide the discussion. I learned a lot through this opportunity to facilitate, and I gained a great deal of knowledge from the participants.

### **Reflections on challenges to participation**

Looking back at my engagement with the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty — from the nomination call-out to when I fulfilled my role as a member — I encountered many challenges.

#### **Issues of not having a phone**

When I joined the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty, I did not have a phone. It wasn't a problem as I am not a phone talker and I hardly make calls except to Ontario Works caseworkers or emergency calls.

But in today's fast-paced, high-tech world, people want answers to questions in a twinkle of an eye. And with the advancement of technology, tools like a cell phone are easily accessible. People take it for granted that everyone has either a landline or a cell phone. Unfortunately, I have neither. To some a cell phone is a basic necessity, but for me it is a luxury. When ESDC selected me to be a member of the committee and tried to communicate with me by phone, they had no way to reach me.

"To some a cell phone is a basic necessity, but for me it is a luxury."

#### **Difficulties with long-distance calls**

I asked the ESDC office for a toll-free number so I could communicate with them if needed, but they cannot supply toll-free numbers. They said they can call me if I provide them with a phone number. But I don't have a phone number to give them unless I trouble others to use their phones. It became a challenge when they asked me to provide my SIN by phone. I literally had to "plead" with staff to make the call for me — something I dislike to do!

#### **Challenge of timelines without having a computer**

It is a constant struggle to respond to email quickly without owning a computer. When the government sends an email, they expected a reply within a day or so.

Computers at community centres, drop-ins, and libraries have restrictions around allocation time, availability, and hours of operation. With meetings and travel time usually occupying most of my day, it is a challenge for me to check email every day and respond.

Although committee staff give advance notice, things often change due to the minister's schedule. Emails are often last minute and need immediate response.

Committee staff are very patient and do their best to accommodate me. I always feel sorry when I cannot respond to their emails and requests in a timely manner and speed up the process.

### **Accessing email on public computers**

At the drop-in centre there is a sign-up sheet for the computers, but most people don't sign up. They just sit down whenever they see an empty chair. If you have to get up to make a phone call or go to washroom in the middle of your session, before you even take two steps someone has already taken your computer. If you say: "It's my time slot. I haven't finished." They just ignore you. They might mess up your email or even pull out your USB stick and throw it on the floor. When I try to fight for my right to continue using the computer, staff are afraid of homeless people yelling and swearing at them, so they will often blame me. I had to stop using the computer at the drop-in center when the blaming and accusing became so ridiculous. I am tired of fighting every time I use their computers.

The library is more peaceful but there's a shorter 30-minute time limit. There are a lot of procedures for using library computers, so by the time I get to my email account, 10 minutes have gone by. I only have 15 minutes or so left to check and reply to email. The good thing about the library is that it closes at 8:30 p.m., so it's easier for me to access after daytime meetings. But unless I'm passing by, it's \$6 just to travel to check my email.

After much searching, I found a community centre that is peaceful and there is no time limit for using the computers unless there is a workshop scheduled. I don't mind walking 30 minutes to get there if I can have peace and get work done. Unfortunately, the centre closes at 5:00 p.m. and on weekends.

### **Logistics of conference calls**

After the first in-person meeting, the committee staff emailed us that there was going to be a conference call in mid-October. To avoid unnecessary disruption they insisted that we use a wired landline, not a cell phone, as the quality of the sound on a cell phone is often not as good as a landline phone.

As I don't have a phone, the staff were very thoughtful in arranging for me to use the phone at the Service Canada office in Scarborough. It only takes me one bus to get there but I am not always in Scarborough. I have meetings all across Toronto, mostly downtown. I replied back that if I'm close to Scarborough I will

go to Service Canada. If I have a meeting close to downtown, then I will go to City Hall. But at City Hall I need to know ahead of time so I can make arrangements with staff to use the phone at the poverty reduction strategy office.

### **Evening conference calls create barriers**

One time they called a teleconference call for 8:00 p.m. It was last minute as they sent the email notice out at 3:30 p.m., and asked us to RSVP by 6:00 p.m.

"It is very misleading as Wi-Fi is only available and free if you are a customer. You have to buy something in order to get the password."

It happened that I dropped by the library on my way home that day and saw the email at 6:30 p.m. I thought, Oh my God! How am I going to get a connection? Service Canada is closed. City Hall is closed. I cannot use the library phone to make a long-distance call. Even if I could use the library's phone, I wouldn't be able to finish the call as the library closes at 8:30 p.m. So I emailed them back to say that the conference call is so last minute, I don't think I can make it. They replied and said: "We realize it is last minute. Don't worry, a few of the committee members cannot make it either. We'll brief you after the meeting."

Late times for telephone conference calls are a problem. Except for certain evenings at the library, without a landline phone or cell phone, there is no way for me to have teleconference calls in the evenings.

### **Wi-Fi restrictions**

John Stapleton was having hard time reaching me, so in early November he gave me a cell phone to use for local calls and texts. The phone has a basic phone plan, thus no long-distance calls and no data plan features. Without a data plan I need to go to places that have Wi-Fi to check and reply to emails.

Even so, it is better to have a phone so the ESDC office can call me by phone, and I can participate in evening teleconference calls. I can also check my email at night, although Wi-Fi is often disconnected at my place due to the high volume of usage from many tenants and the landlord.

Not many places have Wi-Fi, though many coffee shops have signs saying: "free Wi-Fi here." It is very misleading as Wi-Fi is only available and free if you are a customer. You have to buy something in order to get the password. Once I went to a Tim Hortons with a "free Wi-Fi here" sign. I urgently needed to retrieve a phone number from an email, but I couldn't get Internet connection without buying something. A phone with some data is necessary for emergency use and to respond to last minute urgent requests.

### **Challenges to receive mail**

I used to have all my mail delivered to my living address. But because I move so often, I no longer use my living address for mail because landlords always throw out my mail after I move out. Even when I'm living at the address, mail gets

misplaced, goes missing, or is thrown out by other tenants or the landlord. (One time when I went to pay my rent, I saw my Ontario Works letter had been opened and thrown in the landlord's waste bin).

However, Ontario Works (OW) will only use a current living address. Every month I get at least two letters and every three months I get a scheduled appointment letter to see a caseworker for assessment. I was cut off OW for two years because I didn't receive the scheduled appointment letter so I did not go to see the caseworker. After I was cut off from OW, I asked the landlord if he could check if the letter was misplaced. He just yelled at me and said: "If you are not happy, move out. Why do I have to keep your letter?" And that was the end of the conversation. He didn't even want to talk to me.

For a while, I didn't have a mailing address. Then, when I was at a drop-in centre tax clinic filing my income tax return I told the tax filer I am thinking of moving and I don't want my tax refund sent to my living address. She told me that I can use the drop-in address as my mailing address for my income tax refund. Since then the drop-in address has been my mailing address.

However, too many people use the drop-in as their mailing address. Sometimes the reception or staff mix up the mail. One time the manager gave me someone else's mail. I saw it was not my name and gave it back to her. Sometimes mail is misplaced. Once I didn't get my cheque from the advisory committee. It just went missing! Thankfully staff were able to issue me another cheque.

"Even when I'm living at the address, mail gets misplaced, goes missing, or is thrown out by other tenants or the landlord."

### **Need for a credit card**

I hardly ever travel or stay in a hotel, so I didn't know there is an incidental charge applied during check-in. My first two trips to Ottawa were fine. But the third time the front desk reception asked me for a credit card. I told her I don't have a credit card, but she insisted that she need my credit card for hotel check-in. She would not let me check-in without one even though the room was prepaid. When I asked why I hadn't been asked for a credit card the last two times, she said they always ask, it is procedure.

Fortunately, John was there and I was able to use his credit card. The advisory committee staff had already settled with the hotel about the incidental charge, but it is possible the worker was not informed about this.

In this high-efficiency world, almost every transaction uses a piece of plastic—debit card, credit card, presto card, gift card, grocery card, award point card ... and on and on. Maybe it's time for me to get a credit card?!

### **The value of lived experience for poverty reduction strategies**

It is good to have academics, researchers, and policy makers — they have the theory and understand policy. But a person who has first-hand knowledge and

“Only someone who has gone through poverty knows what will work or not work.”

experience of poverty knows how to make policies sounder and more applicable. They have a deeper understanding of problems faced, systemic barriers, and what needs to be done to address them. Only someone who has gone through poverty knows what will work or not work. They can help policy makers avoid unintended consequences that can arise from their proposals.

Evidence shows that policy models that involve those with lived experience and prioritize their needs, are typically the most sustainable and scalable.

Those with lived experience should not be seen as service recipients, objects of policy-making, or research subjects. I strongly believe involving and engaging those with lived experience is the only way forward to needed and long overdue transparent, workable, and transformative decision-making. Engaging those with lived experience is a powerful tool to tackle the root causes of poverty, come up with workable solutions, and prevent others from falling through the cracks into poverty.

### **What I enjoyed about being on the advisory committee**

What I enjoyed the most is the fellowship of my colleagues, Minister Duclos, and the advisory committee staff. Because work is work right? But that friendship is something you cannot buy. I remember the time we spoke relentlessly to get our points heard. Together we worked so hard to get the “masterpiece” of our final recommendations to the minister. We talked about serious stuff but we also talked about lighter things, and we joked during break time. Most of all, the caring that was shown to make sure I was able to participate — that’s something I will always be grateful for and remember in my heart!

“Those with lived experience should not be seen as service recipients, objects of policy-making, or research subjects.”

### **Contributions I was able to make**

One contribution I was able to make was to suggest that everybody who works should get the WITB refund, not only those with a working income of \$3,000 or more. I think everybody who works should be receiving something back — big or small. Many people with low-incomes — especially those who are working precarious, seasonal, or on-call jobs — don’t earn \$3,000. They would have to work many hours at minimum wage to get to \$3,000. For those workers, getting a few dollars back is better than nothing as everything adds up.

I also suggested single individuals should receive a higher rate than other people with the WITB. When it comes to benefits, it is always the same group of people: seniors, disabled, children, single parents, and families. There is nothing for singles. Yet it costs more for a single individual to live. They pay more in rent, food, transportation. It is good to know that my advocacy has helped ensure an increased WITB rate for single individuals.

I also recommended the auto enrolment of income tax returns, without filing, for those who are on social assistance. The CRA has all our records — SIN,

address, how much rent we pay, the amount of money we earn. Everything is recorded through Toronto Employment & Social Services. Many social assistance recipients do not file income tax returns, especially those who don't work and have no T4 slips. Without a T4 slip we don't think about or remember that it's time to file an income tax return. And for those on the street, they are thinking about where to get food, where to go sleep, and for women safety at night is what's on their minds. Auto enrolment, without filing an income tax return, means everyone can get a refund of at least a few hundred dollars.

I also fought for the housing allowance for those who are precariously housed, or those who are experiencing bad conditions in rooming houses. Especially single individuals who are at risk of homelessness — this group is the most neglected. When it comes to the housing allowance, all three levels of government think about those who are homeless or in shelters and provide a housing allowance to get them housed. But they seldom think about those who have been housed but are living in bad conditions and need support from the government to pay market rents and to prevent them from becoming homeless again. Through my advocacy, I am pleased to know that an allowance for those who are precarious housed is currently under consideration.

When thinking about contributions I am able to make, I realize how much I learn too. I received more than I contributed. I learned so much from the experts: my colleagues, the minister, and the committee staff. Their passion has stirred me up to advocate more and to leave a legacy of advocacy in my life!

For me, being on the advisory committee was not just a way to share my perspectives or experiences, but also a way to learn and grow in my own work by collaborating with others in the same space. Thank you so much for the golden opportunity and a year of invaluable learning together!

### **My hope and vision for the national poverty reduction strategy**

My hope is that the government won't just talk the talk, but will really implement and do something for the poor that helps get everybody out of poverty. It doesn't have to be too high a level to begin, but just out of that basic deep level of poverty first, then to the next level, and then another level until poverty is reduced and eventually eliminated.

My vision is that the government will continue to involve and engage the lived experience as a powerful tool to tackle the root causes of poverty and come up with workable solutions. A national poverty reduction strategy needs to help those affected while preventing others from falling through the cracks into poverty. By moving from reduction to elimination of poverty, eventually Canada will be a prosperous country without poverty! Canada can be the great example for the world to follow.

## PART THREE

### BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

But it is a daily reality that most people living in poverty cannot afford the rites of digital passage in Canada.

Bee Lee Soh’s experiences are incomprehensible for anyone who has a smartphone, a computer, a data plan, a transit card, a debit card, and a credit card. These six items are minimal rites of passage in modern Canadian society. To many of us, it is inconceivable not to have them.

Nevertheless, none of them are cheap and many lower income people are routinely turned down for all of them. In many ways, the financial noose is tightening. In some circumstances credit cards are mandatory. For example, cash is no longer acceptable on airlines or hotel counters.

In 2019, a telephone number is like an address — an indispensable form of identification. This explains why Bee Lee was asked so many times for her phone number. It is the principal “touch point” of most computerized databases. If you don’t have one, they simply cannot find out where you are. Not having a data plan is a social curiosity. Not having access to a computer seems unimaginable.

But it is a daily reality that most people living in poverty cannot afford the rites of digital passage in Canada. The reality is that staying in touch with the mainstream depends on access to retail credit. And qualifying for retail credit costs money that low-income people do not possess. In a survey conducted by ACORN Canada, 58.9% of respondents revealed that they have to reallocate money budgeted for food, recreation, and rent, in order to afford home access to the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

There are five principal barriers that Bee Lee and others in her situation face when participating in engagement processes.

#### 1. Low-income social infrastructure provides limited assistance

Low-income infrastructure (community centres, drop-ins, libraries and shelters) in the City of Toronto, and elsewhere, provide safe places to access resources such as food, advice, transportation assistance, meeting space, services, and in some instances, temporary accommodation. They also provide basic access to computers, Internet, and local telephone service. After experiencing difficulties in receiving documents sent by post, a local community agency agreed to receive and save mail sent to Bee Lee.

<sup>3</sup> [https://acorncanada.org/sites/default/files/Internet%20for%20All%20report\\_0.pdf](https://acorncanada.org/sites/default/files/Internet%20for%20All%20report_0.pdf)

However, all of these community resources are not intended for the kind of uses needed by low-income people who are involved in consultations with governments. Basic telephone access is restrictive making 1-800 conference calls and ongoing long distance contact impossible. Time limits are placed on computer availability. Chronically older software in agencies and libraries and difficulties in saving information to a personal account or a USB stick make it challenging for someone to participate in long distance or conference call meetings with government.

## **2. The digital divide**

The second barrier is the digital divide between Canada's mainstream and the availability of Internet and communication technology to low-income communities. This divide leads to a serious lack of access among the poor to negotiate both the hardware and software required for basic connections to the digital world. For example, Bee Lee was not able become a member of GCollab — a Government of Canada collaboration platform that allowed committee members to post papers and exchange ideas.

## **3. The hostile world of financial services**

The third barrier is lack of access to basic banking services and to a modest level of retail credit. The lack of availability of financial services for Bee Lee goes much further than accessing money when needed. Basic financial services have become increasingly important in establishing identity (bank and credit cards) and securing accommodation with security deposit guarantees normally provided through access to retail credit. For example, even when hotel rooms are pre-paid by government and the security deposit is guaranteed, hotel operators still insist on being supplied with a credit card in order to issue a room key.

## **4. The problem of inappropriate and insecure housing**

Bee Lee lives in an illegal rooming house where landlords routinely hide the identity of their properties as rooming houses to the wider community while exerting extraordinary control over the lives of their tenants. Landlords often do not report all their rental income to the Canada Revenue Agency as it could be subject to taxation. Similarly, they are not inclined to make physical modifications to these houses even though it would make them safer, as making physical changes is often costly. They sometimes do not identify or list their tenants on Canada's national census.

Accordingly, any sign of Bee Lee's tenancy is a problem for the landlord. This includes the installation of landline telephones, receiving mail, or the presence of visitors or callers. This means that the normal use of her home address to communicate, build social capital, and to receive goods and services is not

permitted. Immediate eviction for non-compliance is the norm. All financial transactions (including rent) are paid in the form of cash.

## 5. Practical costs of respectful participation

When Bee Lee began her consultation role, she did not own business attire and had no travel accessories such as a suitcase or toiletry bag. She did not have a smart phone, a laptop, a voice or text plan, a data plan, a credit card, or a reliable address.

The model for reimbursement in place at the federal government level is typical of most reimbursement models. It assumes that Canadians serving on advisory committees either possess or have access to a suite of eleven resources.

Table 1  
Eleven Resources Required to Participate  
in Consultation Processes

GOODS OR SERVICES	MINIMUM COST
<b>Monthly cost items</b>	
1. A smart phone plan	\$40
2. A landline telephone	\$40
3. A data plan (internet access)	\$50
4. A reliable address	\$250 higher than a rooming house <sup>4</sup>
5. A transit pass	\$146.25
Monthly cost increment	\$526.25 or \$6,315 a year
<b>One-time costs</b>	
6. Clothing for business occasions	\$150 (shirt, pants, shoes, jacket)
7. Travel accessories (e.g. a suitcase)	\$50
8. A basic printer/scanner	\$100
9. Used laptop	\$300
One-time cost to begin a consultation	\$600
Total cost to participate in a one-year consultation process	\$6,915 for one year
<b>No-cost items that require retail credit</b>	
10. A credit card	Requires retail credit worthiness
11. A reliable (working) bank account at a bank or credit union	Requires retail credit worthiness

<sup>4</sup> Typical rental for a room in a rooming house is \$450 a month in Scarborough, Ontario. Minimum cost for a very low-cost apartment rental is \$700.

When Bee Lee began her work as an advisor to the federal government, she had none of these eleven resources to which most Canadians have reasonable access. More significantly, there is no provision for government to pay for any of these items or assist with establishing retail credit guarantees.

Put another way, the federal government does not typically pay for or assist with any of these resources. Without the informal assistance Bee Lee received from me and others, it would have been difficult for her to meaningfully participate in the federal advisory group.

## PART FOUR

### CONCLUSION

Government members and their staff who devise and implement policies for the poor are almost never poor themselves. They do not live and work in the same world as those in poverty.

#### The government's dilemma

Governments are notorious for implementing policies that work in theory but not in practice. There is no situation where this is truer than with people living in poverty. Government members and their staff who devise and implement policies for the poor are almost never poor themselves. They do not live and work in the same world as those in poverty. It is only when governments are prepared to listen to people with lived experiences of poverty that they can come to understand whether new policies will work “on the ground.”

It is an interesting dilemma as most people in government know and appreciate the cost of a smartphone and a data plan, and realize that someone who is homeless or receiving social assistance cannot afford these costs. But they may not know the minimum cost of secure accommodation and they may not know that libraries and community hubs restrict access to long distance calls and online computer equipment. They may not realize that a low-income person may not have luggage, a bank account, or access to retail credit through a credit card.

The everyday items and conveniences that most of us take for granted as part of our daily lives, like smart phones and credit cards, are accoutrements that we would never dream of doing without. We also have little idea of the problems we would face if we did not have them. For example, few would contemplate that not having a credit card could result in us having no place to stay on a winter's night.

Governments may not wish to address the five barriers or arrange to pay for the eleven resources to which poor people do not have access, because they want to ensure that all citizens are treated in the same way. But providing extra supports and covering the costs of goods and services that are outside the means of those living in poverty is a necessity if people living in poverty are to be included in government consultations.

The federal government may need to write a two-tier policy for expenses and should adjust how it obtains information and disburses funds. Changes of this sort are crucial in order to meet basic standards of inclusive consultation for the poor.

Engaging people with lived experience is a new undertaking for governments and new processes are needed to address both unfactored considerations as well as assumptions made about the costs of participation for low-income people. It's important to stop and consider these costs — both financial and personal — as successful inclusion is dependent on these costs being met.

### Cost of activism

Put simply, the cost of activism for people living in poverty is the cost they incur from participating — in this case — in government consultations. It is important to note that the cost of activism is both very different and much higher for a person living in poverty. They can lose a critical source of income if welfare programs deduct the money they receive to cover the costs of participation. When their accommodation is precarious they face the risk of eviction. They also risk a loss of reputation if they do not participate fully.

Cost of activism theories focus on what individuals are being recruited to do — a particularly important question for governments when they recruit low-income people with lived experience to participate in poverty reduction exercises. In the past, the inclusion of people with lived experience was often seen within government consultation groups as nothing more than a “check mark” on a page of consultation requirements. In other words, the advice received is a necessary feature of the consultation gauntlet of requirements, but relatively incidental.

One of the most injurious costs of activism for people with lived experience of poverty is to fully participate without “letting on” that they often find it very difficult to do so without a secure address, a smart phone, or regular Internet access. They are likely to view their lack of access to these attributes and goods as incapacities that are their own fault. There is often a heightened fear that they may be viewed as either troublemakers or as making things difficult for others, when in fact the opposite is true.

In Bee Lee's case, one of the clear costs of activism was (and continues to be) the exposure of her living in an illegal rooming house. Eviction can be an extreme cost of activism should exposure result in either the threat or loss of housing.

It is important for governments to understand that when they ask people living in poverty to participate in consultations, they are exacting the cost of activism. The consulted member must remain true to other activists with lived experiences of poverty in order to maintain their reputations. Yet they must also overcome, and be seen as overcoming, the many barriers to consultation that they face as a result of their successful recruitment.

Engaging people with lived experience is a new undertaking for governments and new processes are needed to address both unfactored considerations as well as assumptions made about the costs of participation for low-income people.

Two federal changes mark first steps forward. Bill C-97, (Division 20)<sup>5</sup> the federal government's poverty reduction legislation, introduced in November 2018, has taken a positive approach to the inclusion of people with lived experience of poverty. It proposes not only to pay them but to offer them all the civil protections of becoming "de facto" members of the public service. Section 9 of the legislation contains the following subsections:

**Remuneration**

(7) The members of the Council, other than the ex officio member, are to be paid, in connection with their work for the Council, the remuneration that may be fixed by the Governor in Council.

**Travel and living expenses**

(8) The members of the Council are entitled to be reimbursed for the travel, living and other expenses incurred, in connection with their work for the Council, while absent from, in the case of full-time members, their ordinary place of work or, in the case of part-time members, their ordinary place of residence.

**Deemed employment**

(9) The members of the Council are deemed to be employees for the purposes of the Government Employees Compensation Act and to be employed in the federal public administration for the purposes of any regulations made under section 9 of the Aeronautics Act. Full-time members are also deemed to be employed in the public service for the purposes of the Public Service Superannuation Act.

These two new provisions<sup>6</sup> will not only allow people in poverty to meet their expenses, it is our understanding that retail credit will be automatically extended to them through the extension of government credit cards and other retail credit instruments.

By including subsections 7, 8, and 9 of Section 9 of Bill C-97 (Division 20), the new legislation will go a long way to fostering full inclusion of people with lived experience of poverty into the consultation process. It will provide the changes necessary to ensure they are in a position to secure the goods, attributes, and services they require to participate.

It will be important to ensure that the public service is in a position to advance funds in a logistically expedient way, to both participants and those who support

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-97/third-reading#ID0ESI00>

<sup>6</sup> The provision to pay expenses has always been in place for persons on advisory councils and committees.

them. This will require thoughtful consideration of what people in poverty need in order to be able to contract with relative ease with service providers, be they banks, hotels, or retail credit providers.

Governments must give permission and encourage staff who are leading engagement consultations, to review their processes in light of the five thematic barriers outlined in this paper. All costs of participation need to be taken into account.

As Bee Lee Soh says:

“Nobody would think that not everyone has a TV, a phone, a land phone, a cell phone, a computer. It’s hard for people to realize that what to them are the basics, to me are luxuries.

I think the government should provide, at minimum, a phone with data. Because they always want you to be able to call them! So at least a phone, with long distance capacity, some data and some kind of laptop or a tablet for you to do some basic work.”

### Next steps to meaningful engagement

There has been much interest and work done to ensure the inclusion of people with lived experience in poverty in government consultations. For example, the Daily Bread Food Bank was an early advocate of processes of inclusion along with City of Toronto with its Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG).

The phrase — “nothing about us without us” — has been a frequent rallying cry for people living in poverty to make the case that unless policies are developed with the support of those who live by them every day, they are missing a key element in the design process.

The Maytree Foundation<sup>7</sup> has recently called for a greater role for people with lived experience of poverty in government consultations, as has the Tamarack Institute.<sup>8</sup> Each make the point that engaging poor people in poverty policy is crucial to ensuring policies that will work. Both call for respectful co-creation processes that allow people living in poverty to have equal voice with traditional policymakers.

It is clear that governments are listening to those with lived experience and wanting to deepen engagement by being proactive in reducing barriers to participation. The important changes (remuneration and extension of retail credit) that the federal government is making with the passage of Bill C-97 (Division 20) — the Poverty Reduction Act — is a critical way forward. In order

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<sup>7</sup> <https://maytree.com/stories/exploring-the-role-of-people-with-lived-experience-of-poverty-in-finding-solutions-to-poverty/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/engaging-people-with-live-experience-in-poverty-reduction>

to continue to facilitate meaningful and inclusive consultation with people with lived experience of poverty, we believe government groups conducting consultations should identify, supply, and/or pay in advance for:

1. All required communication equipment and required contracts.
2. Computer equipment and office supplies.
3. Retail credit and banking fees associated with participation.

And where and when requested by a participant with lived experience of poverty:

4. Contract with local agencies in the person's community to provide advice, mentoring, office space, clerical and financial support to facilitate participation. This needs to extend for the duration of the advisory function and for an agreed upon time after the process has concluded.

Although this recommendation is being put forward with the federal government's processes in mind, it has broad application to other levels of government and to other entities that engage people living in poverty in their processes.

This paper is meant to inform an interested public policy audience especially as it relates to poverty reduction policies and the design of programs intended to reduce poverty.

It is significant that with the recent announcement of the new Advisory Council on poverty, not only have they included members with lived experience of poverty, they have implemented a reasonably generous remuneration schedule<sup>9</sup> that should result in low-income members receiving over \$500 a day for their participation. This will go a long way to overcome the financial barriers to participation experience by low-income members.

We hope that the insights, suggestions, and recommendations contained in this paper will be useful to provinces, territories, and municipalities who have yet to undertake consultations with people living in poverty. Our aim is also to help those who already have experience with these processes, as they continue to refine their consultation regimens.

Poverty is complex and difficult to address and not amenable to easy solutions. It is imperative that we understand what new policies will do in the real world, not just how they would work for us if we were poor. People often make the mistake of thinking what would work for us will work for everyone. That is simply not so.

By including people with lived experiences of poverty in a meaningful and thoughtful manner in consultation processes, we enrich the policy process and those who undertake it. More importantly, we also ensure that policies we implement will work for the people whose lives they are intended to improve.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=38613&lang=en>

It is imperative that we understand what new policies will do in the real world, not just how they would work for us if we were poor.



## **Voice of Experience**

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Engaging people with lived experience of poverty in consultations

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