

*Federation CJA Social Advocacy Committee holds municipal candidates
accountable on supporting the vulnerable*

During this past municipal election campaign, a wide range of poverty-related social policy issues emerged as priorities at the local Côte-des-Neiges / Notre Dame de Grâce (CDN/NDG) borough level. Concerns about improving accessibility to public transportation, including the implementation of a social fare, real equality for men and women, social housing and the development of the Blue Bonnets site, as well as improved application of the municipal housing code were heard on the airwaves, in local newspapers, and shared directly with the Mayoral and City Councillor candidates.

The prominence of poverty-related issues in this particular municipal election campaign is the result of a few key factors. A number of community groups, such as the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors, the *Corporation de développement communautaire de Côte-des-Neiges*, the NDG Senior Citizens' Council and the NDG Community Council, organized candidate debates, providing their members and service users with the opportunity to directly question the candidates on a range of local issues. Borough residents mobilized themselves for these events, attending in good number, asking critical questions on issues that affect them on a daily basis. For the most part, the candidates responded with candor and sometimes humour. They described their parties' position on a given issue, offering borough citizens hope that their situation might improve with a new administration in place.

The Federation CJA Social Advocacy Committee, a coalition comprised of mostly social service agencies and groups within the Jewish community, was also active during the municipal campaign. We participated in a letter writing effort to the City of Montreal Mayoral candidates and borough level candidates requesting the implementation of a social fare for low-income public transportation users. The Committee also sent letters to each of the local CDN-NDG Mayoral and City Councillor candidates asking them to publicly state their support for a series of practical improvements, including the construction of a minimum of 2,500 social housing units on the Blue Bonnets site, improved application of the municipal housing code, and the freezing of public transit fares, among others. We received a significant number of responses from the candidates, all of whom recognized that more needs to be done for individuals living in poverty in the borough.

For more than 15 years, the Federation CJA Social Advocacy Committee has been acting for the protection of people's social and economic rights at all levels of government, so we are acutely aware that follow up on promises made during election campaigns are often needed for commitments to be realized. It is for this reason that we believe it is critical to highlight the important role that our new borough Mayor, Russell Copeman, and his City Councilors have to play in terms of working towards addressing poverty-related issues.

Borough elected representatives have an important voice of influence regarding future decisions by the City of Montreal and the Société de transport de Montréal (STM) to freeze public transportation fares and/or to follow through on implementing a social fare for low-income public transportation users. The borough Mayor and Council can play the role of advocate, bringing attention to the fact that borough residents living on fixed or low-incomes must make difficult and at times impossible decisions on a daily basis about how to cover the cost of their basic necessities. Efforts to influence the City of Montreal and the STM towards a decision not to increase transit fares will have a positive impact on individuals on a fixed income and also serve as an act of solidarity. Montrealers should not have to choose between paying rent, buying food and covering other essentials. They should not have to walk several kilometers, particularly during the harsh winter months, because they cannot afford public transportation.

The CDN/NDG borough Mayor and Council also occupy a direct role in the extent of the application of the municipal housing code. It is the borough itself that decides on the financial resources it will allocate towards hiring additional permanent housing inspectors, who work on the front-lines trying to ensure safe, clean and healthy housing conditions. Local inspectors are also increasingly taking on a preventative approach, going door to door in apartment buildings where there are existing complaints about health and safety issues, which is a much needed approach to deal with endemic housing problems.

Without a sufficient number of housing inspectors, tenants living in mouldy, unheated apartments, or with rat or bed bug infestations, have fewer options for resolving their housing problem. Individuals and families living in poverty do not often have the means to move when faced with poor living conditions, and even if they could leave, their options are few given the availability of good quality, low cost housing units in the borough.

The borough has a critical role to play in the development of the Blue Bonnets site. With more than 22,000 households currently on the wait list for a low cost housing unit across Montreal, including almost 2,500 households in the CDN-NDG borough alone, social housing is a long-term solution to poverty that makes an immediate difference in the standard of living and quality of life of people living in poverty. The Blue Bonnets site is a long-awaited and perhaps last opportunity to build sufficient social housing in response to the needs of neighbourhood residents, given both the tremendous size of the land and that it is public. The municipal and local borough governments have a responsibility to exercise sufficient pressure on the provincial and federal governments to ensure sufficient funding for much-needed social housing initiatives.

In the same way that community groups, citizens and municipal-level candidates exchanged during the election campaign on addressing issues affecting our most vulnerable individuals and families, the Federation CJA Social Advocacy Committee will continue to engage these entities in meaningful dialogue and problem solving, working towards a more just borough, that respects everyone's basic human right to a life of dignity.