

Premier urged to raise frozen welfare rates

By Meghan Hurley

PREMIER Gary Doer appeared comfortable being on the hot seat Thursday night as people quizzed him about the province's welfare rates, which have been frozen for the last 15 years.

"I'm not here to provide all the answers, but we should have an annual accountability session and I agree that nobody can live on \$6 a day," the premier said during the community forum held at the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg. "On the issue of raising rates, some have to be raised more than inflation."

The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg presented Doer a petition signed by more than 10,000 people who want to see welfare rates increased to help reduce poverty.

Not only have the welfare rates been frozen, but welfare recipients have lost 35 per cent of their purchasing power, according to the council.

The petition, which was endorsed by around 40 organizations in Manitoba, is part of the council's 'Raise the Rates' campaign designed to eliminate poverty.

Sagkeeng First Nation Chief Donovan Fontaine also presented the premier with a petition that had signatures from 2,200 people who live on reserves.

"If changes are made provincially, changes will be made federally on reserves," he said.

Fontaine sees members of his own

community who live in poverty. A few weeks ago, he met with a family of eight who live in the same trailer together. The trailer, he said, had a hole in the roof.

Billboards were set up for the presentation that showed the average shelter allowance for families on welfare is around \$471 per month. The average cost of renting a two-bedroom apartment is around \$740.

A slide show was shown at the beginning of the presentation that began with a picture of a man searching through a dumpster with the caption 'Could you live on \$6 a day?' written underneath.

During a question-and-answer period following Doer's speech, people voiced their concerns about affordable housing, programs for youth, day care and welfare rates.

While Valerie Wolbert didn't get the chance to ask the premier a question, she said she attended the forum because she can't believe the rates haven't changed. Wolbert, who is on disability, said the amount of money she receives isn't enough.

"I'm shocked that they haven't raised the rates," Wolbert said. "My husband works full-time and it's still difficult for us to live."

After the forum, many people met at city hall for the annual May Day march, which is an international celebration of the gains made by the labour movement and the working-class.

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