

Tena koutou- Thank you for the warm welcome on a warm Wednesday morning.

Before I begin, I was wondering if I could have a show of hands. Who is here from the Ministry for Housing? The Ministry of Social Development? The Ministry of Social Development? Work and Income?

I'd like it noted that the ministries that should be most interested in this hui are not present today. And if by chance you are present, but not feeling brave enough to raise your hand, I commend you for attending.

Kei te mihi nga mana whenua o te rohe nei. Ngati Koata, Ngati Kuia, Ngati Toarangatira, Te Atiawa, Ngati Rarua me Ngati Tama. Tena koutou, tena koutou

Ki te kaiwhakarite o te hui, Aunty Joan – tena koe whaea

Te haukainga o te hui nei, Stoke School me Child Poverty Action Group – Kei te mihi, kei te mihi, kei te mihi ki a koutou.

Ko wai au? Ko Takitimu toku waka, ko Ngati Ruapani me Ngati Kahungunu oku iwi, Ko Waikaremoana toku moanatapū, ko Wairoa toku rohe, ko Hinemihi raua ko Iwitea oku marae. Ko Lisa Lawrence ahau. He Kaiwhakahaere ahau no Motueka Family Service Centre. Kia ora.

I'd like to acknowledge Professor Mike O'Brian, and the well informed Katie O'Donnell for their insights this morning.

My name is Lisa Lawrence and I have the privilege of managing the Motueka Family Service Centre. We work with a community of approximately 10,000 with 20% Maori and have been there for the last 23 years. Even though the latest census will have us pitched at a much lower population, we have a large number of people and homes affected by the cyclones that happened around census time so their data hasn't been collected and another cohort that don't wish to be counted and live off the grid. For those of you not familiar with us we deliver whanau focussed social work, budgeting support, parenting programs, whanau focussed counselling, sexual health services, healthy lifestyles activities, parent/child enrichment programs, kindy based support and coordination of an integrated multi-agency approach for whanau experiencing family violence across the greater Motueka area.

When it comes to raising your family in this district, each of us has our own concept of what that means. For some it's summer holidays at Tata beach, or playing sport on a Saturday morning, or roast dinners once a week, owning a pet, school camps and maybe even trips away in the school holidays. For many local kids, however, who go without the basics regularly, their childhood bears very little resemblance to the kind of upbringing many of us see as a birth right.

Some Kiwis find it hard to believe when they look around at the country that kids are going without. The national conversation about child poverty quickly deteriorates into comparisons with 'real' poverty in Africa – as if one of our kids going without the basics should be grateful that their struggle isn't quite that of kids living in unstable developing countries. Perhaps should we change the phrase we use to encourage our kids at mealtimes from "Eat up, there are starving kids in Africa" to "Eat up, there are starving kids down the road".

Because that is the reality. There are also dehumanising notions of parental blame for poverty. That families on the benefit are there by intentional choice. That families surviving poverty 'just don't have their priorities right'. These opinions are often formed with very little first-hand comprehension of what it is actually like to experience ongoing material hardship and the ensuing instability, stress and anxiety it brings. And those things never abate. Operating in survival mode should never be dismissed out of hand.

What gets lost in all the well-meant conversation is the understanding that today, in schools and kindys here in Te Tau Ihu, many kids will not have the stationery they need, warm clothes, lunch to eat, clean undies, or a bed of their own to sleep in tonight. Many of you here will know that this is no exaggeration and know how bad individual situations really are for some of our youngest citizens.

Whanau experiencing poverty don't experience in isolation from other challenges. Inadequate income often comes coupled with housing instability. Maslow's hierarchy of needs hasn't become any less relevant in the 21st century. In one sense I feel like I'm preaching to the converted by speaking about this with you today, so please bear with me if feels like you have heard it before.

Last week we had a government budget released that is aimed at slowly turning the ship that is the government support around.

Where will this have impact for the families that we work with? You've already heard today the limited effect that the planned actions of the government will have.

I have a whanau in mind, one of many. A working single mother of two teenagers and a 9 year old that has been homeless for nearly two years. Her teenagers are mostly off her hands and making their own way in the world. So she is trying to find permanent accommodation for herself and Mr9. Mr 9 is amazing, he's a bright boy with challenges that his primary school actively support him in. He needs medication dispensed throughout the day and needs to be picked up at short notice when a day has not gone well for him and he's not coping. She is his primary caregiver and extended family support isn't there for either of them. In fact Mr9's grandmother is very unwell and won't be with us much longer. Because of the need to remain close to grandmother with her declining health and Mum's permanent job, they won't be leaving the district.

Secure housing is not their reality, as there is more need, than supply of homes. For the past two years they have couch surfed with friends, stayed in her mums single bedroom flat on the living room floor, slept in their car in friends driveways and stayed in a tent at the local domain. That's not living, that's surviving. They are resourceful, yet scarred people. The recent cyclones have meant that the domain is now unavailable, and their tent was damaged.

What are they meant to do? Where are they meant to go? How can a parent provide when the housing resource is not there? She is working; taking care of her son and his health needs and is lined up for a promotion at work which will improve her minimum wage rate *slightly*. A tiny speck of hope for one of the two components that would make them slightly less impoverished.

And even more unjust, why is she challenged by government agencies that she's not providing the necessities for Mr9 when the necessary housing does not exist in our community.

Now, I'm like you in many senses. I have a job to do, and a structure to follow and I do my best to do it well. But no matter how well I manage my organisation, the material changes that my families need will not happen. My organisation cannot produce secure housing in my district, my organisation cannot improve the inadequate incomes that my families are forced to subsist on. And I use the word subsist intentionally. And it's these two particular things that would vastly improve life both now and long term of all the Mr9's living in my area.

There are three things in your everyday working life that you can do to move both of these substantial issues forward. **Document, Advocate and Agitate.** It may seem tiring and depressing on an everyday basis to acknowledge deficits, but if Mr9 isn't complaining that he hasn't had a bed nor privacy for two years then why would I complain.

So, DOCUMENT - You can document the material deficits. Include living conditions and income adequacy in your assessments, your case notes, your data collection, your monthly reports to your managers and forward those reports every month to your Board. Ask your Board to consider drafting a letter to the Minister for Housing, the Minister of Workplace Relations (*which incidentally reviews the minimum wage every year, why aren't they asking the people what they think??*), Minister of Social Development and cc in your local MPs. Highlight the issues. If the whanau you work with are clients of WINZ, attend appointments with them, point out to Case Managers that the resource is not adequate, and ask them to note your feedback in your professional role in the case file. Build the body of evidence so you have a platform to speak from.

ADVOCATE - Advocate for the needs of whanau that use your service at every opportunity. Both within your organisation and in your relationships with others. Advocate to your local councils to address social housing to an adequate level. Advocate in every forum you participate in that material poverty is a barrier to whatever the intended social outcome is and request that the barriers are not parked, but addressed. I personally didn't think letter writing worked as a strategy – until I saw it in action on a related issue. Advocate for the communities most vulnerable who are never at the table – our kids.

AGITATE TO IMPROVE – Nothing changes if we don't shine a light on what's not working. If you are in a forum that is tasked with effecting change for whanau, or delivering a service to whanau, ask what resource is allocated to support people to participate. There's no point having a crash hot program when whanau can't afford to get themselves to your venue or can't afford childcare for the duration of a course. If there has been no consideration for supporting people to attend, then ask how was it expected to support our most vulnerable? Time and again services are set up and developed with little consideration for the needs of the end user. You don't need to be rude to agitate, you just need to decide to have a tough conversation to support change.

Our most successful courses in Motueka have addressed these issues amongst other barriers for whanau to participate in programs to support parenting skills. By addressing them we have some of the highest rates of participation and clinical improvement in the country. It does improve. We take care of childcare costs and fuel to the venue. Why wouldn't we?

People often say that change has to come from the leadership – I personally reject this. We have to enact the change. Talk alone doesn't do it. All of our kids have the right to reach their potential, and it's a collective responsibility to put our resources and goodwill into making this happen.

Thank you so much for having me here today.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa.

NOTES TO REMEMBER FOR AFTER

What we should never forget is that the definitions of poverty, the way poverty is perceived and the policies put into place to fight it, are always the result of the actions taken by the non poor. According to Georg Simmel, the father of the sociology of poverty, 'poverty' is a teleological concept that never is in line with the needs of the poor but always with the needs of society. 'Caring for the poor' is very often a moral obligation that the wealthy accept and put on the forefront, forgetting about the rights of poor people. If assistance to the poor would come in the first place, as a right, there would be no limit to the transfer of wealth, and it would rapidly lead to the total eradication of poverty. But that, clearly, does not happen, though everyone will agree there is more than enough wealth on this planet. [2]

If wealthy people 'care for the poor', what they want to make clear is that their wealth is 'legitimate' and their own social role is useful. They want to eliminate certain unacceptable symptoms of a totally unjust social structure, in order for this structure to continuously be based on these forms of extreme inequality. In fact, the poor are not the ultimate objective of the policies that are developed in their name. They are 'collateral beneficiaries' of the conscious and unconscious guilt of the wealthy.

This reasoning can explain why it is so difficult to define poverty. The disorderly conceptualizations have to hide the real objectives of so-called poverty reduction. Poverty definitions always have to be in line with the social and ideological needs of the non-poor and the wealthy. This also explains why the poverty definitions of the international organizations focus on an ever-changing list of 'poverty dimensions' and mostly totally forget income.