



lakehead
social planning
council

NEED FOR CHANGE: CITIZEN PERSPECTIVES FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Submission to the Commission for the
Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

Introduction

On Wednesday July 20th and Thursday July 21st the residents of Thunder Bay had the opportunity to share their views on the current social assistance regime in Ontario. As part of their Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Ontario government appointed Frances Lankin and Munir A. Sheikh to examine social assistance in Ontario through engagement, research and analysis to provide the government with a concrete action plan to improve the system for the people who need it.

A local coordinating committee was tasked with making the necessary preparations for Commissioner Lankin's visit. This committee decided that two separate sessions should be organized to help facilitate open and engaged discussion. On Wednesday July 20th, 64 recipients of Ontario Works (OW), the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and advocates gathered to share their views for addressing the current systems. The next day, on Thursday July 21st 85 frontline, advocacy and other agency workers, along with the general public were in attendance to share their views on the necessary changes that are needed to make OW and ODSP better for recipients.

In the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario document, *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*, an overview of the key issues and questions is offered to help guide discussion in local communities. Chapter 3 of this document lists the five key issues as: 1) Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment; 2) Appropriate Benefit Structure; 3) Easier to Understand; 4) Viable Over the Long Term; 5) An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security. Each of these issues are accompanied by a number of questions.

The local organizing committee, however, decided to simplify these key issues and accompanying questions in order to ensure their clarity for participants and to ensure that discussion of the issues would not be pre-determined with any

leading questions. The committee decided that the issues would be: 1) Employment; 2) Social Assistance Benefits; 3) Rules; 4) Purpose of Social Assistance; 5) Integration of Benefits. Each of these key issue areas were accompanied by one or two clear and straightforward questions designed to uncover what is currently working, what is currently not working, and what are the suggestions for change.

At both of the sessions, the participants were split into groups of eight. Each group were asked to address the same key issue and corresponding questions simultaneously. Once the allotted time had elapsed for the question, a facilitator would guide each group through a call back session where each group shared their priority points with all in attendance.

The remainder of this document outlines what we heard during these sessions.

This report would not be possible without the generous time commitment of the organizing committee and the valuable perspectives shared by the workshop participants

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Research Team

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Executive Summary

It is clear from the feedback received at the workshops that a myriad of changes need to take place to improve our current social assistance programs. The key messages that were heard repeatedly include the need for:

- At minimum the need for increases to the Basic Needs and Shelter Allowances with consideration given to a Guaranteed Annual Income for all individuals on social assistance
- In-depth case management model that meet people where they are at
- An emphasis on stabilizing an individuals life before placing emphasis on employment
- Systems navigator to help steer individuals to the many services available to them in the community
- Increased support for clothing, transportation, child care and housing
- Social assistance rates set by geographic location at 80% of the Low Income Measure to ensure an end to deep poverty
- Increase the time that case workers have to spend with their clients to better support their needs

Through these and many of the other changes suggested through this research, positive strides can be made to the current social assistance regime for the betterment of all people in our communities.

Issue Area #1 - Employment

The first issue area that was discussed at both of the sessions was that of Employment. This issue area had two questions for the groups to discuss. The first question asked, *What barriers do people on social assistance face when finding and maintaining employment?* and the second multi question for discussion asked, *What current supports and rules about employment are working? What is not working? What do you think would help?*

Barriers

During the evening session, participants responded to the question of employment barriers by overwhelmingly agreeing that the largest barrier that one is faced with when seeking and maintaining employment is the lack of opportunities available in Thunder Bay.

Participants also felt that there are an insufficient number of training and skills development opportunities and that the opportunities that do exist are not well communicated to those that require this assistance.

Participants identified a lack of financial support available for individuals attempting to obtain work as a major barrier. They argued that this financial support is crucial for additional transportation when delivering resumes, for the purchase of clothing that is suitable for job seekers, to acquire a criminal record check for workplaces that require one, to purchase child care services, and other essential goods necessary to present oneself in a professional manner.

Some of the other comments that we heard reflect stigma or a willingness to take advantage of subsidy programs. Participants claimed that employers will participate in subsidy programs but will then fire the employee shortly after the subsidy has expired. Other participants claimed that it is extremely difficult to find

employment as employers are reluctant to hire individuals on social assistance. More education is needed to address this stigma.

During the morning session, participants also responded to the question of employment barriers by overwhelmingly agreeing that the largest barrier that one is faced with when seeking and maintaining employment is the lack of opportunities available in Thunder Bay.

A number of the comments that participants shared identified barriers relating to adequate financial support. For example, participants noted that far too much of an individual's energy is spent ensuring their basic needs are met. This leaves very little time and energy in the pursuit of employment. Participants also noted that there is a lack of up-front money available for individuals that are beginning employment and long waiting lists for subsidized child care.

Participants also felt that there is an insufficient number of training and skills development opportunities, particularly those that address language and cultural barriers and pre-employment coaching.

Similar to comments from the evening session, participants at the morning session also identified employer attitudes as a barrier to employment. A general stigma was identified pertaining to social assistance and that employers are not accommodating to special needs.

What Support and Rules are Working?

When asked what current supports and rules pertaining to employment are generally working, the participants responded stating that some of the existing workshops, such as literacy training, work well to prepare one for employment.

What Support and Rules are Not Working?

When asked what is currently not working to assist people to find and maintain employment, participants declared that the clawback of money from social assistance cheques for income earned makes it difficult to get, and stay ahead. Participants also responded stating that individuals are generally uninformed about what services are available to them and that there is far too much inconsistency with how differing case managers interpret the rules as well as significant differences between case managers concerning the amount of time that they will spend assisting their client.

When asked what current supports and rules pertaining to employment are generally working, the participants responded that the Employment Resource Centre is an excellent resource that has a number of helpful programs. Participants also mentioned that assistance with child care is extremely important, but not readily available to all that require it. Also mentioned were programs such as Winter Warmth and LEAP, which provide assistance with utility arrears, and the Phones for Families program that provides a free telephone for individuals with children in school. Participants also noted that person-centred programs that are designed to work with an individual's unique skills and abilities are successful.

When asked what is currently not working to assist people to find and maintain employment, participants declared that there needs to be an increase in the interconnection between services, stronger partnerships developed with employers to overcome issues of stigma, and improvements made in assessing an individual's needs and strengths. In addition, participants noted that the focus should be placed upon stabilizing an individual's life before emphasis is put upon finding new employment. This and many other positive improvements can be achieved through better case management with smaller case loads.

Issue Area #2 – Social Assistance Benefits

The second issue area that was discussed at each session concerned Social Assistance Benefits. This section began with a brief explanation of the various benefits including but not limited to Basic Needs, Shelter Allowance, Community Start-Up, Mandatory Benefits, Health Benefits and Discretionary Benefits. The first set of questions for this section was *What about benefits is working? What isn't working? What suggestions do you have for change?* and the second question was *How should social assistance rates be determined?*

What About Benefits is Working?

During the evening session, participants responded by stating that they felt the dental and health benefits as well as the community start-up fund were currently working for recipients of social assistance.

At the session the following morning those in attendance pointed to child care subsidies, transportation assistance for medical appointments, the available single parent supports, and the Northern Health Travel Grants as examples of what is working in the area of benefits.

Not Working

All in attendance agreed that the benefits provided, particularly the Basic Needs and Shelter Allowance are acutely insufficient. In addition, participants felt that further finances should be made available for the high cost of utilities, eye glasses, crowns and root canals.

Other complaints not directly relating to the amount of assistance received included comments pertaining to the application process as being confusing. Participants also felt that information is often withheld from recipients and that case workers did not have enough time to properly assist clients. Others felt that

access to affordable housing takes far too long to obtain and accessing private market housing is near impossible on the income provided. Participants also noted that there is too much discrepancy between what an individual earns from Ontario Works compared with Ontario Disability Support Program.

Suggestions for Change

Suggestions for change to the current benefits received included the need for increased financial assistance with some participants supporting the idea of an integrated approach with a guaranteed annual income. Other participants noted that financial assistance should be made available for preventative health care instead of waiting for individuals to get sick and then spending more money on treatment.

In addition to these suggestions, participants also noted that available benefits need to be better communicated, and supports for childcare, housing and transportation need to be vastly improved to meet the needs of people supported by social assistance.

Further, there were a number of comments made about the need for improved relationships between recipients and case workers. The workshop participants felt that more time needs to be made available for case workers to truly assist their clients. Comments were also made regarding the need for consistency in relation to eligibility for discretionary benefits.

Determining Rates

All of the workshop participants from both sessions agreed that rates need to be raised and that the new rates should reflect the cost of living for individuals in a specific geographical area. Rates in Thunder Bay and Toronto may not be identical as they should match the cost of living for that area. Some argued that a

figure at the 80% point of the Low Income Measure (LIM) would be a significant step forward for ending deep poverty. It was also stressed that any increases that are made must be indexed to grow at the rate of inflation to ensure that the rates do not fall behind with time.

Issue Area #3 – Rules

The third issue area that was discussed at each session concerned the Rules Regarding Social Assistance. This section had one multi-part question that asked, *What rules and eligibility criteria are working? What rules and eligibility criteria are not working? What suggestions do you have for change?*

Rules and Eligibility: What Is Working

Unfortunately, we did not receive feedback from the recipients of either workshop concerning what current rules and eligibility criteria are working to serve people. This seems to indicate that the rules and eligibility criteria are in dire need of an overhaul.

Rules and Eligibility: What Isn't Working

Unlike the previous question, the workshop participants shared a variety of views on some of the issues found with the current rules and eligibility criteria governing social assistance. The first grouping of comments focused upon the eligibility criteria. Participants felt that the eligibility criteria for discretionary benefits are too unclear or too broad, which leads to different interpretations and results by different case workers. The second grouping of comments focused on asset limits and declarations of gifts. Workshop participants also stressed that asset limits are far too low to qualify for social assistance. The idea that people would have to lose everything they have before gaining assistance ensures a longer tenure on social assistance. This leads to deep poverty. Participants noted

that the declarations of all gifts is also punitive. One participant noted that a small gift received for a special occasion should not have to be declared and deducted from their social assistance payment. A few other comments included issues with the welfare fraud hotline. Participants felt that this phone-in line was often used to settle personal vendetta with the claims often being baseless. In addition, it was noted that the appeal process for individuals that have had their application for ODSP rejected is far too complex.

Change

The ideas for change included: making it easier for individuals to transition to and from Ontario Works; the extension of health benefits for people that find employment; a more wholistic approach regarding eligibility for ODSP. It was also suggested that individuals earning ODSP should have more in-depth case management services available to them and that the appeals process for ODSP should be made more simple and efficient.

Issue Area #4 – Purpose of Social Assistance

The fourth issue area that was discussed at each session concerned the Purpose of Social Assistance. This section began with a brief overview of the legislated purpose of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program. According to legislation, the overall intent of the Ontario Works program is to assist people that are in temporary financial need to find sustainable employment and achieve self-reliance through the provision of effective, integrated employment services and financial assistance. In contrast, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) was created to meet the needs of people with disabilities. The program provides income support including health and other benefits for people with disabilities in financial need. The program also provides employment supports to help people with disabilities prepare for, obtain or

maintain a job. The intent of the program is to provide the supports necessary to enable individuals and families to live as independently as possible. This section asked, *Do you agree or disagree with the legislated purpose of social assistance? Would you change this purpose?* This section also asked *Does social assistance help individuals become self-sufficient? What do you think people need to leave social assistance?*

Agree or Disagree with Purpose of Social Assistance

The workshop participants wholly agreed with the legislated purpose given to Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. However, the participants also felt that this stated purpose was not being achieved with the current programs and that many changes are needed to make this system achieve the desired goals.

Change to the Purpose of Social Assistance

Although participants agreed with the legislated purpose of social assistance, they did feel that a change to the purpose that emphasized stabilizing an individual's life first and focusing on employment second would increase the success of the programs. Participants also felt that broad changes need to be made to the eligibility requirements for both programs.

Helping Individuals Achieve Self-Sufficiency

Participants noted that these programs are not providing sufficient support that would allow individuals to successfully gain self-sufficiency. In order to achieve this, a more holistic approach is needed that considers all the various needs that an individual may have to live successfully in the community. This would include support for clothes and transportation for individuals pursuing employment, a slight continuation of benefits after an individual finds employment to help with

stabilization, increased life skills training, and a guaranteed annual income for all people on social assistance.

Leaving Social Assistance

Generally, participants felt that we need a stronger social safety net to eliminate falling through the cracks and hitting rock bottom. To achieve this, a more holistic approach needs to be developed to determine an individual's strengths and weaknesses to apply support accordingly. Through this, individuals can be transitioned through the proper training, employment supports and necessary life skills.

Issue #5 – Integration of Benefits

The fifth issue area that was discussed at each session concerned the integration of benefits. This section began with a brief overview of some of the other benefits including EI, Child Tax Benefit, WSIB, Canada Pension Plan, and Guaranteed Income Supplement and then asked, *How could these benefits be better integrated? What is currently working or not working? What needs to change?*

Integration

Participants felt that an important first step would be to integrate all benefits under one administration with better integration between provincial and federal programs.

What Needs to Change

Participants felt that more public education is required to allow for the policy changes that are necessary. It was also felt that individuals require a system navigator to help people through the maze of social services available. This would help individuals to access the services available in their community.

Conclusions

It is clear from the feedback received at these workshops that changes need to take place to improve our current social assistance programs. The key messages that were heard repeatedly include:

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