



**Poverty Free Ontario**  
Pulling poverty out by the roots



## ***Bulletin #11***

March 14, 2013

### ***A Good Faith Start to a Social Justice Agenda: PFO's Six Point Plan for Action on Poverty Eradication***

Prior to her election as Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party and becoming the new Premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne declared that she wanted to be known as the [“social justice premier”](#). This statement raised some hopes and expectations among community advocates for low income people for serious action on social assistance reform and the minimum wage.

Since assuming leadership of the Government, Premier Wynne has not been very specific about her social justice agenda. The [Throne Speech](#) in March included only a few brief references to affordable housing and several recommendations in the [recent social assistance reform report](#) by Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh. Besides generally referring to interest in helping social assistance recipients move into employment, the only specific recommendation that the Premier has expressed an interest in acting on is the \$200 per month earnings exemption for social assistance recipients with working hours before implementation of the clawback on their earnings.

Neither has either opposition party leader has shown any greater interest in serious social justice action to this point. [Mr. Hudak's policy proposals](#) harken back to the worst visions of workfare and punitive practices of the Mike Harris days. Ms. Horwath has shown no inclination to go beyond the earnings exemption recommendation in her negotiation on the spring provincial budget with the Premier. Social justice for the most vulnerable is searching for a champion among our political leadership in Ontario.

It has been almost five years since the social assistance reform was announced as one of the cornerstones of the Government's [Poverty Reduction Strategy](#). Such lengthy research, consultation and study were not required for an earnings exemption to be the only specific measure under consideration.

The budget to be delivered in April offers an opportunity for the Premier to show “good faith” in her expressed intention to be the “social justice premier” for all Ontarians. To that end, Poverty Free Ontario invited Premier Wynne to meet with PFO delegates from across Ontario for a discussion of their proposals for a social justice agenda. Sadly, the Premier's Office has not formally acknowledged nor responded to the invitation.

Still, more than 100 PFO leaders from more than 20 communities all across Ontario came together in Toronto for a day on March 8. They discussed and endorsed the following Six Point Plan for a Social Justice Agenda:

- Increase the Basic Needs Allowance by \$100/month for OW and ODSP recipients as the first step towards adequacy in social assistance rates.
- Index OW and ODSP rates, starting immediately, to keep up with the annual inflation rate.
- Ensure that all increases to social assistance or changes arising from the proposed integration of the current programs do not lead to any reductions in basic needs and housing allowances for persons currently receiving ODSP and Ontario Works, or to cuts in benefits such as the Special Diet Allowance or the Disability Worker's Benefit.
- Introduce an earnings exemption for social assistance recipients with working hours so that a 50% clawback on earnings does not apply on at least the first \$200/month earnings, and preferably not on the first \$500.<sup>1</sup>
- Commit to the principle that the minimum wage should ensure a full time, full year worker earns an annual income 10% above the Ontario Income Poverty Line [LIM 50], and to an implementation plan that will achieve that goal.
- Index the minimum wage immediately to keep up with the annual inflation rate.

The PFO community leadership assembled on March 8 asked that invitations be made to the Premier and Opposition Leaders for meetings with a cross-community PFO delegation prior to the budget to discuss a social justice agenda based on the preceding Six Point Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> It is fitting to *footnote* here that Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh's recommendation for the \$200 earnings exemption in their report actually proposes that the clawback on additional earnings be increased from the current 50% to 57% -- not indicated in the body of their report but in footnote #46 on page 73, reducing the benefit to recipients of even this minimal measure of reform.