

MEDIA RELEASE

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Release of Final Report on the Social Assistance Review ***Commissioners show constraints of austerity climate***

Social Assistance Review Commissioners Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh released their long awaited Final Report on the Ontario Social Assistance Review today.

Community advocates for serious and immediate social assistance reform can feel some sense of achievement that the Commissioners acknowledge that OW and ODSP rates are too low to enable recipients to have access to adequate nutritious food. The Commissioners acknowledge the position of the [Put Food in the Budget](#) campaign and recommend an immediate \$100/month rate increase as a “down payment” on moving toward adequacy. Regrettably, they suggest that this be partly paid for by eliminating the \$230 million Special Diet Allowance to recipients with medical conditions requiring certain nutrients for their health and well-being.

“Proposing a \$100 a month increase to the single rate is encouraging and the Commissioners are very clear that rates need to move towards adequacy,” says Peter Clutterbuck, PFO Coordinator, “but why does this have to mean the elimination of the Special Diet allowance? In their other proposals for moving toward a new integrated system, the Commissioners recommend maintaining supplements and existing benefits to make sure recipients are not worse off during the transition period.”

The Commissioners propose more than 100 recommendations on all aspects of social assistance that will require careful community discussion. The Commissioners attempt to outline a vision of a more simplified and coherent social assistance system. It is clear, however, that they felt the constraints of the austerity climate that the Ontario Government introduced with its 2012 budget.

Plus, the Commissioners had to work against the tide of the Ontario Government’s action in the last few years that has continued the austerity agenda of hunger and hardship directed at people on social assistance started by the Harris Government in the mid-nineties and has included the following measures:

- Cutting the Basic Needs Allowance for single parents by \$125 a month per child after introducing the Ontario Child Benefit (another clawback called “rate restructuring”);
- Ending the clothing and back to school allowances for children on social assistance;
- Cutting the real incomes of people on social assistance through reducing cost of living adjustments to half the rate of inflation in the last two provincial budgets;

- Changing the medical conditions qualifying for the Special Diet Allowance so that thousands of social assistance recipients lost access to nutritious food critical to their health;
- Withdrawing planned increases to the OCB for two years in the 2012 budget; and
- Cutting the Community Start-Up and Maintenance funding to municipalities for people on social assistance.

[Poverty Free Ontario](#) (PFO) has maintained a consistent focus on the need for major structural reforms to end deep poverty (incomes falling below 80% of Ontario's official income poverty measure) and to end working poverty (minimum wage level that brings a full-year- full-time earner out of poverty).

On first review of the Commissioners' Report, PFO is dismayed that they discount Ontario's official income poverty measure (i.e. Low Income Measure – 50% of median income). Not only was the LIM set as Ontario's official income measure in its 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy, but the LIM is also internationally recognized as the income poverty measure of the United Nations and the European Union. Notably, the proposed subsistence line set by the Commissioners' "Basic Measure of Adequacy" would condemn a single person or a two person family to a life of deep poverty at 70% of Ontario's official income poverty level.

Another major concern that requires further investigation is the proposed integration of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disabilities Support Program into a unified system. While the Commissioners show some care in recommending that persons with disabilities should be in no worse off income position while this transition is made, the recommendations reflect a push towards the labour market for persons with disabilities that must be watched vigilantly to avoid workfare strategies, especially given the Commissioners' recommendation of integrating ODSP and OW administration at the municipal level.

PFO will be consulting with its community partners across Ontario in the coming days to more fully develop its response to the Commissioners' Report.

Poverty Free Ontario is an initiative of the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) working with local community groups across the province www.povertyfreeontario.ca

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