



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP OF NIAGARA

Anglican Church of Canada

March 12, 2012

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

2 Bloor Street West

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Toronto ON M4W 3E2

Email: socialassistancereview@ontario.ca

Dear Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh:

RE: Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform

The Diocese of Niagara is a community of ninety-three parishes serving nearly 30,000 people in Hamilton and Guelph, the regions of Niagara and Halton, as well as Wellington, Haldimand and Dufferin counties. As we mentioned in our first submission to the Commission, we are actively living into a vision of prophetic social justice-making, which includes many ministry initiatives leveraging our community partnerships to further the goal of eradicating poverty within our province by transforming the unjust policies, structures and behaviors found within our society.

When we reviewed your message at the beginning of this paper we were delighted to read your view that there is “need to transform the social assistance system” and that “small fixes will not be enough.” We agree with you that transforming the current system is needed, but such a transformation is also of the utmost urgency. Too many people within our province are struggling for dignity because our current social assistance system is unjust and broken. Immediate and courageous action is needed to transform social assistance into an income security system that enables all Ontarians to live with dignity, participate in their communities, and contribute to the economy.

In our current context in which Statistics Canada recently reported that there are more than three Ontarians looking for work for every job vacancy, there are simply not enough jobs in Ontario. Consequently, the Government of Ontario must create the conditions for the development of jobs that ensure the dignity of those employed.

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But for those who are not able to seek paid employment immediately, we reiterate our belief that the scope of employment supports available through social assistance must be broadened. Social assistance recipients should have options for participating in community through volunteer work and involvement in community initiatives. With an emphasis on supporting and equipping recipients to achieve self-identified goals, participation in volunteering and civic engagement will assist people to take steps towards the workplace, will result in less unemployment and will strengthen our communities.

Throughout your consultations you have heard again and again from people with lived experience that the current benefit structure is woefully inadequate and should more closely reflect the cost of living. It is unconscionable that purchasing nutritious food, obtaining secure housing and participating in one's community is currently not an option for the most vulnerable among us and this is directly attributable to inadequate levels of social assistance.

Yet any conversation about the adequacy of social assistance rates should not instigate a false rivalry between those on social assistance and low income workers because of a focus on fairness or creating work incentives. As a society we should strive for the dignity of all, regardless of employment status. As such we recommend that health benefits be provided to all eligible low-income Ontarians. Moreover we believe that both social assistance and minimum wage rates should be set at levels that enable one to live with dignity. Currently neither achieves this goal.

Thus we recommend that the Government of Ontario establish an independent advisory board to recommend evidence-based social assistance rates on an annual basis. Those rates should be based on an analysis of the actual costs of rent, a healthy food basket, and other basic necessities in communities across Ontario, and should provide a level of assistance that will allow individuals and families to live with dignity. An example of such a body is the recommended Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board as proposed in Bill 235, "An Act to Establish the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board" (introduced in the 38th sitting of the legislature on June 4, 2007).

The Special Diet Allowance should also continue to be provided as the need for additional financial assistance for those with certain medical conditions would exist regardless of the level of basic income supports available and should be expanded to include other medical conditions where diet plays a preventative and therapeutic role.

As a first step towards adequacy the Government of Ontario should take immediate action to implement a \$100 per month Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on social assistance. This proposal was widely support through your consultations and already has the support of many municipalities within our diocese.

Contrary to the common stereotype of a person receiving social assistance, those whose stories we have heard are individuals who would much rather return to the work force than rely on social assistance. For this reason financial incentives to return to work are not nearly as important as the adequacy of rates. We recommend the Government of Ontario, as a starting point, set an indexed reference wage of \$12.50, ten percent above the poverty line. Currently workers who are employed full time at minimum wage fall below the poverty line. While this situation has been improved in recent years we must do more. Moving towards the concept of an indexed living wage – one where a person working full-time can be liberated from poverty and fully participate in their community – as a benchmark for our society should be the government’s medium term goal.

We were perplexed by the discussion regarding the establishment of a rate methodology. The Low Income Measure (LIM) has already been adopted by the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, the United Nations and the European Union as an appropriate measure of poverty. We encourage the Commission to adopt the LIM and thus focus its policy efforts on transforming the current system.

Throughout the ISARC Social Audits in 2010 the people whose stories we heard frequently voiced their frustrations with a complex system that is often slow to respond and lacks clear lines of communication and interconnection. Some recipients had the regular experience of having to deal with many different people and departments in an attempt to have their file adequately dealt with and they sometimes received conflicting answers to their questions. During a period of time that is incredibly stressful, those receiving social assistance should not be forced to live under a system of ‘surveillance’ that adds more stress on the recipient in order to receive inadequate income supports. Accountability to taxpayers should be secondary to the quality of life and dignity of recipients. Given your affirmation that “that the majority of social assistance recipients do not misuse the system,” the Government of Ontario should simplify income and asset rules to improve equity and make it easier to understand and administer social assistance, rather than simply move to a targeted system that only delays verification.

Finally, we note that many of the report’s questions address the complexities of the administration of the social assistance system rather than offering a comprehensive vision and concrete plan to eliminate poverty in one of the wealthiest countries of the world. As you work towards your final report, we invite you to consider this question: “in whose interest is the transformation you seek for social assistance?” We hope that your answer will consistently be: those who are living the indignities of our current system.

In summary, we ask that you consider the following key pathways to dignity:

- Implement immediately a \$100 per month Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on social assistance
- Establish an independent advisory board to recommend evidence-based social assistance rates on an annual basis
- Set an indexed living reference wage of \$12.50, ten percent above the poverty line
- Provide health benefits to all eligible low-income Ontarians
- Broaden the scope of employment supports available through social assistance to include options for participating in community

We give you thanks for all your many efforts in the task of building a healthier and just community and society through the Social Assistance Review and look forward with great hope and expectation to a report that offers a truly bold and transformative reform of our social assistance system.

Yours faithfully,



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Anglican Diocese of Niagara

Copies to: The Hon. Dalton McGuinty, MPP
Premier

The Hon. Dwight Duncan, MPP
Minister of Finance

The Hon. Deborah Matthews, MPP
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care

The Hon. John Milloy, MPP
Minister of Community and Social Services

The Hon. Eric Hoskins, MPP
Minister of Children and Youth Services