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Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario  
2 Bloor Street West  
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Toronto ON  
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Dear Commissioners

Re: Social Assistance Review

In reading through your reports and summary of your reports, we find ourselves dragged down by the details. It seems as though the remedy being proposed is more a tune-up than an overhaul, a fledgling upgrade rather than a completely re-vamped model of social assistance delivery.

For plainly what is needed is an overhaul, a new system which lifts people out of various levels of subsistence living into something which constitutes a 'living wage.' A system that doesn't differentiate between working poor and non-working poor, but which plainly insists that subsistence living in any form is politically and socially unacceptable. Social assistance must be redesigned not only to get people back on their feet again, but to re-engage them as full participants in our society, realizing that our own social well-being suffers when they're excluded.

Historically speaking society hits its high water mark when it has the courage to implement policies which economic pundits initially write off as 'impractical' but in the long run benefit everyone. Publicly funded health care, pensions for all Canadians, employment insurance and social assistance, all these programs were initially deemed by the business community as 'impractical' and 'too costly.' The reverse has proven to be true: not only have these social programs helped many of us through extended periods of illness, disability, and job loss; they have minimized the threat of overall social unrest through periods of widespread economic uncertainty and recession.

These safety nets are eroding and vital to any consideration of improving Social Assistance is to re-frame it not only as 'a last resort when people have no other financial options' but as pivotal to overall poverty reduction.

Yes we are in a time of economic crisis and yes governments are afraid to adopt policies that require additional spending. But we are talking about inequity here, where those at the top of the economic ladder have too much and those at the bottom have too little. Without a substantial overhaul of Social Assistance the number of those who can't meet the expense of 'adequate' living will continue to mushroom.

No one taking stock of life conditions faced by an overwhelming majority of OW and ODSP recipients can come away insisting things are okay. Social Assistance is critically failing those who rely on it. Not only does it provide too little for its recipients to cover adequate food and shelter costs, but it makes it harder for those on either OW or ODSP to escape from 'deep poverty.'

What was meant to reduce poverty instead perpetuates it. What was meant to be an investment in 'human capital' to help people finding sustainable meaningful work has instead become invasive and punitive, cycling people between inadequate social assistance and inadequate low paying jobs.

Specifically we are asking that your recommendations include:

1. the admission that the current Social Assistance program has not succeeded in integrating people into the labour market
2. the admission that Social Assistance (OW and ODSP) programs are not consistent with poverty reduction and should be aligned with specific poverty reduction objectives
3. the recognition that the increase in OW claims is indicative of an overall systems failure (i.e. failure of the labour market to provide sustainable employment, failure of other social programs such as Employment Insurance, lack of skills upgrade and retraining programs and lack of supports for people living with mental illness, lack of adequate child care facilities for single mothers, etc.) rather than the fault of the applicants themselves
4. changes within SA to shift the application process from one of scrutiny to helping applicants to get the services and supports they need, moving from a punitive 'work first' application approach to an 'opportunity planning' approach with the overall objective of developing their personal 'assets' (i.e. through education, training etc.) to attain sustainable employment
5. the removal of the mandatory 'asset depletion' as a pre-requisite to receiving SA income
6. basing SA payments on adequate rather than inadequate income to meet basic life expenses which at the very minimum means the reversal of the 22% cut in OW in the mid 90's
7. a case by case approach which understands that 'one size that fit all', which takes into account that some applicants face multiple barriers to employment (i.e. single mothers with no access to affordable child care, newcomers to Canada whose vocational and academic credentials gained elsewhere aren't recognized here etc.)
8. an increase in ODSP payments in response to the OECD concern that 'perhaps the biggest challenge facing Canada was poverty among people with disabilities'
9. that ODSP continue in not making financial support conditional upon work related participation

It is evident from your Review that you have sought input from SA recipients including those most adversely affected by the current system. You have ample documented proof of how hard things are for them.

As you are on the verge of possibly affecting significant political change, we urge you to be bold to articulate what is urgently required; to not forget whose interests you are actually representing, people who but for your voice have little say at the table where decisions are made.

If you don't speak up for them, who will?

Thank you for reviewing this submission.

Sincerely,

Betty Hubbard