

WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION FOR THE REVIEW OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN ONTARIO

Written submissions dropped off at the registration desk March 7, 2012, will be submitted to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario by **The Social Planning Council of York Region and the Do the Math Working Group of York Region**. **After March 7th, you can still complete this submission form below on-line, save the document and email it back to Yvonne Kelly at yvonnek@vrfn.ca** We require these to be sent to us on or by Thursday March 15th with the deadline for submission being Friday March 16th.

Alternatively, you can submit your response directly by visiting www.socialassistancereview.ca, downloading Discussion Paper 2 and completing the online Workbook, or email your comments to socialassistancereview@ontario.ca.

Submissions can also be faxed 416-212-0413 or mailed to:

**Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor Street West
4th Floor, Suite 400
Toronto, ON M4W 3E2**

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario has posted a selection of submissions on its website to help facilitate dialogue on social assistance issues. By sending the Commission your submission, you are giving the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario permission to post it on the website and/or cite it in Commission publications.

If your submission is personal in nature and/or you are not comfortable having your name published in the Commission's website, please indicate that in your submission.

The Do the Math Working Group of York Region has been operating since June 2009 in an effort to address the food security challenges of residents of York Region including those on social assistance who live in deep poverty and have been living in deep poverty since the 22% cuts to social assistance rates in 1995. We are part of the provincial umbrella of the PUT FOOD IN THE BUDGET Coalition as well as the POVERTY FREE ONTARIO Campaign that began in 2011.

To address deep poverty we have been advocating for the Immediate Introduction of a \$100 Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on Social Assistance in Ontario since our inception in June 2009. *We continue to advocate for the HFS as we believe it is the one measure that can make an immediate impact on people's lives and we have province wide support for this initiative including the endorsement of 16 Municipal and/or Regional Governments including York Region who know and assume the full costs of poverty when residents are not able to escape from it.*

Overwhelming evidence points to the fact that poverty and as a result, hunger, are on the increase, even in areas always thought to be better-off, like York Region.

- An overall 28% increase in food bank use occurred between 2009-2010
- The number of meal programs supported by food banks increased by 25% in 2010.

“We need change. We need our governments to step up and provide effective social programs that allow families and individuals to live with health and dignity. We need politicians to be bold and make well-reasoned decisions for the long-term good of our citizens. We need help, because Ontario’s food banks cannot – and should not – have to shoulder this responsibility forever.”

Hunger Count 2010.

In reference to the Input Paper released by the SAR Commission we have the following points to make:

Fairness:

- We believe that the parameters (terms of reference) within which the Commissioners have been asked to complete their review are limiting and in some cases counter-productive to arriving at favourable outcomes.
- In the case of the parameter of fairness to be considered when comparing social assistance recipients and low-wage earners, we feel that this is a very dangerous and divisive comparison to make. Both groups are at the very bottom of the income scale, living on or in most cases below the poverty line, regardless of what measure is used. To compare these two groups and arrive at fairness is not possible and is even an unfair request of the Commissioners to work within those parameters.
- Perhaps a comparison between low-income individuals regardless of their income source, to the highest of income earners might be more fair and productive in terms of exploring alternatives that are necessary in terms of lifting people out of poverty in this province.
- Also with respect to fairness, comparing OW recipients and ODSP recipients does not yield a helpful discussion of the issues. Both are receiving well below what is required to live at the very basic level, let alone eat or live healthily.

Adequacy of Rates

- In York Region where there is a 12 year waiting list for affordable housing, an individual’s entitlement for one month does not even cover the cost of market rent in the majority of cases.
- There is no avoiding the obvious. **When the gap** between what individuals receive to live on for one month, and what they require in order to live at the poverty line, **is larger than what they are entitled to**, then the issue is clearly adequacy.
- Raising the rates is the only logical first step to take. Monies spent on improving the system and making employment programs more accessible and more efficient, will be money wasted when people cannot even avail themselves of such supports because they are focussed on survival and dealing with hunger, stress and constant health care issues as result of prolonged poverty.

Recognizing the Impossible Task before the Commission

- We recognize the hard work of the Commission in making recommendations for systemic changes to the ways in which the rules and benefit structure are rolled out. You have been given an impossible task. But we ask that you make the recommendations that you feel would be necessary to actually achieve a system that respects the cost of living and individual's right to dignity, and that would eventually help lift people out of poverty and for many, back into the workforce.
- We urge you to make the right recommendations and let the politicians make the tough decisions about how to spend the resources they have. Don't make it easy for them to cut corners and make minor changes that won't really amount to significant change. Remember, we've all been waiting for the bold changes touted about in the early days of the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the announcements about the Review.
- We also want to acknowledge that you have identified the many outside factors that impinge on this review such as an economic reality that does not even allow for the jobs particularly good jobs, that would be necessary to assist in lifting people out of poverty.
- Therefore we want to urge you to make recommendations that would enable people to avail themselves of their basic needs and necessary supports to survive in an economy that cannot even promise jobs to those who have a good education and long work histories, until such time when circumstances improve and it is possible for people to work and live and obtain decent employment that meets the real costs of living. Not even our minimum wage does that at this time.

Missing Piece - \$100 Healthy Food Supplement

- It is notable to the thousands of individuals and organizations who have shown their unwavering support for the Introduction of the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement that there is but a mere mention of this recommendation in the Input Paper. Meanwhile, the Housing Supplement is being considered and put forth as a primary consideration and feedback is being invited on this. How can it be that a recommendation to address the urgency of hunger and poverty in communities all across Ontario (more than 20 communities have actively participated in the PFIB coalition and 26 ISARC Communities have also put their support behind the Healthy Food Supplement) and yet this has not resulted in much acknowledgement by the Commission at all.
- 16 Municipal and/or Regional Governments have put their weight behind the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement in the form of endorsements and recommendations because they know the dire poverty that exists in their communities and know all too well the costs and expenses that this brings to bare in the form of local services and programs not to mention the extreme burden that deep poverty is placing on overtaxed charitable programs and networks.
- We ask that you pay Close Attention to what people and local government officials from all across Ontario are saying to you about the sense of Urgency and the Immediacy of Need, and reflect that in your final set of recommendations. It was an extreme disappointment to not have had the Healthy Food Supplement taken more seriously in this recent Input Paper.

There is much more to say, but we recognize that the spectrum of issues and recommendations will be covered in the many other submissions which you will no doubt receive following the release of the Input Paper #2.

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to these issues and urge you to make recommendations that will actually address the dire poverty that people are experiencing in this rich province of Ontario. We have failed one generation already in the years following from the mid 90's and cannot bear the thought of repeating those mistakes.

Sincerely.

**Yvonne Kelly and Pat Taylor on behalf of the
Do the Math Working Group York Region**

Members include:

*Social Planning Council of York Region
York Region Food Network
Poverty Action for Change Coalition (PACC)
Trinity United Church in Newmarket
LAMP Lunch Program
St. John Chrysostom Church
Heart and Stroke Foundation, YR
Housing Help Centre
YR Alliance to End Homelessness
Georgina Food Pantry*