



Fairlawn Avenue United Church

28 Fairlawn Avenue, Toronto ON M5M 1S7

Tel 416-481-6848 Fax 416-481-4109

www.fairlawnavenueunited.ca

“Let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”
Amos 5/24

March 15, 2012

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor St W., Ste. 400
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 3E2

Sent by fax 416-212-0413 page 1 of 4

Re: Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform

Attention: Hon Frances Lankin PC and Dr Munir A. Sheikh

Dear Ms. Lankin and Dr. Sheikh:

I am writing on behalf of the Social Justice Team at Fairlawn Avenue United Church regarding the Discussion Paper 2: Approaches to Reform. Social justice is an integral part of our faith, as central as prayer and worship and we appreciate the opportunity to respond to this Discussion Paper. Our submission is consistent with our faith traditions and our hope for a just future for all.

As Christians we deplore the intolerable living conditions of recipients of social assistance in Ontario and had looked forward to a document that would provide a clear long-term vision to improve this condition. We are deeply disappointed that Discussion Paper #2 does not address the profound injustice of a system that creates and sustains poverty.

The Ontario government has made a commitment to reduce poverty. We urge the Commission to reflect the urgency of the current situation by advocating for social assistance rates that will move toward the elimination of deep poverty.

We would like to make the following points:

1. Urgency of Reforms to Social Assistance Rates

The current rates do not provide sufficient funds for food, shelter and other necessities of a dignified life. We expect the SAR Commissioners to recommend specific, immediate changes to current social assistance rates. As we noted in our August 2011 submission, the rates for social assistance have been out of whack since they were dropped by 22% in 1995. In addition, they have not been increased from even that low level to keep pace with the cost of living.

We expect a more substantial emphasis in addressing the inadequacy of current Social Assistance rates. The rates must move toward a level that can sustain a life of dignity and opportunity.

At a minimum, we ask that you recommend the government end deep poverty by getting the rates up to 80% of the LIM Poverty Line Measure with a built in adjustment for inflation.

Market Basket Measure Numbers and the actual average costs of rent set out in the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation's (CMHC) April & October Average Market Rent Reports should be used to establish the annual cost of living.

2. \$100 Healthy Food Supplement: immediate action to address health needs of adults on social assistance

We regret that the Commission makes no mention of the introduction of the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement – a recommendation adopted by sixteen city councils representing 3,000,000 Ontarians in 19 communities. The congregation of Fairlawn Avenue United Church passed a motion supporting this initiative at its 2011 semi-annual meeting last September. It is a small amount but it is a step in the right direction and sends the right message.

3. Fairness and Trade-Offs: those on social assistance and low income workers

A comprehensive approach is needed to address poverty. While we note that the mandate of this Commission is to address social assistance, we are concerned about the challenges of low income workers. This paper appears to promote division and competition between social assistance recipients and those dependent on minimum wage jobs. The reality is that both groups are the face of poverty in Ontario, marginalized by their lack of livable income. It is crucial to provide appropriate, sufficient and effective supports to low income workers and social assistance recipients alike.

Claw backs act as disincentives to workforce attachment. The removal of claw backs for those moving into the work force from social assistance is essential to allow people to move out of poverty.

We also support recommendations to extend medical, dental and other supports to all low income Ontarians as an essential part of maintaining healthy communities and a healthy workforce.

Full-time workers earning the current minimum wage still live in poverty. Increases to minimum wage and social assistance rates should be fully indexed to the annual cost of living increase. Increased income will lead to increases in economic activity in local communities throughout the province.

4. Make Policy Easier to Understand for Recipients and Taxpayers

While we understand that the Commission must operate within a fiscal and accountability framework for the disbursement of public funds, policy must ensure that investment of tax monies is viewed through the lens of poverty reduction and the dignity of all families and individuals.

The application & receipt process for social assistance should be less complex. In addition, rigid rules can present further barriers in getting recipients back to work.

It should be easier for individuals to apply for and receive assistance. Many of the stories in *Lives Still in the Balance* and its follow-up *Persistent Poverty* talked about applicants being turned down for benefits because a form was incorrectly filled out. We agree that there should be an accounting to tax payers of monies appropriately spent but we also need to ensure the dignity of the individual.

5. Disability and Work: addressing how existing rules and policies restrict the smooth transition to employment for those on ODSP

Respecting the autonomy of the person is paramount. It is essential to ensure that people with disabilities who want to work and are able to do so have access to effective and appropriate employment supports. They should not be subjected to unreasonable rules and claw backs of employment income.

Recipients of ODSP should have the flexibility to try out work placements. Perceptions of disability and the lack of effective employment supports also serve as major barriers to full workforce participation. We ask the Commission to urge the Government of Ontario to develop and implement concrete plans to address these barriers.

Responding to the Drummond Report

The Commission has a unique opportunity to provide its own response to those recommendations of the Drummond Report that would have the greatest negative impact & cause additional hardship for social assistance recipients and low income workers.

There are many structural issues that need to be addressed in approaching social assistance reforms. It is imperative that reforms move from recommendations in numerous reports to concrete action on poverty reduction that is in the economic interests of all Ontarians.

We had hoped that this Discussion Paper 2 would provide a strong message of the need to reform social assistance and stop the perpetuation of structural poverty on Ontario. We do not see this message clearly stated.

We urge the Commission to consider our requests carefully and look forward to a final report that will include specific long-term changes to social assistance resulting in sustainable supports for all to live in dignity. We believe that the majority of Ontarians would support such changes when they understand the impact of poverty and its consequences on our society.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our input.

Yours sincerely,

Original signed

Rosemary Pryde, Chair
Social Justice Team
Fairlawn Avenue United Church

c.c. Mike Colle,
MPP Eglinton-Lawrence
Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Natural Resources