

To the Commission on Social Assistance:

And to: FRANCIS LANKIN AND MUNIR SHEIKH,
Commissioners.

FROM: HOPE CENTRE GROUP, WELLAND, ONTARIO.

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Our group submitted answers to the Issue and Ideas questions, as you requested. We went to meetings and were present with both of you in Welland and Niagara Falls. We believed that you would assist low income people have a better life and an adequate income.

We believe that the Options Paper that was coming would give objective for social assistance that would reduce poverty with objective to treat low income people with dignity without stigma and discrimination. We believe the process of life on social assistance would change for the better. We looked to see the positive personalized assistive supports to employment that would be suggested for consideration; how disabled person would be assisted to have quality of life and be able to contribute to the Ontario society and the labour market.

We did not see this in the report. We saw one idea that the disabled and Ontario Works recipients raise about the working poor not having the Ontario Drug Benefit. This was not about those of us supported by social assistance in Ontario.

Why are the Commissioners not hearing clearly expressed community voices for significant rate increases?

We raised the issues of the dignity that comes from contribution to a work place and how we would need different types of work places,

training centres, and job coaches. We suggested various types of work places that could assist some of us to move to regular employment but would allow many of us to contribute even if the a few hours a day or each week. A system that has positive personalized supports to employment with consideration for the disabled persons' medical conditions and limitations without negative responses or disincentives will be a primary issue. For the disabled person to succeed in working within his capacity and limitations they need a one to one assessment of their abilities. Often their desires are more than they can really achieve. A new future of day to day living and working in shelter employment is a good idea to help a disabled person contribute to their own support. Most disabled persons want to do this through their own efforts within their abilities and capacities. This is not what we saw in the Discussion Paper: 2.

The discussion on rate increases was not even raised. Most disabled persons cannot work in a regular work place and employers would not hire them to perform work as they are often a danger in the work place. They cannot return to the work place to do regular work as the Discussion Paper: 2 suggested. They are missing the proper nutrition that public assistance is not allowing to have in the budget allotted. Disabled persons working need the balanced good diet more than healthy persons on other supports.

Training, coaching together with other supports would need to be in place to allow any contribution to a regular employment position. A process of consideration of our abilities to work seems to be left out of the discussion. We would need assessments and work hardening to discover our limits and our inabilities to perform certain types of work. We now feel that many of the decisions were already made and this report was only to move those on social assistance along the path towards change of the structure of the future of social assistance. We were misled into thinking the Ontario Government was actually going to listen and that they were interested and cared.

The Discussions Paper 2: contradicts itself. It is not written in the best interest of the Reduction of Poverty or the best interests of a person living in poverty. It does not discuss how to treat a social assistance person with dignity or a plan to assisted our low income community have more quality of life in our daily lives. Disabled

persons want to contribute within their abilities and limitations but they too see that the labour market needs reform and education on providing work positions that a disabled person could perform. Few employers have job share positions, or light duty part-time positions to offer. As the Ontario government is changing the rules for Employment Standards we question if this will be making room for the disabled to work in the work places of Ontario. What about the WSIB issues. Why is this education not the priority in addition to the adequacy low income families needs? "First things first", is a good process.

Where are the jobs? The federal government is raising the age of retirement and when benefits will be paid out. More and more people will need to keep working while many young persons out of college and university are waiting for someone to retire so they can have a life and a job. Many advertised positions have hundreds of applicants apply where new employment may begin. A single job position will have over 100 or more résumé responses for that one position. The advertising time frame is kept short now to discourage too many applicants putting in there request for this one job.

Work environments where the disabled person can work with other disabled persons to train, progress and work within their capacities need to be established and built. The only places in our area are N-TEC. ARC Industries and the March of Dimes. Goodwill Industries is opening a business that employs a few disabled persons and minimum wage employees to work in their work place. These are the only viable facilities in Niagara. They are not able to assist many individuals at a time. They are not a training facility while N-TEC is. N-TEC has given many individuals a good daily existence but the proper pay does not accompany the work that is done.

EXAMPLE: A group, The Dan Group, of disabled persons wanted to open their own work place where individuals could fill in work slots and perform work within their capacities. The support services of those who were able bodied were lost in the 1995 cuts and this work place never materialized. They had a plan and were ready to look for funding when the cuts to agencies took place. They did not need incentives as they had a strong desire to work as much as they could in an

employment place that was made for them. They wanted to work with recycled tires and make other products from the old rubber. They had a good plan. Rubber ties are not being used to make patio blocks to use indoors and outdoors on patio deck, pool sides, and on other surfaces. This could have been their business. The product is small enough to handle and lift easily and can be put in small packaging of 4-8 pieces and still be lifted without equipment.

A work place that understands disabilities and is willing to give accommodation to those trying to work is an important aspect of a work place where disabled persons could ever work. The WSIB rules are a barrier for employers to allow disabled persons to work in their workplace. This is why a separate work place with different rules needs to be established for work training and on going work where this community employer would hire a person who acts out at times when under stress or has to go home to lie down as he has a sudden on set of pain. This is not how regular employers operate in our society as this does not make profit for the employer. These are problems any employer does not want to deal with. The employer may work with an agency to file one of his job positions by a team from that agency. It would be the agencies job position to fill daily and to do training the employees and have sufficient number persons trained to keep this position working to full capacity. The employer could pay the agency. It would up to the agency to pay for the hours of work of the worker and for the Job Coach. A Job Coach would be responsible daily to keep that position productive. This would be a different type of Labour Pool made up of teams of persons comfortable to work with one another and who understood each others abilities and capacities for the job. This would require more financial investment, not cuts. The Ontario government needs to look elsewhere to find the income it needs to strengthen and change the labour market and build or fund these work places for the disabled. When some many persons apply and are granted it would be wise for this government to look into the history of each individual to see the reason for the disability. Why is this problem at the degree that it is. Is it environmental? What do we need to change to decrease the numbers? The restructuring will not change what has been taking place and we need to understand why this is taking place in the

numbers that it is. These disabled persons are not lazy; they are impaired unable to work in regular employment.

Why do the Commissioners continue to pit the interests of social assistance recipients against those of the working poor in their discussion on “an appropriate benefit structure”?

Not only is their horizontal hostility build into the Discussion Paper: 2, but it is also seen between the Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. Pitting one class of person against another is a bullying tactic. The low wage employee pitted against the employee earning top up for his Ontario Works. The able bodied against the disabled person while looking at the sick disabled person like he is the same as a persons supported by Ontario Works who are employable. The Ontario government wiped out the Vocational Rehabilitation Program that did assist disabled persons to train and find a specific job that they could perform part-time or longer hours depending on the job and their abilities. These individuals are not the same as those on Ontario Works who can work if there were enough jobs in Ontario. When will you do what needs to be done to create employment?

The report does not address the financial need of adequacy of benefits for those on ODSP who want to be trained and assisted to have the ability to bring adequacy into their own lives through work they are able to perform.

The Ontario Works system needs to change and the folding of the ODSP system into the OW system is not a good idea for those on ODSP. These two different categories of persons are not the same. While they could share the same Employment Supports they need to be treated and dealt with differently. It would be better for them to have their own supports as their needs are very different to achieve employment. The standards and requirements need to be different for those who are mentally and emotionally disabled or those with severe disabilities. The process of full integration of these two systems will put the entire disabled community at risk. When it is truly the numbers of persons being deemed disabled then is not the real issue what is the cause? The story of the babies floating down the river in vast numbers and the struggle to save them was only a “band-aid”

solution. The real solution was found when those involved went up the river to discover the reason that these babies were being sent down river. This was the prevention part and much more than an unsatisfactory solution like blaming the poor, or taking more and more from the near non-existent middle class. Where in the discussion are the plans for a progressive positive responsible Ontario society?

Dealing with the Ontario deficit is not about Poverty Reduction. When will the cuts be made to the pockets of the rich and the corporations who don't pay taxes and want more tax breaks? What about the lowering to a fair wage for many over paid higher government positions on Ontario? Why are cuts always slanted at those already living with next to nothing? Reducing the deficit is a task that needs to happen by fair taxing and investing in improving social assistance. Cost savings have to be shared and not punish the poor. Other countries have done this and operate in fairness. The Netherlands have a 4% poverty rate with we have a 12% poverty rate. Eventually, we will have to take these steps to be a progressive society and without leaving anyone to live in hunger and without hope. Let Ontario lead the way for all of Canada.

We need good recommendations that move our society to work towards shared solutions without the horizontal hostility raised in Discussion Paper: 2.

Why do the Commissioners reinforce the myth that social assistance recipients need incentives to work?

Increasing OW case loads is a large indicator that we have a labour market problem, but we are not addressing this problem that does work towards a solution to the rising costs of social assistance. The focus in Ontario does not address the many environmental problems that exist; causing some of the health problems that make individuals disabled. Chemicals in work places processes or in foods we eat, or in the water we drink. Who does the work to keep Ontario healthy? When we take a long period of time to make a corporation resolve its problem this time is spent hurting the employees who then can no longer work. We have to work a proper balance in our society and take a proactive approach to issues that affect the health of Ontarians. Many small companies break the rules and then close

when they have too many WSIB issues. Better they were close before the employees were injured and cannot work and this applies to the large corporations who threaten job loss, but this is often the outcome for many who become ill. We need to stop the “band-aids” in our society and act responsibly right away in the best interest of all of our citizens. These situations are adding to the rising costs of social assistance. The steps discussed in Discussion Paper: 2 are steps backward for the Ontario society. Even making ODSP standards higher and tougher will not solve the issues as it means the person will struggle longer, have less money, more lack of nutrition, more medicine and medical care and eventually they will make the standard but will never be able to contribute to their own care. The ideas being considered may prolong the situations but it was be worsening as proper solutions are not provided. Being sicker, with less nutrition and reduced services is not a solution. The longer individuals have to suffer on Ontario Works the sicker they become. The lack of food is starving many of these individuals in our province. Many of the young mothers go without proper food to give their children better food and then they become depressed, sick and in need of medical care. Some become disabled. Have the Commissioners looked at the report on the Oppression of the Poor? This is lack of financial and social justice is not just an issue for social assistance costs. Reports such as ***Poverty is Making us Sick*** (The Wellesley Institute, 2008) and ***Sick and Tired: The Compromised Health of Social Assistance Recipients and the Working Poor in Ontario*** (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T), University of Toronto’s Social Assistance in the New Economy Project (SANE) and the Wellesley Institute, 2009) clearly demonstrate the linkages between low socioeconomic status and poor health. A local report for Niagara Market Basket Measure states our local issues. <http://www.livinginniagarareport.com/09-economic-development-poverty-prosperity-2011/market-basket-measure-in-niagara/>

The Commissioners heard as they produced a report that shows that they did hear, but these issues are not the current topic of discussion.

When will the proper supports to assist to reach reasonable sheltered training and job coaches for employment to reach disabled work

goals be put in place to start a healthy good process of assessment and training for those interested in getting involved with a new constructive way to contribute to their own future and a better quality of life for those disabled people who are able to work for short periods. When will we have support industries that will allow disabled persons to work? When will the market place be ready to allow even on job position in their organization to be filled by a team of disabled persons to share this position. Disabled persons wait for a safe constructive cottage type industry to work in with other disabled persons.

We disagree with the idea of a new severely disabled category and many disabled persons have episodic type conditions that at times in the range of very severe, but they also have times that they can function at a higher level. All of these issues have to be addressed before any of the plans to put many of the disabled community into even part-time work positions can begin. There are large sweeping changes that would need to take place but the persons who are disabled need to be in the same or better position at the end of this as they are able to work in regular employment for a regular gainful employment wage. They need to be able to continue to have the medication coverage they require to address there conditions and to maintain and real health balance.

The disabled community involved in this report wanted to address the issue of the lack of nutrition that is then addressed with medication that causes damage to the kidney or liver and then requires more medical care due to the damage and the notional food could have solved the situation. This part of the plight of many disabled persons who have to go through this and their entire health level lessened. This is not new to many disabled persons but is the same news. Disabled persons believe more individuals could work and would not be disabled if this government paid proper attention to what the answer is to the many problems adding to the disabling factors of a person. It is often the accumulation of the problems that disables.

The government cannot expect people to heal and be health without the proper nutrition or to have medications to address pain issues when disabled. It is also dangerous to work when using some medications and this too will need to be part of any assessment of the

person and their capacity to work and where they can work and the length of time they can perform before the onset of pain. Over medication of individuals can also contribute to problems in a work place. For medication to be given to all low income workers, then the employer needs to be making contributions as they do for EI and WSIB coverage. Perhaps the funding that goes into health benefits needs to be universal and all partly managed by government. Less control by Insurance companies would be beneficial. Many workers pay and have a problem to collect for the coverage they have paid into the system. When these individuals cannot get proper treatment, they too join the ranks of being disabled. Our entire system is a negative based way of existence. Those that are entitled to insurance benefits while they recover are denied and these people are also on EI then OW as they cannot access the benefits they paid to cover them when they were sick. The province needs advocates like the Office of the Workers Advisors to assist sick individuals with the insurance sick claims. The provincial Insurance Commission advocate is not enough. These persons are on OW, then ODSP and never get the benefits they paid to have care for them but the Insurance companies being in higher profits. More unfairness that allows more punishment for the sick person who now has no money to hire a lawyer, or get legal aid to assist him and he is forced to just rely on the Insurance Ombudsman. All of these loop holes need to be closed and the insurance companies need to be forced to care for those that paid for the coverage's to care for them when injured or sick.

Assets: Asset levels need to be raised to the \$60,000 and those already granted need to be grandfathered. A house and car of any value should be exempt for those who are on OW and ODSP. Also RRSP need to be exempt so that when older individuals are able to care for their own needs as they plan before becoming sick or injured. We have to stop punishing those who end up poor. Those on OW need to know that they will not lose everything they own due to the lack of employment in Ontario. If there was a job available to cover the numbers of those unemployed then we would have to look at this differently, but this is not the case. This could happen to any one and until it happens to you it is easy to take such a hard line on what the Province can exempt.

Verification: The farther we move away from “the culture of surveillance “ the more trust that can be built between the Caseworker and the recipient as they can more easily work together to find solutions that always be under the watchful negative eye that is always looking for a cheater. Verification is done once and does not need to be done again unless it is about a job that ended or a house is sold, or the person moves. These need to be in an identity file that is up dated once per year and not tied to the on going file. The workers would have more time for real social work and help the family have a better quality of life and give referrals to other supportive services to assist with the positive running of the family during difficult times. Provide glasses, sports activities and other perks to keep the family open and going forward in spite of their current situation.

To move to a stiff audit system would not address the real needs and problems our society is having. It would be better to send a sheet on what is verified and if there are changes that these are taken to the annual identity file review. For those disabled or who end up moving often the receipts on other proof necessary would be lose for a taxing system and the poor person would be again in dyer straights as they would not be able to file a tax return. Many individuals do not have sufficient capacity to understand what they would need to keep and would have problems year after year and go hungry and lose their housing. A person who has episodic problems is at times to sick to care and would have problems also.

Employment Services: The persons on OW/ODSP need different types of supports for find employment. This could be a two stream program but it needs to be an easy access program that is only for those on social assistance and not part of Employment Ontario.

The participation agreement for those seeking employment is a good tool where both agree what the current process is. Those seeking regular employment that are supported by ODSP could also have a participation agreement to know the conditions of what is required for them to receive employment services and other services. The agreement would be entered into by choice. The process needs to be consistent and not used as a punishment but as a measure of success and celebration of the choices being made together with

their Caseworker. The participation agreement needs to be an encouraging document that works in the best interests of “the person” and “the family”. The person would be able to appeal to an Internal Ombudsman if there is a lack of agreement to mediate a solution.

Employment supports and job coaches will need to be in place and be diverse to cover all situations for needs to end the barriers to employment or the training to obtain skills to reach employment. Job Coaches who could educate employers and well as teach skills to get and keep employment. This process has to be working well for individuals to work a process to find full-time, part-time or volunteer work or training. OW co-op training positions where the staff person in an agency and the Job Coach work to manage the volunteer to learn new or refresh old skills. A part of the Employment support service that that is able to contribute to the labour market and employers open to use persons from the Employment Support program.

Until the world of employers makes a large shift in taking workers from the Employment Support Service that would give positions to persons supported by OW/ODSP as quality trained individuals ready for work then hiring the OW person or the disabled ODSP person will never take place in any numbers sufficient to change the caseload until employers are educated and open to do this. There is still the WSIB issue that is always present and considered by employers. Getting the thinking of employers to change will take time that will make this process slow. While people work this process they need adequacy in their budget. They need the job coach to build strong ties between the new employee and the employers. This will give the employer services beyond hiring a person on his own rather than with the assistance of the Employment Supports Services' job coach. The job coach can work with the employer to remove any barriers to fill the position to excellence. This will be one of the selling points to use these individuals in some of the job positions that open.

One stopping place for OW/ODSP/Employment Support Services that are tied together but not combined as one program is a step forward. The independence allows for different supports at different levels of program and to have the choices on what services the person is open to enter into. The greater the resources of the Employment Support

Services the greater the number of persons who will want to be at this level and work when they can around their disabilities when they can. To lose the separateness does not allow the programs to have an upward step to success and a lessening of the tie to assistance and benefits. The Employment Supports open to all OW/ODSP supported people is a step forward and a choice to work towards success. For those on OW the choice could still be open for that person to use the Employment Supports Services or not. Waiting and not looking for work or training would be a deterrent to allow them into the Employment Support Services as they really do not want to work and perhaps they need some other form of resource to move them forward. Again this needs to be negotiated as employers need persons who want to work. If the systems were integrated some may fall through the cracks and there is no defined success place to move on to, even if it is not full time employment. A system that works on celebration, rather than negative scrutiny, works to excellence with success. This type of system seldom leaves many behind unless there is a capacity issue. The Employment Supports would assist this person find the resources to still progress.

Travel: Travel out of the province with family or for funerals was not raised as an issue and this is a concern raised as an issue. The disabled persons were concerned for disabled persons who want to travel within the benefit month to be with family or friends from time to time. Often a family member will cover the costs or sufficient income is saved to take the trip by the disabled person. The disabled person needs some perks in their lives. They need to have happy times when they are able. Being disabled is most often for ever and this is depressing unless the person can still have small hopes and dreams take place. Without the small goals and success the disabled person becomes sicker as time passes. This too is a drain on the medical system.

Where to Find Employment Employers: Part of the funding dollars of government services and agencies could be used to have positions filled by disabled persons or a team of disabled persons through an agency job coach. Job share positions with two or three disabled persons or one able bodied older worker who want to only work part-time. We need to re-think how to use these different classes of employees and it can easily start in government and agency funded

employers. The Ontario Government could set the example for community employers and show they believe community employers could benefit also. These government funded employers could lead the way.

Their need to be many different ways for agencies to fund providing these services to the community employers and funds to build small manufacturing shelter workshop places that can hire disabled persons or job share teams/work crews/ to work a position. Once the team is working well in the shelter work place they may be ready to enter the regular work world and regular employment.