



March 13, 2012

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance  
2 Bloor Street West  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Suite 400  
Toronto, On M4W 3E2

Dear Commissioners:

Members of the Niagara Prosperity Community Committee have received and reviewed the Social Assistance Review Discussion Paper #2. As many of us attended the public consultation meetings with the Commissioners on July 5 and participated in independent workshops to engage those with lived experience, we were awaiting the release of this interim report.

With about 8% of Niagara residents (which equates to more than 34,475 individuals) trying to survive on Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program and knowing first-hand how hard Niagara was impacted by the economic downturn, we were hoping to read that you were, first and foremost, recommending an immediate increase to social assistance rates. Instead we are left wondering what happened between the time input was received and this report was issued.

We are concerned that the salient points raised by those who participated in the 2011 consultations, and those who submitted responses, were missed. There seems to be a disconnect between what you were told and what is reflected in Discussion Paper #2.

We cite the following points:

**Adequacy of rates** - Almost 80% of just the written submissions indicated social assistance rates are too low. This issue should have been front and centre in this Discussion Paper, as it was during the consultations. With rates now lower, in terms of buying power, than they were during the darkest days of Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution, more needs to be done than the government's current practice of annual increases that are lower than the cost of living index. As an immediate first step towards improving rates, we continue to advocate for a \$100 a month Healthy Food Supplement, a position echoed by many others in Niagara including the Regional Municipality of Niagara and 16 other city councils, including some in Niagara.

**Pitting Social Assistance recipients against the working poor** – As the Regional Municipality of Niagara noted in their response, 'It appears the Commission has positioned the issue of fairness as a competition between people who are poor.' It is a myth that the majority of social assistance recipients need an incentive to work. We don't believe it should be a competition between one group of poor and another. Furthermore, as Regional Niagara added, 'The notion that they need incentives to leave social assistance does little to increase their appeal to employers as a suitable pool of potential employees.' Both should benefit from this review. The focus should be on improving living conditions for all low income Ontarians.

**Poverty Measure** - The Government of Ontario set the Low Income Measure as the Province's official income poverty line in 2008. This does not need to be re-opened now. Doing so would only serve to delay or distract the action that is urgently needed.

**Missed opportunity to champion the link between poverty and health** - Given their very low income, poor living conditions and limited opportunities, people living in poverty, particularly those receiving social assistance, face greater risk of, and are burdened by, ill health. An effective social assistance strategy for Ontario will make the link between poverty and health, thereby helping to reduce Health Care costs through emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and drug costs.

We are concerned that Discussion Paper #2 does not express an overriding vision as to what the role and objectives of social assistance should be - even though your first Discussion Paper specifically asked for input on this. Many respondents said they believed the overriding objectives of social assistance should be to:

- reduce poverty;
- treat people with dignity; and
- provide positive, personalized supports to employment, rather than negative penalties and disincentives.

Our response was purposefully intended to be brief. For a more in-depth response, we urge you to study the response submitted by Regional Niagara. Their response can also be accessed online at

<http://www.regional.niagara.on.ca/council/Council%20Documents/OCRBW-com%206-20122012-02-22%20161841.pdf>.

As you noted during your initial consultations last summer, this is the first thorough review of social assistance in a generation. It would be a disservice to those on social assistance not to champion a substantial overhaul of the system that would improve their lives.

Sincerely,



Elisabeth Zimmerman, Chair



Willy Noiles, Vice-Chair

Niagara Prosperity Community Committee

- *A collaborative of over 30 Niagara Stakeholders seeking to improve quality of life for individuals in all of Niagara's neighbourhoods*

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