

THE PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF ONTARIO

(Estb. 1923)

Commissioners for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor St., West , Fourth Floor, Suite 400
Toronto, Ontario M4W 3E2
socialassistancereview@ontario.ca

March 16th, 2012

Dear Commissioners Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh

As President of the Provincial Council of Women of Ontario (PCWO), representing many thousands of Ontarians through our twelve Provincially Organized Society (POS) affiliates and five Local Councils of Women, I bring to your attention our disappointment with the Commission's Social Assistance Review Discussion Paper #2: Issues and Ideas.

It has been 16 years since the drastic welfare cuts of 1996 left so many people deep in poverty and 4 years since the Provincial Government promised to reduce child poverty by 25% in 5 years. In our September 1st, 2011 submission to your Commission, we expressed our extreme frustration with the Government's "belief in poverty myths, their failure to raise social assistance rates - which are still below 1992 rates - and the need for an immediate \$100 food supplement to address critical levels of hunger." PCWO also expressed "cautious optimism that your Commission's final report would "compel" the government to make significant changes to our social assistance system."

As the Commission traveled across Ontario over the past several months and heard from a wide diversity of individuals, community groups, experts, Churches, organizations, front-line agencies, health providers and social assistance workers and staff, we were pleased that in discussions and public statements, you agreed that :

- * welfare rates are far from adequate.
- * the vast majority of social assistance recipients do not cheat, are very anxious to work, need better employment supports, and feel demeaned by the welfare myths.
- * the poor receiving social assistance should not be pitted against the working poor, as it is the labour market that fails to provide decent jobs at living wages .
- * serious efforts must be made by the government to "transform" the system so that it is just, fair, supportive and sustainable.

We interpret "sustainable" to mean the Commission's support for immediate and ongoing increased government investments in our poorest and most vulnerable Ontarians, so that the individual, community and provincial costs of poverty - and a quickly accumulating social deficit - do not continue to accelerate. Rather, the social deficit will stabilize and then shrink and the cost-savings of prevention will be realized, as:

- * adequate welfare rates will go straight back into the community for food, clothing and shelter and help people maintain their health.

* job creation and employment supports, along with decent wages, will allow people to support families and pay taxes.

* investments in affordable housing and other community support services, will improve people's quality of life and reduce the costs of after-the- fact interventions and remedial services.

Recently on video-tape, you spoke of the "bigger picture" for a "transformed system". This underlines the need for Discussion Paper #2 to lay a sound foundation for your final recommendations to Government through an overall "vision" and key short term and long term goals.

Instead, the paper dwells on, and we are asked to further discuss, many "choices and trade-offs" - all underlain by the welfare myths which the Commission has seemingly set aside.

Over and over, good ideas with broad public support, are noted, but then negated by inaccurate information. For example, the Discussion Paper states that there is no established poverty measurement, when we know the low income measurement (LIM) is used by the Government.

Or faulty suppositions are cited, such as the need for "incentives" for people to work, or the "unfairness" of people working side by side, one receiving social assistance help and one not. The discussion paper sets this latter view up as a trade-off between providing an "appropriate benefit" and being fair to low wage workers. It also needlessly pits one set of interests against another in silos - or degrees of "worth."

PCWO finds it quite unacceptable that the discussion paper unduly complicates the Commission's complex task and undermines what should be a solid, factual and visionary document, with just the methods of achieving your goals to be determined in the coming months.

There should be no trade-offs, myths or silos. Rather there must be vision, facts and best practices.

PCWO urges Commissioners to be champions of the poor! Put their most pressing needs ahead of the false myths, assumptions and political directives. Speak out strongly at this critical point in time, when others, such as the Drummond Report, urge spending cuts, our economy deteriorates, the poor fall further and further behind and lose hope, full time jobs with fair wages disappear, and more and more Ontarians join the growing ranks of the unemployed, working poor, desperately poor and the homeless.

Mary Potter
President PCWO
461 Kilman Road RR#1
Ridgeville ON L0S 1M0
jmpotter@talkwireless.ca