

THE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM NETWORK OF NIAGARA (SARNN)

***A Network of Front Line Agencies, Organizations, Churches and Individuals -established
in response to the 1988 Welfare Reforms of Judge George Thomson's Social Assistance
Review Commission***

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance
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March 16, 2012

Re: Social Assistance Review Discussion Paper #2

Dear Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh,

The Social Assistance Reform Network of Niagara (SARNN) is dismayed that Discussion Paper#2 - the Commission's initial response to the thousands of diverse groups and individuals who have engaged in its Social Assistance Review – fails to lay the essential groundwork for the Commission to advocate strongly on behalf of those who will be most affected by your final recommendations and outcomes.

In fact, we see that contrary to some of your forward-looking views, as expressed on TVO on February 28th, the discussion paper creates huge road blocks, as it frames your crucial task of advising the Government on social welfare reform within the very damaging constraints of a welfare myth – that recipients don't want to work – and a false ideology that benefits to the poor must not give them at an advantage over the working poor.

The latter view on the need for “*balance*” and possible unfairness to the working poor, fails to recognize the desperate living, social and health conditions of the poor, their desire to support themselves and their families through work, and, the need for an improved labor market with liveable wages for both the poor and working poor. More important, it also severely constricts the Commission's opportunities to develop a plan that reflects its stated “*vision of a 21st century income security system that enables all Ontarians to live with dignity, participate in their communities and contribute to a prospering economy.*”

This is clearly illustrated by the discussion paper's failure to acknowledge the growing consensus, evidenced by multiple requests province-wide, from municipalities representing 3 million Ontarians, medical organizations, front-line agencies, large inter-faith groups, public interest groups, research institutes and others, for adequacy of social assistance rates, and in the interim, an immediate \$100 per month supplement for individuals to alleviate their extreme hunger.

Of further grave concern to SARNN is the Commission's lack of urgency and the conflicting and (intervening) regressive recommendation of the Drummond report that Provincial increases to social program spending be cut to 0.5% over 5 years.

This is despite the fact that social assistance recipients have been suffering for an extremely lengthy time from the huge 22.6% social assistance rate cuts of 1996, a paucity of rate

increases to make up for this, the adjusted costs of inflation, and now, a steadily accelerating loss of jobs in a faltering economy.

With all of the above in mind, rather than entering into further discussions around what we perceive to be a flawed and in places contradictory discussion paper, SARNN respectfully reiterates, in our addendum below, its most important requests of government over the last few years as recommended to the Commission by SARNN in response to your June 11th 2011 discussion paper ' *Issues and Ideas*'.

We conclude by urging you to turn this process around quickly and decisively. Step outside the mythological and ideological parameters set by some of the Government's more regressive goals and your discussion papers. Take advantage of the expertise, evidence, and the many excellent recommendations from the original discussion participants. And then, backed by a broad and growing public consensus re the role social assistance should play in eradicating deep poverty - and the Provinces' stated intent to reduce poverty – move swiftly and decisively into the task at hand. That is, to create a fair, just, workable plan for both the short and long term future of poor Ontarians.

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ADDENDUM: Important requests to Government and to the Commission as noted in our response to the Commissions June 2011 Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas

*the elimination of deep poverty by 2015 and a reduction of general poverty to 4% or lower within a decade (10. SPNO 2011-2015 Human dignity for All: Working for a Poverty Free Ontario, Spring 2011)

*an immediate payment of a \$100 Healthy Food Supplement (HFS) for adults receiving social assistance to alleviate chronic cycles of hunger (6. PFIB campaign)

* implementation of a statutory wage framework that assures all year-long full-time workers (35/week) sufficient for a basic income 10% above poverty, and an additional three stage minimum 75 cents wage increase to \$12.50 /hr by 2014 (11. *ibid*)

* an allowance for retention of earned income for those in receipt of social assistance until a person is able to be truly independent

* initial and ongoing substantive catch-up investments in affordable, accessible , appropriate housing, with a ten year goal of providing 750,000 new and renovated homes, for which the Province's shared costs should be \$1 billion per year (5. Michael Shapcott Wellesley Institute. Forums in Niagara 2007 and 2010)

* dental, drug and vision coverage to low income workers and preventative dental care for those receiving social assistance