



Social Issues Networking Group

SING

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Submission to the Social Assistance Review Commission Comments on Discussion Paper #2

The Social Issues Networking Group – SING is a coalition committed to finding solutions to and taking action on issues that affect people living in poverty. SING emerged in 1998, as the Child Tax Action Coalition hoping to end the claw back of the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS). The efforts of the Coalition resulted in the development of the Kingston Entitlement Access Program wherein the City of Kingston returned the 20% of the “claw back” that they received from the province to the families on social assistance. Since then SING has met with success on a wide variety of poverty and social justice issues.

Clear vision and understanding of the role and purpose of social assistance are prerequisites for a meaningful discussion about reform of the social assistance system. This discussion was initiated as a part of *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* in order for the social assistance system to meet the needs of all recipients but the Discussion Paper 2 seems to be departing from that goal. While the first discussion paper asked for feedback on what goals and purpose of assistance may have, Discussion Paper 2 does not lay out a clear vision of the system's roles and objectives. Any input into Discussion Paper 2 is further complicated by the fact that each chapter offers a series of options: certain options from a chapter may provide solutions but only if they are matched with appropriate options suggested in other chapters. For example, one should not remove health benefits from social assistance recipients before figuring out how to provide government support while introducing requests for pooled insurance program for employers. These omissions allow for the continuation of a patchwork policy that suits the needs of government without consideration for the effects on low-income individuals.

Further, the paper neglects to convey the urgency with which we need action in Ontario. Social assistance recipients have been living with austerity since the mid-1990s when social assistance rates were cut by 21.6%. Since then only limited increases have been implemented that, with inflation, have kept social assistance rates in real terms lower today than in 1995. While we appreciate the long-term focus of the review, we are disappointed by the lack of short-term goals suggested that would assist people now. For instance, the \$100/month Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on social assistance was supported by many groups across Ontario, and recently endorsed by the City of Kingston, but was not listed as an option in this discussion paper.

This document prioritizes helping people move from assistance to employment. While we support efforts to increase employment, we know that employment is not a sufficient condition for poverty elimination. Further, to “expect” everyone to have a job would entail having enough jobs available for all Ontarians of working age. We cannot punish individuals further because there are not enough jobs available. Therefore, we support increasing employment supports that are tailored to suit individual needs, but we also caution the Commissioners against proposing policy that would punish those who are unable to find work. Further, we are dismayed that the report frames the discussion as providing incentives to work, when throughout the consultation process individuals and organizations discussed removing the disincentives to work. This framing reinforces the well-entrenched belief that people living on social assistance are unwilling to work.

Tying eligibility for benefits to participating in specific employment programs for people with disabilities would first require many other steps. To expect individuals to participate in employment services, there would first have to be adequate supports in place. The strategy would also require accommodating workplaces that are equipped to support people with varying disabilities. Since neither adequate supports nor appropriate workplaces are currently in existence, we cannot require people with disabilities to participate in employment programs as it may prohibit people from accessing benefits due to unfair conditions.

In Kingston, most individuals and organizations that attended the consultations argued for an increase in the benefit rates that is based on actual living costs. However, the discussion paper cites the need to respect working-Ontarians and ensure they receive wages higher than those on assistance. This rhetoric perpetuates the idea of “deserving” and “undeserving”, in which people unable to find jobs or unable to work are labeled as “less deserving” of dignity and a decent standard of living than people who have jobs. Rather than lowering our expectations for what people on assistance should be receiving, so their income is less than a minimum wage earner’s, this is a perfect opportunity for the report to outline the necessity for an increase in the minimum wage. As laid out in Discussion Paper #1, social assistance is part of a broader income security system that also includes minimum wage: therefore discussions on social assistance rates and employment expectations should include a discussion on the adequacy of minimum wage. We would like the Commission to take a step further and suggest that the government enact policies that support a healthy, stable labour force. This would include policies that work towards using the Living Wage as the standard by which we expect all employees to be paid. While we understand that people should be expected to work, we expect the government to set conditions for a healthy labour market in which all people have access to safe, secure jobs that pay a living wage. This document focuses on fairness and equitability between social assistance recipients and people working for a minimum wage: this focus on minor inequities blurs the bigger societal picture in which taxation brackets remain unchanged despite the growing inequities in earnings.

Shift to severely disabled and everyone else would reduce people to employability status. This proposition is worrisome on many levels: experiences from Britain and Australia already indicate inadequacy of the tools used; the process would be costly and redirect attention from supports to categorization; distinction between employable and unemployable ODSP recipients would open the door for participation agreements, the worst aspect of OW surveillance, to creep into ODSP. Any assessment should be removed from bureaucratic standpoint and focused on individual goals and supports around barriers and needs.

While the suggested change from monthly reporting to auditing appears to respond to requests to reduce surveillance in the social assistance system, it is burdensome. The paper states: "Instead they could continue to report monthly, but only be required to produce pay stubs or receipts if there is an audit." It is unclear how reporting without submitting documentation reduces surveillance, but it is certain that doing so moves the responsibility for filing and holding to documentation onto social assistance recipients.

We are wary of the suggestion to remove other income benefits and put that money towards raising the general benefits rate. These benefits were put in place to assist people in unique situations in which they require additional assistance. We believe that the social assistance system must recognize the unique needs of people at specific points in their lives. Removing the other income benefits limits case workers' ability to respond to people's individual needs. We would however, support the creation of benefits (drug, vision, dental) for all low income individuals administered outside the social assistance system. Creation of health benefits would have to address inconsistencies in the health benefit system where some employers provide coverage even in spite of the significant strain on their budget, some cannot afford to provide it at all and yet other do not provide benefits even though it would hardly negatively affect their budgets.

The paper also reopens debate on the most appropriate way to measure poverty, the theoretical question that remains imperfectly answered in spite of great efforts around the world. Given that an absolutely satisfactory answer is unlikely to be found in the foreseeable future and that the need to tackle poverty is urgent, we believe that Low Income Measure LIM, which is already accepted in Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy is adequate enough.,

Policies don't exist in isolation but are affected by a political and economic context. However, Discussion Paper 2 lacked any contextualization of our current climate, even though it was released mere days before the Drummond Report promoting an agenda of austerity. In light of this context, we need a strong final document that communities across the province can stand behind and support. The final document should be a strong declaration that advocates for a better system; something we can use to hold our government accountable.