

No Happy Ending

On February 9, the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance released its long-awaited options paper. The commission, promised in 2008 as part of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, was established in 2010 to reform the province's two social assistance programs, Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. After four years of waiting and consultations involving more than 2000 contributors, including employer and labour groups, here at last was the result.

Within days of its release, members of Voices for Change–Halton met to discuss the report. Voices for Change is a grassroots anti-poverty advocacy group. We are all people who have lived with poverty, whether on social assistance or while working for low wages. We do not accept that poverty is an inevitable and unalterable feature of our society. We work to improve the standard of living and decrease poverty rates by building real bridges out of poverty.

The first thing we noticed was that the report was no longer called the options paper but Discussion Paper #2. It's an innocuous but ultimately foreboding distinction. The first line informs us that "The government has identified employment as a key route to escape poverty." Well, thank goodness someone sorted that out – we can see why it took four years.

The paper seems to operate on the theory that the way to fix social assistance is to offer incentives to get people to work. Let us ignore for a moment that this contradicts studies describing children, seniors, the disabled and people with two jobs as among those most likely to be poor. Let us put aside that the paper perpetuates the unfounded stereotype that those relying on social assistance don't want to work. Let's focus instead on how the paper explains why nothing can actually be done.

For example, the paper compares those exiting social assistance with those already working for low incomes. Two workers could have the same part-time, low-wage job, but the one exiting social assistance would have residual health benefits while the other would not. Clearly it is unfair that one worker is disadvantaged, but we are left to conclude that "fairness" dictates that both be disadvantaged. This does not seem a sound way to reduce poverty.

We recognize why the government cannot endorse a system that makes it more profitable to live on social assistance than to work, but much of the logic here offends us. As a group composed of both social assistance recipients and low-income workers we face many of the same issues, and are glad for each other's victories. But this report attempts to drive a wedge between us, reinforcing the idea of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. We are disheartened by the idea that social assistance cannot improve, and insulted by the idea that it should not.

Perhaps the paper's lowest point is its assertion that a methodology to set social assistance rates cannot be established due to the lack of agreed-upon benchmarks for adequacy. This is remarkable, given that the Ontario Government has already set Statistics Canada's Low Income Measure as the poverty measure in its Poverty Reduction Strategy and that this whole review process emerges from that strategy. Re-opening this debate is unnecessary; we see it as a stalling tactic at best or an attempt to switch to a more politically expedient measure at worst. We find it unacceptable that the commission chooses to dither about measurements tools, rather than addressing their clear lack of adequacy. If the commission can't decide what poverty looks like, we invite its members to see for themselves: try living on social assistance for a month or two.

Throughout the paper, whenever a good idea is acknowledged there is an explanation of why it cannot be implemented. Assistance rates are not adequate, but it would be unfair to increase them. Comprehensive case management shows promise, but resources aren't available. No wonder they changed the paper's name from "options" to "discussion."

The paper is a series of hanging questions. The commissioners acknowledge that it is an opportunity for further discussion "rather than a comprehensive discussion of options for reform." We can tell how much our input matters by the fact that we're given until March 16 to respond, just 39 days. It's a disappointing end to a process that missed the point entirely, focusing on people failing the system rather than the system failing people.