

PLAIN TALK

The Newsletter of the Income Security Advocacy Winter 2003/2004

NEW GOVERNMENT OFFERS SPARE CHANGE, NOT REAL CHANGE

by Sarah Blackstock, ISAC research and policy analyst and Jacquie Chic, ISAC Director of Advocacy and Legal Services

The provincial Liberals promised real change. What they're delivering is spare change.

In the Throne Speech, the new government announced the minimum wage will be raised. Over four years the wage will be raised to \$8. The first increase of approximately .30 cents will be implemented in February 2004.

The raise to \$8 indicates a 17% increase. However, since 1995 the real purchasing power of Ontario's minimum wage has been eroded 20% due to the steady climb of consumer prices. The raise announced in the Throne Speech won't even restore the loss of purchasing power that occurred between 1995-2003.

In the Throne Speech, we were told that the new government is committed to "helping hard-working families make ends meet before they reach their wits' end." Clearly, the government doesn't understand that hard-working families are already at their wits' end and that a measly .30 cents increase isn't going to make it much easier to make ends meet.

A worker earning minimum wage working 35 hours will make approximately \$42 more in February 2004 – barely enough to buy a pair

of winter boots. In total, minimum wage workers will make about \$500 more in 2004 with the announced raise. As a result, a single worker earning minimum wage in a large city will be living \$5500 below the poverty line, opposed to \$6000 below the poverty line as she was for the last 8 ½ years. However, whether it is \$5500 or \$6000 below the poverty line, it is still poverty. It is still hard choices between eating and paying the rent.

During election, the Liberals also promised to increase social assistance rates by a measly 2-3%. People on social assistance

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are living thousands of dollars below the poverty line as a result of the rates being cut by 21.6% in 1995 and the clawback of the National Child Benefit. Consider, for instance, that a single mother with two children receives a monthly cheque of \$1086. How is she supposed to pay the rent and feed her family and herself given that the average rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Toronto is \$1047?

While Premier McGuinty recently told the London Chamber of Commerce, "I think we have a shared responsibility in ensuring that kids and their families get the help they need...", the new Liberal government is now saying they can't afford to raise the social assistance rates.

The budget deficit is the problem, according to the Liberal government. While \$5.6 billion is significant, the social deficit is also quite significant. One in seven people in Ontario are living in poverty. A large cause of this poverty is the inadequate minimum wage and the inhumane social assistance levels.

The new government must not be blinded by the deficit. The government has more responsibilities than simply balancing budgets.

Indeed, perhaps it is time for the Liberals to re-consider some of their other election promises such as their commitment not to raise taxes. Surely, the wealthy and middle-class among us can better afford to pay slightly higher taxes than families on social assistance can afford to wait another month for a raise in their income. Undoubtedly, corporations can better afford to pay more taxes than we can afford further erosion of our social safety net and public services.

Speaking of corporations, the Liberals would be wise to recall that Ontario's Auditor General's 2002 report indicated that nearly 50% of corporations in Ontario had not paid their taxes. Going after corporate tax fraud and increasing corporate tax seems a more reasonable way to ensure

fiscal, as well as social responsibility than simply abandoning pressing social needs such as higher social assistance rates.

Clearly, the new government is going to have to demonstrate political courage and leadership. Making hard choices, we've been told by Premier McGuinty, is the job of government. Indeed it is. Making the right choice, the just choice is often very hard when powerful interests are breathing down one's back.

Throughout the Throne Speech, there was much reference to 'our' government. It remains to be seen, however, just whose government it is. A government that continues along the Tory road of forcing low-income people to choose between paying the rent and eating, between using the last of the food money and buying gas to get a sick kid to a doctor is not a good government, and certainly is not the government of low-income people nor anyone who cares about real justice.

If low-income people are going to get the change they need, our community organizing, policy advocacy and litigation efforts must be creative, determined and relentless.

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POVERTY, DEMOCRACY AND WEALTH

by Jacquie Chic, Director of Advocacy and Legal Services, ISAC

Canada is a democracy, right? If democracy means being able to participate in social, political and economic structures, the answer is no if you live in poverty and yes if you don't.

Despite a veneer of features that purport to signal democracy such as regular elections and the rights and freedoms enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the gap between rich and poor is growing. 2001

Census figures released in May of this year show an increasing polarization of Canadian society. Half of all families held 94% of the wealth. The richest 10% have a net worth of \$703,500 while the poorest 10% have a “negative worth” of minus \$2,100. The top quintile has more than nine times the wealth as the bottom group. Half of all corporations pay no tax and the corporate tax rate is laughable. Women, people of colour, people with disabilities and Aboriginal people experience poverty more frequently than other segments of society.

The myths advanced by governments abound. In a globalized world, there is no choice but to keep the minimum wage at any abysmally low rate, slash already impossibly low social assistance rates, subsidize business and shift the provision of essential services from the public to the private realm. There is no money for social spending. Profit rules. In an ugly and dangerous “race to the bottom” governments are content to shed those who are weak. And most insidious of all, it is said that poverty is a life style choice made by those who experience it.

The truth is that governments create and choose poverty in order to create private wealth that is socially produced and to ensure that it is concentrated in the hands of the few. It is for this reason that we can’t meaningfully address poverty without making structural changes that would redistribute wealth and power. Tinkering won’t do. We need an immediate and dramatic increase in the minimum wage and social assistance rates but that is not even close to enough. We need to provide education for all who wish it, but that won’t be enough either. Education does not guarantee high paying jobs. Immigrants with training and education are routinely barred from getting jobs that suit their skills and there is a 9% unemployment rate among recent university and college grads in Ontario. Important though the provision of education is, at best, it moves some people out of low paying jobs while allowing others

to take their place.

If we are serious about eradicating rather than managing poverty, we need to change the way we produce and consume wealth. That will involve a reassessment of how we value human beings as demonstrated in how we structure our workplaces. Stable, permanent and safe jobs must replace temporary and contingent work. Income security programs must be revamped and recreated. The taxation system must be truly rather than mythically progressive. We need to create structures and systems that connect rather than divide. Respect for human life must replace the profit motive.

If we do that, we will create true democracy. Where there is poverty, democracy has been banished. Changes will need to happen in our workplaces, our communities and in our social institutions. It is to those goals that ISAC remain unrelentingly committed.



HEATING OR EATING? ELECTRICITY PRICING AND LOW-INCOME ONTARIANS

by Sarah Blackstock, ISAC research and policy analyst

Heating or eating? The new Liberal government recently announced its plan to remove the electricity price cap. This, of course, will have a huge affect on low-income households who already face huge struggles to make ends meet.

ISAC, with the Advocacy Centre for Tenants-Ontario, recently made a submission to Dwight Duncan, the Minister of Energy, urging him to take measures to ensure low-income people have access to electricity. Despite our efforts, the Government, to date has not taken the necessary steps to protect low-income consumers. And so our efforts will continue.

Electricity is a basic necessity of daily life in our province. Universal, nondiscriminatory access to electricity service must be ensured for all Ontarians. It is essential that the provincial government give explicit direction – and take a lead – on consumer protection and non-discriminatory access with respect to low-income consumers in the preparation of the plan to move to a higher, regulated electricity rate.

The Ontario Energy Board (OEB) appears reluctant to address these issues despite their legislative authority to do. Recently, both the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO) and the Vulnerable Energy Consumers' Coalition (VECC) made submissions and recommendations on behalf of low-income consumers in the OEB's written hearing on consumer security deposit matters. The OEB's interim response in the proceeding, released on November 10th, was silent both on the low-income consumer issues raised by ACTO and VECC, and the amendments put forward for the Board's consideration.

In Ontario, 11.7 per cent of the population was living in poverty in 2001, the majority of whom are tenants. For these individuals and families, an increase in electricity costs will adversely impact, or even prevent them, from accessing electricity.

According to a Statistics Canada study released in 2002, the typical low-income family had only a \$300 "cushion" to buffer income interruptions or deal with unexpected costs.

Statistics Canada's Survey of Household Spending breaks the population into fifths, according to income. The 2001 Survey shows that Ontario households in the top fifth spent 13% of their pre-tax income on shelter, including utilities. In comparison, those in the lowest fifth spent 41% of their pre-tax income on shelter - more than triple the proportion as those in the top fifth.

The same survey also indicates that, on

electricity alone, Ontario households in the lowest fifth spent 5.2% of their pre-tax income, nearly five times more than households in the top fifth which spent 0.9% of their income on electricity.

Both low-income homeowners and low-income tenants will be affected by increases to the cost of electricity. According to Statistics Canada 2001 Census data, 20% of Ontario tenant households spend more than 50% or more of their household income on shelter costs. The risk of homelessness increases where rental costs consume more than 50% of pre-tax household income for a tenant household.

Approximately 23% of tenant households pay for utilities directly and separately from their rent. Under the current provisions in the Tenant Protection Act, an increase in electricity prices is incorporated into the Annual Rent Increase Guideline and passed on to tenants whose rent includes utilities. As well, landlords can apply to the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal for an above-guideline rent increase if electricity prices increase by any amount greater than that accounted for in the Annual Rent Increase Guideline.

It is worth noting that according to Statistics Canada's Survey of Household Spending in 2001, the lowest Canadian income fifth has a far greater proportion of households that:

- have electric heating equipment (39.3% compared to 16.9% of the highest fifth)
- use electricity as principal heating fuel (44% compared to 20.5% for the highest fifth); and
- use electricity as principal heating fuel for hot water (56.8% compared to 30.5% for the highest fifth).

Clearly, the Ministry of Energy needs to take decisive measures to ensure low-income households are able to affordably access electricity. We recommend that the government's new electricity pricing plan include:

1. An explicit acknowledgement that electricity is a basic necessity and that the provincial government has the primary responsibility to ensure universal, nondiscriminatory access to electricity service for all Ontarians, including low-income households.

2. A commitment from the government to develop and implement an appropriate and comprehensive energy assistance plan for low-income consumers, defined as those with household incomes levels at or below the Low-Income Cut-offs (LICOs) published by Statistics Canada, using pre-tax, post-transfer household income. Until this assistance plan is in place, low-income consumers will be exempt from any increase in electricity prices. In addition, until the assistance plan is in place, there should be a moratorium on disconnection of electricity service for arrears for low-income consumers.

3. A commitment from the government that the development and implementation of the energy assistance plan will be done in consultation with low-income consumers and advocacy organizations. At a minimum, we recommend that 20 focus groups, comprised of low-income consumers, be held in both rural and urban areas across the province.

4. A commitment from the government to evaluate the impact of the change in electricity pricing and the effectiveness of the energy assistance plan for low-income consumers within one year of implementation. The evaluation will include consultation with low-income people and advocacy organizations.



NEW LITIGATION AT ISAC

by Cindy Wilkey, ISAC staff lawyer

Life-time Ban: ISAC has joined with the

Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, the disabled Women's Network-Canada (DAWN), Charter Committee on Poverty Issues, Steering Committee on Social Assistance and Ontario Social Safety Network to intervene in *Broomer et. al.*. This case is a constitutional challenge to the life-time welfare ban, the life-time ineligibility for social assistance that is automatically imposed on people who are convicted of welfare fraud. This case was to be heard on October 14th and 15th, but has been adjourned until April 2004 to allow the new provincial government an opportunity to sort out its position. As the Liberals are on record as opposing the ban, it is hoped that the pending litigation will bring an early end to the hardship suffered by those who are affected by this harsh penalty.

Spouse-in-the- House: The Province of Ontario, which appealed *Falkiner*, (the case that successfully struck down the Tories' definition of "spouse" in the *Family Benefits Act*), has now asked the Supreme Court of Canada to postpone the scheduled March 2004 hearing until next fall. The Province has says it wants the extra time to review its policies. We are hopeful that might mean that the Province will reconsider the appeal. In opposition, the Liberals had said that the Tories should not appeal *Falkiner*.

ISAC was hoping to intervene, in coalition with the African Canadian Legal Clinic, to support the Ontario Court of Appeal's finding that social assistance recipients should have the same kind of protection from discrimination under s.15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as people identified by the already "enumerated" grounds (ie. gender, race, disability). The ISAC/ACLC intervention would have rounded out the context that would be brought forward by other intervenors such as LEAF and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. These intervenors want the Court to understand the impact of poverty on people who already

suffer the disadvantage recognized by the enumerated grounds in s. 15.

Before the Tories changed the definition, a social assistance recipient who had a live-in relationship could continue to receive benefits as a single person or single parent until either she/he decided to treat the relationship as "spousal" or the relationship had met the requirements for a "common-law relationship" under the Family Law Act. (For single adults with no children from the relationship the requirement was three years of cohabitation.) The Family Law Act definition was chosen because that was the point at which the couple would have had the legal obligation to support one another financially. The Tories got rid of the three year cohabitation period and began refusing FBA to recipients as soon as they had any kind of live-in relationship. As a result, thousands of women, many of whom were sole support mothers, were thrown off of FBA.

The Ontario Court of Appeal agreed with Sandra Falkiner and the other applicants that this rule violated their constitutional rights to be free of discrimination on the basis of gender and family status. The Court of Appeal also found that a new ground of discrimination, "receipt of social assistance", needed to be recognized to counteract the historic disadvantage experienced by persons receiving social assistance. Ontario is appealing the decision.

OW treatment of RESPs: ISAC has recently agreed to work with West Scarborough Community Legal Services to challenge the inconsistent treatment of Registered Education Saving Plans (RESPs) for social assistance recipients. While RESPs are sometimes treated as trust funds that are not considered part of the family assets for OW eligibility purposes, in other cases OW has required that RESPs be liquidated and used to meet basic needs before a family can become eligible for benefits. Like the OW clawback of the

National Child Benefit Supplement, the requirement that families use up RESPs before they can get OW benefits hurts the most economically vulnerable children.

OSDP eligibility reassessments: ISAC will also be joining with Grey-Bruce Community Legal Clinic in challenging the test adopted by the Social Benefits Tribunal (SBT) in a recent reassessment decision. We will be asking Divisional Court to tell the SBT that an ODSP reassessment hearing cannot simply be a second opinion about the medical conditions that led to the original grant. Instead, we will be arguing that when the SBT reassesses the eligibility of an ODSP recipient it must find a material improvement in the recipient's conditions before it can discontinue benefits.

This is a matter of fairness to those OSDP recipients who are subject to periodic reassessments. The reassessment process was set up to review conditions that might have some chance of improvement in future. It was not intended to put a recipient's benefits at risk if their condition has not changed. Unfortunately, some SBT members think that they can ignore the original entitlement decision and deny further benefits even where there has been no improvement in the original disabling condition.



ISAC GETS NEW DIRECTORS

by Joanna Tie, ISAC Director of Administration

The clinic's second Annual General Meeting was held in late September and by all accounts was a real success. Our keynote speaker, Vivian Labrie, who traveled all the way from Quebec to share her experiences with us, was nothing short of inspirational. What a wonderful way to launch the newly elected Board members headfirst into their new role as Directors of the clinic.

Many of our departing Board members have a lot to be proud of. When they formed the

founding Board in February 2001 they had already worked together for more than a year, meeting regularly at grueling intervals and always holding steadfastly to their vision of the new clinic. David Ramsay, Bill Haggett and Monty Bhardwaj can feel confident that they have made a significant contribution to protecting and enhancing the legal rights of low income Ontarians.

We are very fortunate to have as our new Chair, **Cindy Buott**, a community activist from Peterborough who is well known to many. As a founding Board member she will bring a clear and strong vision and a grounded practical approach to her leadership. She has also established herself as an articulate and credible media spokesperson for the clinic. The new executive committee of the clinic is also composed of **Barb Anello, Deb O'Connor** and **Liliana Diaz**. All of these Directors have a wealth of experience as activists and will bring their natural talents and critical analysis to the Board level to lead the clinic confidently into the future.

Terry O'Connor has also joined the Board. He hails from North Bay and his activism and commitment to social justice issues is far too long to list here. Suffice to say that the clinic can only benefit from his years of commitment to social justice issues. **Lorne Sossin**, an Associate Professor at University of Toronto teaches, among other subjects, poverty law and is a welcome addition to the Board.

These new members join the existing Board members in forming a cohesive dynamic group of committed activists who will become part of the rich history of this clinic. They are **Raj Anand, Melanie Brown, Libby Bobiwash-Waikquakmic, Melodie Mayson, Mindy Lopes, Michael Shain** and **Elena Dempsey**.

The Board of Directors meets for intense day-long meetings five times per year. Some members give up whole weekends away from their families, travel long

distances and have to make tough decisions, always balancing the continuing pressures for clinic services against the reality of our resources.

The new Board has its work cut out for it during the next three years. Visit our website for more interesting details about the impressive work of our new Directors.



TAKING IT TO THE STREETS: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LEGAL CLINICS

by Deb O'Connor, Community Legal Worker-
Northumberland Community Legal Clinic

One of the painful facts of life for legal clinic workers is that the casework never ends. We spend our years on a treadmill solving the same problems over and over again. Only the faces of the clients change; their issues and their desperation are always the same. This is precisely why working for systemic change is paramount.

Working for systemic change is much more than writing legal briefs and presenting them to government committees. Community organizing and community development are also about creative strategies to bring about systemic change.

In Northumberland, our clinic and its sister agency, the Help Centre, have a long history in the community and strong ties with labour. These are advantages that have served us well in our efforts to make progressive change in a conservative community.

Here's an example of our work. Following our ODSP Forum in May, 2002 two committees were formed. The first committee, consisting of service providers, developed a manual to coordinate the services of agencies helping ODSP

applicants. Those materials are now in distribution across the County, along with a flyer designed for clients applying for the program. Additionally, our local Ontario Works office was persuaded to appoint a liaison worker for their clients who are applying for ODSP, an initiative that has benefited many ever since.

The second committee, made up of low income activists, successfully lobbied County Council to pass a resolution adopting all our Forum recommendations for improvements to ODSP - including the all important demand to raise the ODSP rates. The County sent a letter to then Premier Eves and his Minister of Social Services calling for the recommendations to be implemented. The letter from Northumberland was one of several such letters former Premier Eves received from municipalities involved in the ODSP Action Coalition.

Another crucial aspect of community development work is that it really does engage the community. It educates and empowers the people we serve and increases general public awareness of the inequalities we are looking to conquer. When we gain the support of our communities we are breaking the isolation many legal clinics work in and broadening the base of understanding of poverty issues which is crucial to our work's success. Everybody wins with community development.



PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

by Josephine Grey, ISAC provincial outreach coordinator and organizer

Low-income people in Ontario have clear ideas about what needs to be done to ensure they have an adequate standard of living – and are taking action to pressure the new Liberal government to take swift action. In campaigns such as Ontario Needs A

Raise and Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids, activists are calling for the social assistance rates and the minimum wage to be raised.

Working with ISAC, low-income activists are also planning a People's Assembly. Recently, with funds from the Law Foundation, a group of low-income activists met to begin planning the Assembly.

The meeting concluded that the People's Assembly needs to be an opportunity for activists to network, share ideas and resources, create plans to pressure the new government, challenge stereotypes of low-income people and re-gain energy.

There is an agreement to move ahead and work with provincial organizations like the Ontario Social Safety Network, the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.

The Assembly is planned for Summer 2003.



ANTI-POVERTY ORGANIZING IN A CLIMATE OF POOR- BASHING

by Cindy Buott

Anti-poverty organizing has always been hard work. In Ontario, after years of poor-bashing and attacks on low-income people and their advocates, the challenges are many. Cindy Buott, a long-time anti-poverty activist and ISAC board member, writes about three of these challenges.

In Peterborough, there are a large number of organizations from grassroots groups, to social agencies, to labour unions engaged in anti-poverty work. Often these groups work together, however there are also, inevitably, tensions.

One of the frustrations of some of the

grassroots community groups is the reluctance of funded social agencies to openly criticize the government. Indeed, there are times when grassroots groups who loudly point to the ways in which government policy is creating and maintaining poverty find themselves shunned by social agencies for being “too political”.

Some social agencies will consider you a dangerous radical if you tell them they shouldn't use forced workfare labour, as many do, because it legitimizes the government's attack on the poor.

Often social agencies are too frightened of losing their funding to really stand up for the low-income people they are supposed to be working with and for. It's time for that fear to be conquered and for social agencies to loudly and clearly name the causes of poverty in this province, namely government policy.

Another major challenge to anti-poverty organizing are the lies that have been perpetuated about poor people.

The previous government's public relations machine has done an excellent job of selling nasty lies about poverty and the poor to the people to the middle and upper-class people in Ontario.

Taxpayers were told that the poor go without food because they are too careless to budget properly. People on social assistance were said to have spent their pittance on beer, bingo and riotous living.

However, it's not a question of budgeting ability. Low-income people already know how to budget! It's what we have to spend our lives doing. Nor is the issue reckless spending. Low-income people aren't choosing between beer and bingo. Low-income people are choosing between rent and eating.

And when low-income people stand up to demand the adequate standard of living we

deserve, we are criminalized. Increasingly, anti-poverty activists who take action to demand affordable housing and social assistance rates that we can live on are thrown in jail – and often abandoned by so-called allies. Social agencies should be actively supporting activists rather than resting within the limitations imposed on them by systems that ultimately ensure the maintenance of poverty.

Poverty is not inevitable. However, unless we fight back hard, it will persist. With a new government in power at Queen's Park, we need to be loud and forceful in our demands. We need to be cautious not to be subdued or distracted by their vague promises of change. We'll only get the change we want and the change we deserve by loud, determined activism.



FIGHTING POVERTY IN RENFREW COUNTY

by Johanna Mathieu, RCCAP activist

Many projects in Renfrew County have evolved as a result of the 22% cuts to the Ontario social assistance rates in 1995.

The Renfrew County Coalition Against Poverty is a support group for and by low-income people. We have monthly meetings with a pizza supper and put out a quarterly newsletter. Every November, we take part in the Legal Clinic's Candlelight Vigil to raise awareness of Child Poverty. We also lobby for change such as the reform of our Food Bank in Renfrew. Finally, at Christmas time we have a Christmas party for low-income children.

Volunteers prepare a monthly Community Supper and then get to take home the leftovers. Our guests include low-income people, lonely seniors and others who support us through donations.

Ontario Disability appointments and the Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network which raises awareness of child poverty, and tries to work with all levels of government for change. In Arnprior, a group called CAP (Communities Against Poverty) is working with low-income people to provide affordable services such as dental care.



HOUSING FOR EVERYONE

by Dana Milne, HOME

HOME is a new Toronto-based coalition made up of mainly housing advocacy groups, frontline workers, drop-ins, unions and social housing tenants. We formed in April to raise housing and homelessness issues in the provincial and municipal elections and over the last several months have distributed municipally-focused and provincially-focused pamphlets, organized voter registration events for homeless people and underhoused tenants, and held two press conferences and a mock eviction tribunal event to raise issues such as skyrocketing rents, long waiting lists and the lack of affordable housing.

Although the elections are now over, HOME feels it's crucial to continue pushing around issues such as rent controls, changes to the Tenant Protection Act, and the lack of truly affordable housing -- issues I know you can identify with.

Currently, there are several housing groups that are lobbying the federal, provincial and municipal governments and have presented themselves as available for consulting around housing policies - including community legal clinics. HOME is in close contact with these groups but, from our perspective, consultation is only one part of lobbying. The other is organizing in communities across the country to show politicians that homelessness is a crisis and that we need immediate funding for truly

affordable housing. This is what HOME aims to do.

Anyone interested in becoming involved in HOME, please email us at homecoalition@yahoo.ca or leave us a message with your contact information at 416-604-6784 and we would be happy to let you know when our next meeting will be. Low-income tenants, homeless people and frontline workers /volunteers are particularly welcome.



BUILDING A MOVEMENT IN QUÉBEC

by Joanne Frenschkowski, ISAC staff lawyer

December 18, 2003, will mark the first anniversary of the enactment of Bill 112, *A law to combat poverty and social exclusion* (R.S.Q. c. L-7), by unanimous vote, in Québec's National Assembly.

The object of the law is to eradicate poverty in Québec. Achieving this goal depends on a program of guiding not only government, but society as a whole, towards attitudes and activities that would combat poverty, prevent its causes, minimize its effects and combat social exclusion.

This law would not have become a reality had it not been for the determination and work of the *Collective for a law on the elimination of poverty*. This citizens' initiative united 30 organizations and their members - including grass-roots anti-poverty groups, housing activists, women's groups, unions, student organizations and religious groups - in the vision to improve the circumstances of Québec's poorest citizens and to improve Québec society as a whole.

The concept of a law to eradicate poverty in Québec and an initial draft of such a law

materialized during a period of cuts to government spending on social welfare in 1995-1998.

Throughout 1998 and 1999, the Collective led a province-wide consultation about what a law to eradicate poverty should contain and gathered support for such a law by circulating a petition that was ultimately presented to the National Assembly.

A draft of the law was prepared and sent through the Collective's network for approval. The draft law and the petition – with its 215, 307 signatories – was presented to National Assembly in November 2000.

The subsequent two years were filled with determined efforts to lobby the government to adopt the proposed legislation. It was during this period that it became clear that the work of the Collective had not only resulted in a draft law, but had revitalized and strengthened the regional roots of the Québec anti-poverty movement.

In June 2002, leading up to an election, the ruling Parti Québécois introduced legislation to combat poverty, Bill 112. Although structurally similar to the Collective's proposal, it differed in substance. After holding Parliamentary Committee hearings which heard from numerous groups throughout the fall of 2002, the government revised its proposed legislation. Bill 112 received unanimous assent in the National Assembly on December 18, 2002.

In the time since the law was enacted, a Liberal government was elected in Québec. Activists waited eagerly to see what impact this might have on the implementation of the law.

Under the timetable set out in the law, the government should have tabled a "Plan of Action" in May 2003. On October 8, 2003, the newspaper *Le Devoir* published a document it had received, which appeared

to be just such a plan. Anti-poverty activists directed harsh criticism at the government for the manner in which the document was publicized, as well as for its content.

The "Plan of Action" directs the reduction of certain types of social assistance benefits, an increase in benefits which is linked to involvement in employment-related activities and the imposition of financial penalties on recipients who refused to participate in such activities.

The Collective and its members have publicly demanded that the government withdraw the document arguing that its proposed measures are directed against poor Québeckers and not against poverty. The Collective is calling on its allies to oppose the implementation of the plan and is working tirelessly to not only educate the government and the public about the stereotypes that the plan relies on and perpetuates, but also exert political pressure to ensure the plan is defeated.

For more information about the Collective and its activism around the *Law to combat poverty and social exclusion*, visit their website at: <http://www.pauvreté.qc.ca>.

For further information about the anti-poverty movement in Québec, visit the website of the Front commun des personnes assistées sociales du Québec (the common front of persons receiving social assistance in Québec) : <http://www.fcpasq.qc.ca>.

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ISAC is funded by Legal Aid Ontario to work with and on behalf of low income communities in Ontario to address issues of income security and poverty.