



## TORONTO DROP-IN NETWORK

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Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario  
2 Bloor Street West  
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Toronto ON  
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### Re The Review of Social Assistance

Dear Commissioners,

The Toronto Drop-In Network is an active coalition of more than 50 drop-in centres working with people who are homeless, marginally housed and socially isolated in the City of Toronto.

On August 16 and August 18<sup>th</sup>, we held forums for over 30 people who are social assistance recipients and are participants in TDIN Drop-ins. The forums were coordinated by the Toronto Drop-in Network in partnership with the Fred Victor Centre Drop-in and St. Stephens Corner Drop-in and were co-facilitated by an ODSP recipient. The purpose was to document voices, experiences and solutions that might otherwise not have been recorded by the review process. The attached report reflects the views of those who attended the forum.

Participants in these forums had many specific concerns and constructive advice to the Commission that can be summarized as 3 key issues:

- An immediate raise in social assistance rates is necessary
- Supporting access to housing
- Improve the support and communication with social assistance recipients as they navigate the complex system of social assistance and toward this end provide opportunities for input from recipients into policy development and implementation at multiple points in the system.

People who are on ODSP and especially those receiving OW are some of the most marginalized groups in the City of Toronto. The relatively small number of participants that attended the forums was an important opportunity for them to have their views heard, as many would not be able to access the online consultation or attend public round tables. The one public forum held in Toronto was not easily accessible for people on social assistance, and was primarily attended by community workers and advocates. We recommend that a more in-depth participatory process for those living on OW and ODSP in Toronto to explain their



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experiences and solutions would assist your review to fully understand the ways in which social assistance could be effectively strengthened.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Review of Social Assistance, and we look forward to the final recommendations and speedy implementation of measures to improve social assistance in Ontario.

Yours sincerely,

Nico Koenig  
Training and Capacity Building Coordinator  
Toronto Drop-in Network

Encl.



## Submission for the Review of Social Assistance

### Toronto Drop-in Network

August 2011

Two discussion forums for recipients of Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) were held in August 2011. The forums were coordinated by Fred Victor Centre Drop-in and St. Stephens Corner Drop-in and were co-facilitated by an ODSP recipient. The purpose was to document voices, experiences and solutions that would otherwise not have been recorded by your review process. Responses and direct quotations have been translated into the categories requested by the Commission's Workbook and offer a glimpse into recipient member's real life experiences.

Before addressing current experiences, it was important to clarify the purpose of social assistance. Below are some of the responses from our discussion forums organized into similar themes that address the question: What is the purpose of social assistance?

- Inclusive
  - Help the client with whatever assistance they need to better their lives
  - Adjustable to ones needs
  - Cover medical supplies
  - Able to eat enough to be strong
- Dignity as a Human Being
  - Lift up spirits
  - Start feeling like a human being and not a number
  - Improve quality of life
  - Live with dignity as human
  - Feel stronger
  - Pride of earning a living
  - Feel as a contributor to society
- Long-term process supporting the future
  - Little by little changes will happen
  - Make people stronger for future
  - Encourage to live longer
- Transition into the employment and education
  - Help people who are incapable of fitting into the economic system
  - Education for people who have problems
  - Help move into a life of dignity with safe, quiet environment

Clearly these expectations of social assistance from drop in members go beyond those expectations held by the Government of Ontario; that is, "social assistance is intended by the government to be used as a last resort when people have no other financial options." The TDIN drop-in members we consulted describe social assistance as an inclusive long-term process that fulfills human



dignity while supporting transitions into education, employment and a valued living environment. This vision, based on the needs and experience of recipients, will be used as the foundation for our feedback. We recommend that you consider our vision as a starting point towards a greater definition of social assistance. Drop-in members' views on the specific issues defined by the review of Social Assistance follow:

### **Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment.**

To be eligible for OW, people are required to participate in employment activities while those living on ODSP may voluntarily access employment services. Many drop in members stated that it was important for them to “be a contributor to society” and to “take pride in earning a living.” They also believe that the transition to employment is a long-term process that requires supporting both searching for and holding onto employment, and that certain resources need to be available. For example, an OW recipient who wants to apply for jobs struggles to find appropriate winter work clothes. Other necessary supports needed to begin the transition to employment named by recipients include:

- Housing
  - Help paying first months rent
  - Place to live, not shelter
  - My own little place
  - Help with money for extra assets like a fridge and sewing machine
- Work clothing
- Groceries
- Time off available in case of injury
- Child care
- Internet

In addition to these quantifiable basic needs, social needs such as being able to visit friends and family while having meaningful peer support were also stated as priorities to securing a career. The personal relationships held by recipients and drop- in members with friends, family, pets and the greater community provide support to their employment. Without opportunities for such social connections, they would feel as if their work held no merit.

The challenge remains to connect the employable with meaningful work. The path from unemployment to career relies on many opportunities, resources and activities sustained over a significant time period. As was mentioned by one drop in member, “this is not an overnight thing.” Common themes emerged during our forums related to the employment supports, education and training programs required to reach and hold onto a career.

- Education support
  - Apprenticeship programs
  - Assistance to attend university
  - Support to go to back to high school



- GED
- School tuition
- Clothing to attend school
- Advertise training opportunities
- Make it easier to find work
  - Metro pass to look for work
  - Reduce fare for TTC
  - Good job leads
  - Support March of Dimes
- Type of employment
  - Reserve certain positions for people who are on OW/ODSP, or are homeless
  - Peer worker positions within drop ins or social services that recipients are already using
  - Kitchen work within drop ins

## Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

Within our forums, raising the rates to an adequate level of subsistence was a common recommendation. Josie S., an ODSP recipient, offered her experience: She puts most of the money she receives from ODSP into her health care. The remaining funds are insufficient to pay for housing, explaining “it’s hard find a decent place for \$700 a month – most are in the \$900 range.” Her suggestion is to increase subsidized housing because she says “people are on the waiting lists for 10 years or more.” Other feedback in regard to an appropriate benefit structure includes:

- Increasing rates
  - More money to pay rent and live until a job is found
  - Money for clean clothes to look for work
  - One stable portion focused on basic needs
  - The monthly amount is too small to buy food, now that I have children
- Widening Coverage
  - Alternative health should be covered
  - Pay traffic tickets and support legal issues
  - Health
    - Dental coverage
    - Rehabilitation
    - Alternative healthcare (Chinese medicine)
    - Eye Testing
  - Free community centre access
- Access
  - Support to get onto OW for homeless who do not qualify because they have no address
  - Easier to pass Social Assistance benefits between provinces
  - Assistance to access Special Diet Allowance
  - Drug cards for homeless as they still need medication
- Priority needs that recipients cannot afford
  - Housing
  - Enough food
  - Vet care



- Internet
- Laundry
- Material things for the house: Bed box spring
- Work out in the gym
- Health hearing aids can only be purchased once a year, I have to wait to have it replaced
- Foreign ID
- Clothing, winter clothing, coats and boots
- Hygienic supplies

### **Issue 3: Easier to Understand.**

Participants in our forum feel that the rules intrude too far into personal details of their lives or may not correspond to the real circumstance that people face. For example, an ODSP recipient wished their caseworker would “hear her needs”, instead of treating her as a number. Encouraging rules and conditions to be adaptive to people’s living conditions should be a priority for your review.

Your report mentions that administering so many rules is costly and labour-intensive. George G., an ODSP recipient, understands this well and is convinced that caseworkers are overworked. As he explains, “one person can’t deal with 300 people...how comprehensive can one person be?” He believes the caseload of a social assistance worker should not be more than 40-60% of their time in order to maintain proper communication and accountability to recipients. In addition, George feels less deserving and demoralized when he enters ODSP office buildings to speak with workers because of the confrontational police presence at every door. Indeed, the challenge of interacting with the administration offices was a concern to many OW and ODSP recipients. Here are some of their key concerns:

- Show or advertise agencies or services clearly
- No follow up
- Transferred without communication
- Waiting without communication was stressful and had to put other jobs on hold
- Unclear in regard to new changes that are coming up
- I have had a number of different workers, and nobody told me in advance of changes (to social assistance)
- Money should come bi-weekly
- Cutting people off because of computer glitches
- No information given about the program
- Problems between different programs and how they cancel each other out
- Prescribed medication makes me sleepy so I can’t go to a job, but if I lower the dosage I would lose ODSP
- Clawbacks
  - I can’t get ahead
  - Feeling stuck
  - I am not allowed to sell my own dad’s car



## Summary:

Our forums' participants shared their concerns that there should be a focus on improving support and communication with recipients as they navigate the complex system of social assistance and toward this end provide opportunities for input from recipients into policy development and implementation at multiple points in the system. There was an over arching feeling of “feeling stuck” in the system, both in comprehending the rules and eligibility and the lack of support and dialogue from social assistance workers.

Fortunately, our discussions enabled recipients to share their knowledge of social assistance with each other. For example, one participant's concern over inaccessible community centres was immediately alleviated when other recipients reassured them of places to seek support and specific entitlements available. Evidently, there is a wide gap in people's understanding of income security resources that this type of discussion forum is able to address.

Our participants' feedback reiterates the need for change beginning with an immediate raise in social assistance rates. Increasing the rates will ensure residents can keep their dignity, afford homes, pay for healthy foods and secure a transition into employment.

Supporting access to housing, or as one member put it, “finding a little place of my own”, is essential to begin to address income security. Supporting housing also sustains quality of life and positive social relationships as well as enabling the long term transition into education and employment.

