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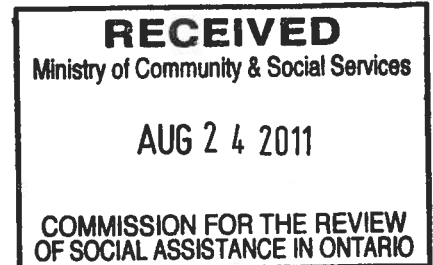
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August 23, 2011

Commission for the Review of
Social Assistance in Ontario
Suite 400 – 2 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M4W 3E2



To the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

We are pleased to send a submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. I am the Director of Community Health at the Regent Park Community Health Centre. We have been a health centre in Regent Park for over 30 years. We offer primary health care, social work, community development, settlement and case management services to marginalized populations, including new immigrants, the homeless, and people with mental health and addictions. We have specialized early years programs for children 0 – 6 years as well as Pathways to Education, for youth in high school.

Our submission focuses on feedback from the diverse communities we work with in Regent Park and the downtown East side of Toronto. We met with 4 focus groups and spoke to random individuals on the street. We used questions from the Social Assistance Review Workbook to guide the questions. We gathered feedback from nearly 60 individuals.

In order to fully represent the rich ideas and experiences of the community, I am sending you the notes from the sessions and interviews. I would like to highlight a few themes and quotes as well. The quote "bring rates up to standard for living and get people on assistance out of poverty" represents a major theme in the discussions. People spoke about needing eye glasses, dental care, over the counter medication, childcare and transportation money. Issues related to worker discretion and perceived lack of fairness and just not knowing the rules were common. Education and employment training were critical, "they should provide more opportunities and make it easier to pursue education goals instead of making it so tough that we keep on hitting brick walls and dead-ends" and "driving people towards low-paying jobs will not take them out of poverty". One suggestion for improvement to the system was "accountability of workers: Chart reviews should be encouraged to ensure that clients are receiving entitlements". The O.W. HOPE program is very successful and could be replicated in ODSP.

Please do not hesitate to call me, 416-203-4506, if you would like to discuss our submission in more detail.

Sincerely,

Cherie Miller
Director Community Health
Regent Park Community Health Centre

Regent Park Community Health Centre

Submission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario -- 2011

#1 – Focus Group:

Monday, August 8, 2011 – 12 participants

Participants were asked to think big and imagine that a miracle had occurred over night and the living conditions were improved for those living in Regent Park.

-families wouldn't have to worry about having enough money to buy what is needed for back to school items

-the cost of ttc is included in social assistance as a basic need expense and so is laundry costs (washer, dryer, soap fabric softener)

-childcare is available and or costs are covered for if private arrangements are needed because beyond regular daycare hours. People are required to work shifts or outside of the 9-5 work day.

Over the counter medications are covered including allergy, cough and pain meds like Aspirin.

Participants were asked what changes they would make to Ontario Works or ODSP if they could.

- *Raise the rates to reflect true costs of living
- *Drug coverage for low wage earners and the elderly transitioning from OW/ODSP to old age pension.
- *Vision/dental coverage as needed
- *Don't destabilize the housing of elders.

How would life be different?

There would be real opportunities to move forward because supports would be in place to give real help. People could take part in training or go to school and have enough money to pay for those things without being stressed out.

What the purpose of social assistance should be?

- *An avenue for training and education to help find a job
- *Income that meets actual costs of living
- *To make up the difference in case of an income short-fall
- *Help with childcare expenses and provide support that is needed.
- *Funded and flexible childcare options.
- *Recognize the roles that individuals play within the familial dynamics

*Consider the individual family's distinct need for social assistance supports instead of using a one size fits all model. E.g. every parent on assistance must pursue employment when the child turns 4 years old, but one may need to provide the childcare while the other one works or looks for work.

Rules and Understanding -- What are some of the rules that are not working for you, and how does this affect you and your family?

Participants reported that they didn't know or had not been told what many of the rules are. Some reported people being cut off benefits because they were not given clear information.

Many were astounded to hear that there are over 800 rules that govern social assistance in Ontario.

The deduction of 50% of all earned income was of concern, as it serves to keep people entrapped in the system and does not help them save or move on with their lives.

What would make the rules easier to understand and more effective?

*Transparent communication, rules and expectations.

*People may comply more if they have a clear understanding of what the rules are. This could be achieved by: understanding and explaining rules in order to make informed decisions.

*Change can come from:

* The sense of power and attitude that some workers exercise over clients.

* Better recognition of supports and education costs that would improve lives.

*Provide proper information to clients.

*Examine long-term clients to ensure they are not cheating the system (Working cash jobs)

*Increase asset limits so people have a chance to move forward.

*Current system creates dishonesty

*Stopping discretion and apply entitlements evenly.

*Workers should have a comprehensive understanding of what each client is entitled to receive and ensure clients are aware of these provisions. (Consistent enforcement of the rules would be helpful).

*Bed bug allowances should be available to cover costs of treatment and replacement of household items.

* Stop treating people like criminals. Over policing is not helpful

* There needs to be a better process to have devices covered for medical reasons Excessive wait times need to be changed.

Employment Supports, Education and Training -- What employment supports, education and training programs do you or other members of your family need to get the career you or they want?

*Up-grading people should get extra supports for ESL

People should be able to get training programs and education courses of their choice and not be streamed into work options they had to take because that was the training or education covered by OW/ODSP.

* Fund associated costs for credential recognition, up-grading, certifications, so internationally-trained professionals can work in their fields sooner. *Funding for computers and internet for those returning to school.

*Respect client dignity.

What would make employment supports and services more effective and easier to access?

*Respect client dignity.

*Increase funding for training mentorships and fund it. Also transportation, so they can get there.

*Change to anti-oppressive model

What else do you need to work and participate in your community?

*Better customer service focus

*Recognize nature of current job market conditions and be flexible to respond.

*Consistency in workers and case information.

*Recognize recipients as tax payers to cut stigma and poor bashing

*Recognize the economic value of low income earners to local economies and businesses

There are some concern about how who was going to pay for all of these suggestions.

Investments in business are not subjected to the same scrutiny as social programs. It was noted that money would have to be invested to support such suggestions to help people more forward in their lives, and that investment would be returned to the public purse through taxes and higher purchasing power that clients would have to local businesses if they were employed.

What do you or other family members do to fulfill participation agreement?

Have you or they had problems getting your benefits because of these requirements?

*Some participants reported that clients are expected to volunteer up to 120 hours per month.

To get \$100 volunteer money. Metro passes cost \$122.00 starting clients off in a deficit.

*There was concern that this takes away from time that the client could be training or looking for work.

*6 month limit for volunteer placement doesn't give enough time to create meaningful

Relationships with perspective employers.

Respect individual needs.

Anything Left Unsaid?

*Inspections-Public health should play a bigger role to ensure safety and healthier homes.

*More \$ for healthcare.

*Driving people towards low-paying jobs will not take them out of poverty.

*Create more standard employment too many jobs are part-time, contract and temp. positions.

*Jobs must have benefits and a decent wage.

*Offer opportunities per personal preferences; don't just dictate what's available.

* Encourage people's skills by letting them pursue their fields of expertise.

* Tutoring funds for families whose first language is not English.

*Accountability of workers: Chart reviews should be encouraged to ensure that clients are receiving entitlements.

*It would be helpful if workers gave positive feedback and encouragement to clients

*People shouldn't have to hit rock bottom before getting help.

*Purpose should be to support people to get on their feet, instead of oppressing them

*There should be systemic protections and the system should follow anti-oppressive theory.

#2) -- Focus Group:

Parents for Better Beginnings --Friday, August 5th, 2011 -- 4 participants -- female, mothers, low income.

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

-What employment supports, education, and training programs do you need to get the career you want?

-What would make employment supports and services more effective and easier to access?

-What else do you need to work and participate in your community?

* Employment centers have been helpful for my family

* I need **Canadian** experience, more programs to facilitate this

* English training that has onsite child-minding

- * Financial support in completing qualification accreditation programs
- * More support for newcomers upon arrival in Canada, i.e., be immediately linked to an agency to assist with referral, follow-up, encouragement, etc.
- * One-on-one personalized and individual career plans
- * Consistent resume writing - each employment centre has a different way of preparing resumes, causes confusion
- * More volunteer initiatives that also have childcare
- * Recreational English training, ex. English clubs, meet people in community

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

-How should social assistance rates be determined?

-What new benefits should be provided to low-income people, regardless of receiving social assistance?

-What is the most important thing you would need help with paying for if you were to get a job and leave OW/ODSP permanently?

* People who have previously been on OW/ODSP should be prioritized when applying again, often find that there is a long time period while waiting for eligibility

* I believe it should be temporary with \$ for training and education

* More funding for people with no skills or education to offer more opportunities to participate in community

* A higher rental supplement that is unique to the rent an individual is paying

* A higher food supplement to afford food that is nutritious and healthy

* Families should be able to utilize their Child Tax Benefit for children, not to pay for rent

* Find a less invasive way to investigate social assistance fraud/misuse - monitor based on length of time family/individual using OW

* Supplement cost of car - some people forced to work in Mississauga and Oakville, 4 hours in transit all day

* I need childcare to help with going to work

* I need affordable rent before I can go back to work

* There needs to be better communication and collaboration between housing, childcare, and social assistance systems

* I need professional clothing

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

-What are some OW/ODSP rules that are not working for you, and how this affects you and your family?

-What would you suggest to make the rules easier to understand and more effective?

* Funding should not be cut right away after finding work, should wait until the job is stable and secure, give a supplement as an incentive to work

- * There are too many rules, and they are not properly explained, "I don't know rules"
- * Oftentimes do not know something is a rule until you have broken the rule
- * Rules should be provided in clear English, and also in various languages, and the government should provide interpretation in face-to-face meetings
- * Rules should be more flexible based on the family/individual, especially re: assets - ex. family have been able to buy a house upon arriving in Canada, but now have a small income and are just making mortgage payments, not going to sell house to be eligible for OW...
- * Confusion over whether or not being on OW affects credit history

Issue 4: Viable over the Long-term

-If you could change one thing about OW/ODSP what would you change?

-How would your life be different w/ this change?

-What do you think the purpose of social assistance should be?

- * Eligibility rules - process to determine eligibility too long when you have no money
- * Rental and shelter allowance should be higher to reflect the cost of market rentals
- * Funding should not be cut if your rent is geared to income
- * Social assistance rates should be unique to individuals and families, not all needs are the same
- * Should be a supplement to purchase better means of transportation
- * Families may be working, and are not eligible for OW, however can only afford to pay rent - could better afford basic needs if eligible and focus more on work and gaining secure employment
- * Not able to afford things for children - clothes, snacks, cable, etc,

Issue 5: An integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

-How should the federal and provincial government work together to ensure that low-income people have their needs met?

-How should federal and provincial benefits work together?

- *immigration and provincial systems should be more collaborative and work together, ex. families members who are sponsored make promise not to go on social assistance, will owe money back - unfair condition
- *when you are working you get less benefits from both the federal and provincial government, you should get benefits regardless of whether or not you are working
- *there should be federal childcare programs
- *more connection between the two systems, same information streamlined, less waste of time/stress

#3) Focus Group:

Parents for Better Beginnings

Friday, August 19th, 2011 -- 5 participants - 1 male, 4 female, parents, newcomers, all experiencing financial challenges

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

-What employment supports, education, and training programs do you need to get the career you want?

-What would make employment supports and services more effective and easier to access?

-What else do you need to work and participate in your community?

* Having work is better off for children and families

* Employment centers need to provide more one-on-one support with looking for courses, applying for OSAP, registration with a course, and support throughout a job search

* I need **Canadian** experience, there should be a program that verifies experience and links both experiences (ex. a transition program for qualified and skilled overseas workers)

* Newcomers often have valuable experience and should not have to begin at the very beginning. They need to survive and do well - may be supporting family overseas also.

* Provide supplements for professionals to become accredited

* Courses welfare provide are basic, they do not provide education for good jobs, just basic jobs

* Childcare subsidy

*Newcomers often do not have references; various employment centers should provide a service where they can give references to their clients

* Appointment for employment centre's take too long, ex. may see a job you are interested in where the application deadline is a week away, and you can't get in for an appointment for two weeks...

* There is pressure to volunteer - I have 4-kids, I need to work, not volunteer...I can't get child subsidy if I volunteer either.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

-How should social assistance rates be determined?

-What new benefits should be provided to low-income people, regardless of receiving social assistance?

-What is the most important thing you would need help with paying for if you were to get a job and leave OW/ODSP permanently?

*Take individual living expenses into account, some people pay much higher rent

- *Currently they give less than expenses, groceries for children are expensive, 4-kids, spend \$15 on milk a day
- *Social assistance should not presume people need to use food banks; food is a basic need that should be covered.
- *Food banks have bad food
- *During the fall and winter children have expensive needs; ex. back-to-school clothing and winter clothes are expensive. My children are always growing out of clothes. Canadian Child Tax Benefit cannot cover all of children's costs, ex. uniforms.
- * Nutrition supplement for food that is nutritious
- * Diaper supplement, they are expensive
- * Market rent supplement - Rent can be very expensive when it is not geared to income
- * Most jobs that OW have helped me to get have a very short probationary period
- * Little incentive to work - When you work your CTB goes down, your rent goes up, and you pay more for childcare, you just end up in the same position you were in before. Overall system needs to be more accommodating to working people
- * To work I need: transportation, clothing, on the job training, and CO-OP programs

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

- What are some OW/ODSP rules that are not working for you, and how this affects you and your family?
- What would you suggest to make the rules easier to understand and more effective?

- *Too many rules, clearer, easier to understand
- * Rules are never clearly communicated
- * Should have interpreters, translated materials, clear language
- * No one will read 400-500 rules...

Issue 4: Viable over the Long-term

- If you could change one thing about OW/ODSP what would you change?
- How would your life be different w/ this change?
- What do you think the purpose of social assistance should be?

- *I feel stigmatized by systems, that people see me negatively, that I'm lazy and just have kids
- * More money, right now they provide very little
- * Less intrusive, and ask less questions
- * Much more help for single parents with programs and funding, all the financial burden is on one person
- * More resources and funding at the library and other public institutions for families, better access to information about Ontario Works

- *The purpose should be to help people improve their living status
- * Should help people move forward, build on capacities and strengths
- * Purpose should be to invest in people
- * Workers should not be so rude and judgmental; workers should participate in compassion training
- * More funding for courses that would result in good jobs
- *More funding for courses that might be expedited, get off assistance sooner
- * Special cases should be taken into account, not everyone is the same, should be unique rates

Issue 5: An integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

- How should the federal and provincial government work together to ensure that low-income people have their needs met?
- How should federal and provincial benefits work together?

- * More federal support for single mothers
- * stronger provincial and federal penalties for not paying child support
- * More community services and advocates for people in community
- * If you have a family member who could help financially, or help with child minding, etc. they should be able to come to Canada to help. It will alleviate stress and it should be easier to have family members come
- * In fact, municipal, provincial, and federal should all work together
- * Should be able to bring family members here - causes social problems that end up costing the system more money, ex. drug dependence
- * Housing, childcare subsidy, and OW should be more integrated and better connected. This allows people to move forward, and looks at them holistically, ex. situation where client in under-housed

#4) – Focus Group:

Friday August 5th -- Men's Drop-in group -- 10 participants

SAR Awareness and Engagement:

- 8 of the men were not aware that the Provincial Government had appointed a Commission to review and make recommendations in respect to improving O.W/ODSP.
- * Only 1 participant had been asked to share his opinion of what changes he'd like to see made to OW/ODSP

Discussion Question:

What are your views about making alcohol/drug treatment or rehabilitation a requirement for receiving social assistance in Ontario?

Responses:

- It might be a good idea but a lot of people that are using wouldn't like it. It would give people a chance to straighten out but nobody will think it's a good thing to do.
- If people are eligible the crime rates will increase; if you don't give people anything they'll do whatever to survive.
- I disagree with OW/ODSP moving to a prepaid credit card method which will allow them to restrict and monitor how people on assistance spend their money. This is wrong; people are losing their rights.
- They are keeping people unemployed by providing low wage, part-time or temp jobs.
- The Healthcare system is already in debt. People abuse the healthcare system.
- People sometimes go to the emergency ward not because they're sick but to watch the hockey game.
- If less people get assistance, that's more money for policing.
- You can only oppress people so long before they retaliate. Mike Harris destroyed the social support system.
- Always a system to oppress the poor.
- We're a rich country. There's no excuse not to have healthcare or social assistance.
- If the money they spend on jets was given to the poor, nobody would be homeless. We can afford to provide affordable, safe housing. It's a 1% decision they won't make.
- Desperation breeds criminals.
- Everybody needs a certain amount to live. You can live with nothing but will end up taking what you need and end up in the Criminal Justice system- what sense does that make? It's way more expensive.
- If Politicians had one person in their lives that would not be eligible, they wouldn't vote for mandatory treatment.
- Guaranteed Income would be a better approach. This would put an end to the entire Social Assistance program. By getting rid of all the OW/ODSP workers, this would save money, wouldn't it?
- People who only think of themselves get nothing in the end. They screw themselves; give and you will receive.
- A lot of people would fall off if they made treatment/rehab a requirement for OW/ODSP and not receive money because they weren't able to comply. So they know this decision saves money; it's another way to cut spending using the perception that the Government is acting responsibly by not providing addicts with the money to sustain their alcohol or drug use.

Social Assistance Review Awareness Survey – individual interviews

26 respondents

Gender Male: **8** Female **18** Trans **0**

Age 13yrs and under
14yrs to 24yrs: **2**
25yrs to 35yrs: **3**
36yrs to 50yrs: **12**
51yrs to 65yrs: **6**
65yrs and over: **3**

Do you live in the Regent Park Neighbourhood?

Yes: **20**

No: **8**

If yes:

TCH **15**

Private market **3**

Language spoken most often when at home:

English **19** French Chinese/Mandarin Chinese/ Cantonese **2**

Vietnamese Bengali Somali **1** Tamil **1** Spanish **1**

Other: **Swahili, Portuguese, Turkish,**

How familiar are you with Ontario Works income support program?

Not familiar **8**

Somewhat familiar **9**

Lived experience **9**

How familiar are you with Ontario Disability Support Program?

Not familiar **9**

Somewhat familiar **7**

Lived experience **10**

1. Are you aware that a Commission has been appointed by the Provincial Government to review and make recommendation on ways to improve social assistance support programs in Ontario?

Very aware **2**

Somewhat aware **5**

Not aware **19**

If aware, from what source did you learn that a review of Social Assistance is in progress?

- **Hep C Group and Nurses/Doctor**
- **Heard it on the news**

- T.V.
- From neighbours

2. Have you been asked to share your opinion about potential changes which you think would improve the current income and employment supports provided to recipients of O.W. or ODSP?

Yes **3**

No **23**

If no: Would you have been willing to share your views had you been asked?

Yes **19**

No **4**

If yes: in what way?

- Asked by an OCAP supporter while attending their BBQ
- Class discussion
- Talking about with others at Hep C group

3. Are there any changes you'd like to see made to O.W. and ODSP? For example: rules that don't work, training options that would be useful, basic needs that aren't covered, or challenges with the way service is provided?

Responses:

- They send people money, then send a letter saying it's an over payment. I recently got a letter telling me I had an over payment in 2003 but had paid what they wanted back and now they have no record of this payment so the want more. They are giving me the run around. I went to Neighbourhood Legal. This shouldn't happen.
- Bring rates up to standards for living and get people on assistance out of poverty.
- More compassion and understanding. There's a need for housing and there are mental health needs that aren't currently addressed.
- The Government must do what promises to do; not say one thing and do another thing.
- Raise the rates.
- I didn't have an address so was refused O.W. in Oshawa while I was seriously injured and in a cast. I was then forced to work even though the Doctor said I wasn't supposed to work because ODSP turned me. The bones in my hand and arm never healed properly because of this.

With intervention by another Doctor, I was accepted as eligible but at the time I didn't know what else to do.

- O.W. should provide the same things as ODSP e.g. eye check up and glasses, dental ect. When people have to pay, they don't have the work done.
- Raise the rates because of rent alone. The average rent is \$700.
- Cover more benefits, once every 3yrs for eye glasses is ridiculous. Speech therapists should be fully covered and other medical care needs must be included.
- I see people on social assistance collecting bottles and cans but they should be in school or employment training instead of taking away money opportunities from people who get nothing to live on.
- Basic needs; HRT paid for by O.W. and bring the basic need allowance up to standard; I'm living on \$170.00 a month.
- Definitely shouldn't have to prove you have nothing and desperately need help. There shouldn't be a stigma attached to receiving social assistance.
- People in recovery should be supported financially to be productive members of society. They should be able to attend full-time education.
- The workers are ignorant and their response time way to slow. The Hope workers at O.W. are phenomenal. There could also be more minorities on staff.
- Higher amount and bring back the special diet allowance. Also T.T.C. costs should be lowered for people on social assistance,
- Eye appointments and glasses should be covered and replaced if needed and full dental coverage; same as ODSP for those on O.W.
- Give more money for rent.
- Increase the Special diet allowance and include more people who still need it but don't get it anymore.
- People need to be more aware that the review is happening.
- They should do follow up with people who receive money to check how they're using it and if the don't really need it then that money should be going to people who do need it instead.

- Doctors shouldn't be permitted to refuse to fill out ODSP application forms and of course, transportation should be part of basic needs. People shouldn't be required to beg for tokens and be treated like you're not being truthful about having appointments by these workers. Also workers have too much discretion so one says yes and the next worker says no.
- Workers don't have correct information re: benefits and send clients away empty handed or tell you to go and speak to someone else but when you do and go back to the O.W./ODSP worker they tell you they don't know what your talking about,
- Stop changing workers and I'd like to see people living with husbands not getting welfare while others can't get it when they really need help. Be fair; it's okay if they can't work but it's not when people have businesses. Also workers should stop asking the same questions over and over.
- Put it back to the way it was suppose to be before Mike Harris and Dalton McGuinty.
- I'd like to see more people accepted to receive support; a lot of people don't use social assistance but need the help.
- Making it more accessible to get into ed/employment training; they should provide more opportunities and make it easier to pursue education goals instead of making it so tough that we keep on hitting brick walls and dead-ends.

4. Do you believe that the views offered by the public in respect to improvements to O.W. and ODSP will have a positive influence on the Commissioner's change recommendations?

Yes 10

No 16

If no, why do you feel this way?

- We give our opinion; they listen but still do what they want.
- They don't show that they care about poor people.
- Because those at the top are often making decisions that are unjust and sometimes down right dishonest.
- There are big public meeting in parts of the city where they have money but they ignore us. Poor people don't matter and if you go to these meetings in other parts of the city and see the beautiful

locations it's held at with fancy hand-outs, lots of great food ect. and then you look at how differently were treated you know that they don't care about us here.

- They don't hear or see us, as long as they have their jobs they don't care.
- Too much strength in politics; we won't have a chance in hell.
- Nothing we say matters as usual; what will happen is they'll slash more away from people.
- They'll do whatever they want anyway. We do surveys and more surveys, we give recommendations but they don't listen. They do what they think is best for us.
- I believe a lot of government led forums and commissions are set up to give the impression that people's opinion matter but our government just offers consultations to appease us. We're a Liberal democratic state that's becoming less of welfare and support state.
- They're just doing this to say they spent enough money to do this but if it wasn't for agency workers, nobody would even know anything about the social assistance review.
- They have a mind of their own.
- Past experience. So many things happen but they don't listen; they don't care. We don't count. We're not important enough and the minute they find out you're from Regent Park, out the window goes any help you should have got.
- Even when you voice you're opinion, they just do what they want.
- I don't think they care.
- It doesn't seem to work out even when people do give them advice.