

From 'Social Assistance Review' To 'Income Security Review': Why it Matters for Low-Income Ontarians

The Social Assistance Review Advisory Council issued a report on June 14, 2010. In this report, the Council calls on the provincial government to conduct an Ontario Income Security Review.

The Council's report is important, because it gives the government a roadmap for how to review social assistance and other income security programs in Ontario. But it's also important because it expands the focus of the discussion.

Before, people were talking about how to improve Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

Now, we can talk about a bigger vision for how to improve all income and support programs, so that people on OW and ODSP – and all low-income people in Ontario – can have better, more productive, more respectful programs to help them when they need it.

Who Was On the Council?

In December 2008, the provincial government promised to review social assistance, as part of its Poverty Reduction Strategy. In December 2009, the government appointed the Council to make recommendations on how to do that review.

The Council was made up of eleven people who have history and expertise in working on issues related to poverty and social assistance. You can read more about them at <http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/en/mcass/sacouncil/index.aspx>.

Now that the Council's report is done, the government has said they will respond this fall. We think that means they will announce the start of some kind of review.

This Backgrounder will help people understand what the Council's Report says, in order to help prepare for the government's announcement in the fall.

What Did the Council Recommend?

The Council made recommendations to government in three key areas:

- A) Scope – or, what the government's Review should focus on;
- B) Mandate – or, which programs or elements should be included in the Review;
- C) Process – or, how the Review should take place and what resources it should have.

The Council also called on the government to immediately increase the incomes of people on OW and ODSP, and recommended that this happen either through a rate increase, a tax benefit increase, or a new benefit that would also go to other low-income people.

A) Scope of the Review

In 2008, the government committed to review social assistance – that is, only Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

But the Council said that it's not enough to only look at these two programs. Instead, government should do a Review that includes all the provincial ministries that provide programs and services for low-income people, as well as other levels of government.

This is an important recommendation, because:

- 1) There are other programs besides OW and ODSP that help low-income people.

This includes income support programs like the Ontario Child Benefit, Child Tax Benefits, Employment Insurance, and others. It also includes training programs like those offered through EI, OW and ODSP, and other programs. And it includes social supports like various kinds of counselling, parenting groups, and other services.

More and more, people get income support from sources outside of OW and ODSP – like the Ontario Child Benefit or the GST credit. It makes sense to look at all of the ways people get income supports, to figure out how they can work together to give people levels of income that let them live with health and dignity.

And there are many programs that people on OW and ODSP aren't eligible for – like the employment and training programs people get through EI. But the reality is, all people need the best programs available. It makes more sense to make them all available to anyone who needs them – no matter if they are on OW or ODSP, on EI, or working at low-paid insecure jobs.

- 2) These programs are run by many different ministries in the provincial government, as well as in the other two levels of government – municipal and federal.

But the programs often don't work well together – they are poorly integrated, don't provide a livable income, and don't give people opportunities they need. The various ministries should work together to make these programs better.

B) Mandate of the Review

“Six strategic directions for reform” were recommended in the Council's report. The idea is that these six directions would be the basis for consultation with Ontarians, to create a better income security system for everyone. These six directions are:

- 1) “Using the Ontario Child Benefit as a model, develop an expanded range of income and services to be available to all low-income Ontarians.”

This recommendation is important. It could mean that income support would be given to low-income people based on their level of income, and not on their level of need – and without the huge set of intrusive rules and regulations that make life so degrading and difficult, and are ultimately counterproductive to getting out of poverty.

- 2) “Strengthen initiatives such as minimum wage increases, enhanced employment standards, fair employment initiatives and the federal Working Income Tax Benefit to ensure the labour market offers effective pathways out of poverty.”

Actions like these ones would improve the jobs that are available in the labour market. Improving the jobs that are out there is a critical part of helping people move out of poverty. And so is improving programs that give income support to people who are working in low-wage jobs.

- 3) “Replace short-term coverage in Ontario Works with more appropriate financial support outside of the social assistance system for those who are temporarily employed.”

Moving supports for people who need short-term help, like people who are laid off from a job, to programs outside of OW makes a lot of sense. This would help people who already have marketable skills and only need income support for a short period while they look for their next job, or when a downturn means there are few jobs.

- 4) “Re-engineer long-term coverage in Ontario Works as an opportunity planning program to support achieving full labour market potential through skills building, education, training, employment and related support”

Implementing this recommendation would fundamentally transform OW itself. OW could become a program that supports people to get the education and training they want, tied to job opportunities that are better than “the first available job”. And it could give other kinds of supports (like personal advisers to help with short- and long-term planning, etc.) to allow people to work. People on OW and people who do research on welfare policy have been asking for these kinds of changes for years.

- 5) “Develop standards for a liveable income and a process to use those standards to assess the adequacy of Ontarians’ incomes.”

If the government would follow this recommendation, it could mean that the incomes that people get from social assistance and other programs would be tied to an agreed-upon income standard – so that people could actually live on the amount of money that would be available.

- 6) “Improve income and social supports for those whose reasonable prospects of earning liveable incomes from employment are limited by disability or other circumstances, including a possible new vision for the Ontario Disability Support Program and exploring options for alternative models of financial assistance.”

This recommendation could improve on the ODSP program to create better supports for people who have disabilities. People with disabilities are often limited in their ability to work but want to participate in work and community life. Better income and community supports to make this possible should be part of an improved program.

C) Process for the Review

The Council thinks the government should use this process to do the Review:

- The Review should be led by two Commissioners. They would actually do the Review, and give government a plan for how to transform income security in Ontario.
- The Commissioners should report to a committee of relevant ministries. Because there are so many provincial ministries that provide supports to low-income people, they should all oversee the work of the Commissioners.
- The Commissioners should be advised by an Advisory Council. The Council would represent the diversity of Ontario, including people with experience of living in poverty. They would advise the Commissioners on how the Review is proceeding.
- The Commissioners should be supported by a Secretariat. Staff provided by the government would ensure the Commissioners have good policy and research materials, and do administrative work to help the Review run smoothly.
- The Commissioners should build a process for consultation that includes: people with lived experience of social assistance; people with expertise based on their work within the system or as advocates or policy researchers; all Ontarians who want to comment; and, Members of Provincial Parliament and other political leaders.

The consultation process should also include a wider public consultation, a 'panel of experience', separate discussions with First Nations, and roundtables with experts.

The consultation process should also build on the consultations that government did on the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy.

- The Review should take 12-18 months.

What You Can Do

Email or write to Premier Dalton McGuinty at the addresses below. Tell him:

- I want the Income Security Review to start right away.
- The Review must be broad and comprehensive, not limited only to OW and ODSP. It must review programs in many ministries and at all levels of government.
- I also want the government to immediately increase the incomes of people on OW and ODSP.
- Low-income Ontarians, and especially people on OW and ODSP, should not have to wait any longer for Ontario to be a better place for everyone to live in.

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To read the whole SARAC Report, go to ISAC's Social Assistance Review website at:
www.sareview.ca/other-resources/recommendations-income-security-review/