

June 4th 2014

Income Security Advocacy Centre: Income Security for Ontarians – 2014 Election Questionnaire

NDP response

1. Will your party commit to creating Ontario's next five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy? What will your Poverty Reduction Strategy contain?

The Ontario NDP will implement a poverty reduction strategy and prioritize the elimination of poverty in Ontario. Too many Ontarians – including over 370,000 children – continue to live in poverty. That is an unacceptable statistic, and it costs our province far too much in lost opportunities. Only the Ontario NDP, guided by our principles of fairness, social justice, and opportunity for all, will deliver results that actually reduce poverty across Ontario. We will maintain poverty reduction commitments in the province's existing fiscal framework in addition to several other measures such as investing in more personal support workers and introducing a fully refundable Caregiver Tax Credit of \$1,275 per year.

The Ontario NDP will ensure children are able to get the right start in life. Following the Ontario Child Benefit increase to \$1,310 in July a NDP government will index it to inflation. We will also improve health and nutrition by increasing funding for school nutrition programs from \$20 million per year to \$35 million per year and by expanding dental benefits for an additional 100,000 kids from low income families; and we'll hire 1,000 new educational assistants to support kids in their classrooms.

A NDP government will ensure parents can access affordable child care and will provide \$100 million in emergency relief funding to stabilize the child care sector and keep centres open. We will also provide ongoing annual mitigation funding of approximately \$20 million per year to offset the impact of the new child care funding formula and ensure that centres do not close in 18 communities across Ontario. In addition, we will index the overall child care budget to inflation, representing another funding increase of approximately \$20 million per year every year. As costs rise, so too will the overall child care budget.

These are the social investments that will help families – and that only Andrea Horwath and the NDP will implement.

The Ontario NDP has a proud record of standing up for precarious workers who often live below or on the edge of poverty. A NDP government will increase the minimum wage to \$12 per hour by 2016 and index the minimum wage to inflation. The NDP has pushed government to increase the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program for years. In 2013, we were successful in our insistence that they create earnings exemption that will allow recipients of OW and the ODSP to keep the first \$200 in employment earnings before the government begins clawing back their benefits. We are committed to implementing a one percent increase in ODSP and OW.

The Ontario NDP will also take action to help financially-squeezed families who struggle to find safe, clean places to live. We have taken the lead in fighting for affordable housing and tenant protection solutions, including initiatives such as landlord licensing, inclusive zoning, and housing benefits. A NDP government will provide over \$400 million over five years as part of the extended Investment in Affordable Housing program. This will allow for the construction and renovation of affordable housing units and provide other supports for families in need. We will continue to work with the affordable housing sector to examine potential programs, such as an additional provincial affordable housing program. We will protect tenants by providing additional funding to municipalities to step up enforcement of building and maintenance standards to make sure that existing rental units are healthy and safe. In addition we will increase the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative by \$42 million starting in 2014-15, to a total of \$294 million.

2. Will your party create a new extended medical benefits program for all low-income people in Ontario that includes drug, dental, and vision care?

The Ontario NDP is committed to a national pharmacare plan. We will stand up for Ontario in talks with the federal government and work with the other provinces to push for a new federal accord that improves health care transfers and includes a national pharmacare plan. In the event that the effort for a national pharmacare plan fails, we are committed to exploring options for Ontario to move forward independently.

In addition, we have fought to expand dental and health benefits to low income children and our plan will expand dental coverage to another 100,000 children in low income households.

3. Will your party ask the WSIB to withdraw the proposed policy changes to ensure the WSIB system provides adequate and ongoing support to people who have been injured at work? And how will you improve ODSP benefits to ensure people with disabilities don't have to live in poverty?

The Ontario NDP is strongly opposed to these policy changes, which reduce benefits for workers in order to cut costs. The pre-existing conditions being used to justify these cuts may have been completely asymptomatic and undiagnosed prior to the workplace accident and, in many cases, are simply a part of the normal aging process. Under this new policy regime, they will now be used to deny or cut benefits, which is not appropriate.

In our view, these policy changes significantly undermine the WSIB system. Instead of cutting benefits, the Ontario NDP believes that better solutions to WSIB's unfunded liability can be found in Harry Arthurs' report, *Funding Fairness*.

4. What will your party do to convince the federal government to restore benefit eligibility to all Ontario workers and ensure the Employment Insurance system does its role in maintaining the income security of Ontario families?

The Ontario NDP is extremely concerned by the federal government's decision to restrict access to employment insurance. This is particularly harmful to Ontarians in regions that are coping with decline in the manufacturing sector and other traditional industries. We will clearly raise these concerns with the federal government in an effort to restore access.