

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REVIEW FORUM

Sarnia, Ontario - August 5, 2011

Submission to the
Task Force on
Social Assistance
Review - 2011

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All participants who shared their ideas and stories

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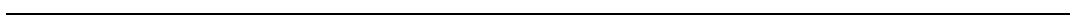
Photographs in this report were taken at the Forum.

Permissions for the use of pictures taken at the Sarnia Forum have been obtained from participants.

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Introduction

On November 30, 2010, the provincial government announced the appointment of Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh as Co-chairs of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. A discussion paper released in June 2011 included 18 questions for discussion. A workbook was also developed for individuals to complete and submit to provide input to the review.

A variety of methods is being employed by the Commissioners, Co-chairs, to collect data to inform their report. Individuals can submit their input electronically, by mail or fax. Communities are also encouraged to host community conversations and submit the collective comments to the Commission.

"In the midst of despair, people are kind. In the midst of miserable poverty, people share. That they go on at all is a testament to spirit, or maybe soul."

June Callwood

This report is the result of a Social Assistance Review Forum held in Sarnia, Ontario on Friday August 5, 2011. The Forum was based on a workshop developed by the ODSP Action Coalition, the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) and the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario to assist people in receipt of Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits participate in the Ontario Social Assistance Review in a meaningful way.

The questions asked of participants at this workshop were different than the discussion questions presented in the workbook set out by the Commission. The questions posed for discussion at the Sarnia workshop were developed to bring awareness to the issues that individuals on OW and ODSP want to talk about. They do not ignore the questions and issues developed by the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. Rather, they address the concerns of the people who are in receipt of social assistance in the province of Ontario as they will be the ones most affected by any change in legislation and policy.

The Sarnia Forum on Social Assistance Review was organized by the Poverty Reduction Committee of Sarnia-Lambton and Community Legal Assistance Sarnia (CLAS) and held at All Saints Anglican Church in central Sarnia. The workshop was held in a drop-in format over a three hour period. Participants were invited to attend lunch and stay at the Forum for as long as possible. Child care and bus tickets were provided to reduce any barriers people may have had that would have prevented them from attending.

Over 80 people attended the Forum to provide input to help the province of Ontario develop changes to social assistance that will provide appropriate and meaningful supports to help our citizens. Most of the attendees were either in receipt of social assistance, or had been at one time. The organizers of the Forum thank these individuals for attending the event, sharing how difficult it is for them to navigate through a complex system, and providing solutions to help make it better for the future.

This report is simple in its format. The questions asked at the Forum are provided and followed by the responses. These responses were expressed in group discussion, in written format on note paper handed in, and by completing the questions and submitting them at a later date.

Although quotation marks are not used in the report, the responses were transcribed verbatim from the oral and written statements of the participants. These are the real words of real people living the harsh reality of social assistance in Ontario today.

Where relevant, the comments have been grouped into themes. The dominant themes articulated include:

- Developing a system of service delivery that embraces respect for the individual receiving social assistance,
- Developing policies to ensure that staff help clients obtain the benefits they are entitled to,
- Real supports that make sense and help people get out of poverty instead of pushing them further behind,
- Consideration that individuals in receipt of ODSP have qualified for this benefit by virtue of being disabled but there is now a focus on finding employment when it is impossible for many of them to do so,
- An absolute need for increases in living allowances that reflect the realities of present day rents and food costs.

The input provided in the following pages should be considered thoughtfully and acted upon by the Commission to Review Social Assistance in Ontario.

Question

1

Question #1

If you could change one thing about Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program, what would it be?

Improve Customer Service

Social Assistance workers need to be aware of all benefits available and be prepared to inform clients. They should see themselves as advocates for the recipients, not the government.



Help to recipients should be available at all times.

Answer the phone!

Enact a more cohesive relationship between ODSP and OW.

That front-line workers are mandated to advocate for recipients and provide information on alternative services.

The OW and ODSP case workers need more training in dealing with people. The workers may not know what our medical conditions are, but chances are if one is seeking assistance then they are experiencing some difficulties which should be dealt with in a more person to person way rather than many of my experiences where I have felt like the relationship is an adult (the worker) to child (me).

The workers need personal relations training.

Some people who are workers in the OW and ODSP offices are not always nice. They give you attitude. That's not good.

It would help a great deal if the staff treated you with dignity and respect or even common courtesy. One often comes away from an encounter with staff feeling violated and worthless.

ODSP should provide necessary information to help a client when it is needed. I had to find out from someone else that I could claim expenses for moving.

That the workers tell clients about all the benefits that are available. We often find out what is available after the fact when it is too late. Social assistance is the last resort. We have to have exhausted all other resources and then when we do need it, we aren't given all the benefits we are entitled to until we specifically ask for them. Are you really here to help us?

"Whenever we hear that a program to help alleviate poverty by removing barriers or providing resources is going to cost X million dollars, there is seldom any mention of the savings that will accrue — there is an assumption that there are no offsetting savings — but nothing could be further from the truth."

*John Stapleton,
Innovation Fellow,
George Cedric
Metcalf Charitable
Foundation*

Increase Income and Other Supports

Increase income supports so that they represent real costs.

Subsidize transportation costs.

Increase income support to families.

Change the rules to allow for a better calculation of shelter costs. You can't find a decent place to rent for \$385/month.

If you can find shelter for less than the maximum allowed, you should be allowed to retain the difference.

Increase social assistance rates to a living rate.

Recognize that a below poverty level of income is not acceptable.

More money.

More money to cover stuff like rent.

Increase asset level for people out of work that have to go on the system.

You should be automatically entitled to a free bus pass as soon as you get on OW or ODSP.

Change the Rules to Help Us, Not Hurt Us

Barriers to education should end so that recipients can access education to a good job.

Stop penalizing recipients when they enter a spousal relationship.

Change the punitive asset rules.

Revisit the income rules.

Change the student loan rules.

Change the home ownership rules.

Allow ODSP recipients to accumulate savings to help with transportation.



The fact that we must transition from ODSP to CPP at 65. We lose our benefits and our income is decreased if we haven't worked enough (usually because of illness). It is also a very stressful process for someone who is that age and has a mental illness.

Keep the drug plan when we turn 65. Just because we are 65 doesn't mean our disability has gone away.

Keep the drug plan simple to reduce stress for us with mental illnesses.

They want you to work, but take half of your pay (which probably isn't much anyway). Because ODSP is not enough to meet the poverty level, this is oxymoronic. We work as hard as everyone else, but we are penalized for it and our time to raise kids, etc. becomes just a vapor.

Appeals – does the process work? Have to get a lawyer to navigate through the appeals process.

Pre-paid grocery cards so we all don't spend the money we receive so stupidly; e.g. alcohol or tattoos or even drugs. Just to know we can still get groceries is great.

Spouses of disabled people shouldn't be penalized for working.

Question

2

Question #2

How Would One Change Make Your Life Different?

Respect

Do not treat me like a criminal.

Treat me with dignity.

Dignity!

For the counselors to have an ounce of caring for us.

I could live like a human.

Take away the plastic barriers in the Ontario Works (Walpole Island) offices. They compel the client to look through little holes to ask for a worker. This is dehumanizing to the applicant and it contributes to their low self-esteem, which hinders job search efforts.

All ODSP recipients must be told about all the services and benefits that are available to them under ODSP. I just found out that there is such a thing as money to help you move.

When I need to call ODSP I sometimes can't wait until my worker is available (only available on Friday afternoons). Sometimes I'm in a crisis and I need help right away. My husband can't take time off work to go to ODSP on Fridays. He can only go to ODSP at the beginning of the week. ODSP needs to be more available during other times of the week.

If our benefits weren't challenged by the fact that we are expected to work, although most of us are incapacitated, and if we didn't have to beg for what we need (including yearly cost of living increases) we could eat healthy food, shop at other than Goodwill. We would feel human.

"Poverty is a personal tragedy for everybody it inflicts. That alone justifies action."

*Don Drummond,
Chief Economist,
TD Bank Financial
Group (retired)*

There needs to be flexibility with dealing with other government departments.

If the rules were more transparent people would feel less anxiety.

OW & ODSP workers need to increase awareness of recipients of what benefits are available.

Health



Improve the medical benefits to include holistic remedies.

Social Assistance should help pay for medical devices and medications that are not covered. I would be able to breathe comfortably without wheezing. Breathing is good; but if you have asthma and need a ventolin machine but can't afford it, you can't get ODSP to pay for it. ODSP needs to approve it so I can breathe comfortably. Breathing is good.

I am tired of fighting to get things I need due to my health problems.

ODSP will not pay for glasses or dentures.

Allow me to care better for my health.

The definition of persons with disabilities needs to include mental and cognitive disabilities in addition to physical disabilities.

Having a pet is therapeutic for me yet there is no extra money for me to pay for pet food and vet bills.

Housing Circumstances and Rules

Provide affordable, decent housing.

I could be allowed to buy a house.

I would have an income coming in to feed and shelter my 13 year old son and myself.

If I could pay a mortgage then I would have my own home, thus a future.

Telephone allowance is needed.

Asthmatics need air conditioning in summer. I'm worried about the increase in hydro next summer when "time of day for use" comes into effect.

If I buy a house and get a loan for a down payment, ODSP will suspend me.

Provide adequate funding for economical group home and shared accommodation facilities.

Rents are too expensive. Make rents more affordable for ODSP and OW recipients.

The workers should be working for us, with respect and compassion, not to make us feel it is degrading and we are less of a person because we have to get assistance. Not having enough to live on, but miserly doling out the crumbs of the government coffers to people who are now second class citizens.



Implement a rent-to-own OW system that rewards good stewards. This would allow a lot more people to be able to buy their own homes.

Rent should not be tampered with when two people are on disability, don't knock the shelter allowance down.

Provide affordable and decent housing. How can it be more economical to forward rent payments to slum landlords and corporations than to provide adequate housing, owned by the people of Ontario, that meets minimum and decent standards of livability and affordability?

The provincial government could assist the clients by subsidizing part of the rent and the clients pay the other half of the rent or increase the basic allowance to meet the basic needs for both food and housing for the clients.

For the clients who are on waiting lists for Social Housing, the Social Housing Department should give more time for both the clients and for the landlords when the clients are going to move out and go into a subsidized unit. It isn't fair to both parties to just announce a vacancy out of the blue and it is against the law unless the government wants to pay for the rent on both apartments.

Standard of Living

A yearly cost of living increase would make a difference. Increases to social assistance would allow us to get new clothes, not always second hand clothes and would allow us to afford to buy real groceries like fruits and vegetables and milk and cheese and meat.

"In trying to explain why so many ex-psychiatric patients lead such desperate lives, we have continued to blame the illness and not the terrible quality of life many endure, with day-to-day suffering, excruciating poverty, and loss."

Pat Capponi, Beyond the Crazy House

The present system for allowable assets means we will always be poor. Increases in the allowable asset levels will allow us to respond to emergencies like visiting an ill relative or paying for new carpet in the apartment.

Letting me stay on ODSP after 65 would make my life better. Being bipolar and having ADHD, OCD and extreme anxiety disorder this one change would relieve me of the mental anguish involved in the process of applying for CPP and OAS, instead of exacerbating the illness to the point of hospitalization or worse.

If ODSP was paying even just minimum wage, I would be able to rent my own town house, feed my celiac self and my grossly underweight son (he is 17). I might even be able to afford to have the treatments that many doctors, rheumatologists and pain clinic doctor feel would help me. My son could have access to programs to help him with his school work, or even to just buy him new clothes (instead of second hand). I would feel confident that I would be able to support both of us and maybe even be able to let my daughter move back home with me. I would be able to afford to have my severe TMJ fixed, so I can eat and breathe properly. Apparently this is cosmetic and costs \$5,000.00 for two surgeries so I can be pain free in my face at least.

Not having to make the transition from ODSP to CPP or OAS. We should be able to continue to receive ODSP beyond age 65 and not lose all our benefits when we have to transition to federal benefits. The federal government could subsidize the ODSP program instead of making us change programs and lose benefits. Also, with the illnesses I have, I get confused and hyper-anxious when filling out forms and waiting for responses.

If they increase the shelter allowance there will be less demand on the rent/utility bank.

If I could get ahead by getting more money, I would go from being a drain on society – I could be a contributor again.

The cost of food has gone up fast and will continue to go up fast. The Special Diet Allowance has to be kept or I can't be buying as much good food.



An increased food allowance/special diet would help alleviate many health issues.

ODSP rates should be increased to at least match the poverty line and need to include coverage for all medications. It would allow for those that must rely on it to survive and to have some dignity and perhaps less physical pain.

Make working with a disability a bigger priority where improving work conditions, access to education and money to pay mandatory fees would increase people's independence.

Cost of living increases would make life easier on so many levels. Life would be much brighter!

Please stop the poverty level and let the people have money for food and clothing to survive and live and enjoy a better life instead of thinking you are a slow learner.

A few luxuries – benefits that can transition into next chapter of your life: back to work, etc. Improving benefits would provide relief of stresses – physically, mentally and emotionally.

Pre-paid grocery cards so I can get milk, cheese, meat and fruits and vegetables for a whole month.

A clothing allowance of \$500.00 per year per person would make a big difference.

Higher rates.

Provide cost of living increases to social assistance each year. This would help us live and we would be able to smile because right now we have to watch where our money goes all the time.

The money we receive from CPP is deducted dollar for dollar by ODSP. If this wasn't deducted we would have a little bit of extra money to spend.

I have heard three different amounts for what the annual poverty level is. One was \$25,000, the second \$20,000 and the third just

over \$15,000. I made \$7,034 last year. I would like to see the minimum amount one makes in a year be at least closer to \$15,000.00 a year to help make ends meet.

There needs to be more coverage for older clients.

Right now I have to walk one hour to and from work. Giving me money for transportation would let me ride to and from work.

Meaningful Employment Supports

Improve the self-employment benefits.

If transition to work rules/benefits were improved, it would reduce stress.

A change in jobs needs new skill sets – we need to be able to return to school for re-educating.



Education increases the chances of getting a job that pays a decent wage. Wage earners contribute to the economy and pay taxes. I think that spouses of disabled people should not be penalized when working. ODSP could take me off my spouse's disability and allow me to make my own money. In the long run they would save on monthly payments and the government would make more money on taxes.

If they stopped deducting my spouse's income we would have a better life.

The change I suggest is to have incentives for those who are motivated to do volunteer work or to take short term jobs or part-time work as a step toward full time employment. Currently people are penalized for showing such initiative.

If my employer could report my earnings directly to OW instead of me having to make a monthly report it would make it a lot easier.

I would like to be allowed to earn more while I'm on ODSP to get myself out of poverty. I see no future for myself living below the poverty line. The stress, fear and depression compound my disability.

Consider hiring people in receipt of OW and ODSP for a government service to help them get back into the workforce.

Assets and Income Thresholds

Inheritance rules need to be revisited.

Overpayment forgiveness.

Insurance policies should not be considered income. He has a small insurance policy where he gets a small dividend cheque but it goes back into paying the premium. OW considers the cheque as income and deducts it from his OW cheque. So he is penalized for having an insurance policy.

Increase the mileage rate – the present allowance is not adequate

Driver’s meals should be covered when necessary.

More money would mean I could pay bills, food and rent. I would be able to be a part of society

If I could see one change made, I would like to see repayments/overpayments ended or pardoned. I now owe \$8,000.00 in money I received when I was forced to take my children and live on my own (instead of with my abusive husband) while awaiting approval of CPP. There has to be a way of receiving assistance while awaiting CPP approval without ending up owing a large sum in the end.



If the mandatory deductions in assets were stopped we could live in better housing, eat healthier meals and perhaps own a vehicle that could lead to a job, enabling us to get off assistance.

Being punished for helping our family prior to needing OW

Good deeds done beforehand were affected. (Helping people out financially before realizing you need to apply for assistance)
Seriously jeopardizes families and individuals.

Biblical Year of forgiveness of all debts every 50th year.

Education

A fast track to get OSAP without all the barriers – by going to OW to get into college.

Forgive/suspend OSAP loans.

If I could get help paying off OSAP I would be in University instead of sitting on OW.

There should be easier access to training. It would then give me the training I need to rejoin the workforce. I broke my leg and despite all the training I have I can no longer do that job.

They told me that since I was still paying back OSAP loans I was no longer eligible for money and OW told me there was no chance to get help with training for a 2 year college course in a job that I am suitable for now.

Loan forgiveness.



Question

3

Question #3

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

To Provide Assistance

To help us out.

To cover everything an individual needs until they can get back to work.

To help you transition.

To help our citizens to pay for things like rent and food and to help them get back to work.

Its purpose should be to provide enough money to make a real living, not one that's below the poverty line.

Social Assistance should be available to everyone when the need is there without barriers to accessing help.

Social Assistance needs to be a program of helping those in need.

The system and its workers need to treat everybody with dignity.

To better listen to us to make better changes.

To help those who are unable, physically or mentally, to work so they can live with dignity by providing an income that would make them able to afford to live in decent accommodation, able to afford wholesome, healthy food, afford transportation, and have full medical, drug, optical and dental coverage – in a manner that is not demeaning.



Should be less adversarial.

To make us feel as human as everyone else: it's not our fault that we can't work. But we shouldn't have to wear clothes that 10 people before us wore or eat garbage that no one else wanted or go around stigmatized by people on the street, family members or social service workers.

Provide support for the entire family.

To Reduce Poverty

To allow helpless people to have a decent lifestyle.

To provide supports to those truly unable to look out for themselves and give a leg up to those who may be somewhat self-sufficient, but require specific assistance.

The purpose of Social Assistance should be to reduce poverty.

The purpose of Social Assistance should be to provide safe, affordable housing.

The system causes more poverty than it prevents.

To Provide Retraining and Education

They should be transitional programs e.g. re-educate or help to access ODSP.

It should be a transitional program whose purpose is to re-educate, re-tool and re-train.

Its role should be to assist people with getting real jobs.



Question

4

Question #4

Tell us about rules that aren't working for you and the impact each rule has had on your life and your family.

Family Life



My husband is disabled. Any time I work to help out, my earnings are deducted and this puts the family further behind. We have children who deserve to have the necessities of life, not be punished because their father is disabled.

I get \$1,053 per month from ODSP. My girlfriend moved in and her earnings were deducted from my ODSP. It cost me \$400 per month to have a girlfriend. The rules regarding spouses need to change. The second she moved in she became financially responsible for me. This puts me in a precarious financial situation.

Part of family life is having a pet. We need money for pet food and veterinary bills.

Crisis Situations

Rules do not facilitate those in crisis.

Hire a crisis worker!

Only being able to see your worker within a three hour period once per week, or call and leave a message. Some matters need immediate attention and other appointments may be at the open time; so I call and leave a message or take papers to reception to be forwarded. But I got no response.

Perpetual Poverty



It keeps me from living life – I can't afford the basic needs of a life in Canada.

The cap on the rent benefit means less money is available for living – sometimes food banks and handouts aren't an option they are a necessity.

Borrowing money from the bank is not allowed.

Can't save money.

The asset rule is too low and doesn't allow us to ever get ahead.

The rules leave people in poverty.

The rules do not respect us as people.

Asset levels are too low. I had one motorcycle too many in my name so I got cut off, now I have no income to feed me and my child.

The fact that the ceiling on our assets is too low. We can't even save enough for burial costs? That's sick.

If you get a birthday cheque for a certain amount let us keep it. Our birthday only comes once a year, why do you deduct it from our income? It's called a gift. We're not getting a lot of money

Why are we told to max out our credit cards??

A retroactive Child Tax Benefit can become an asset/over situation.

If I live in poverty and my kids live in poverty, the chances that they have of ever escaping poverty are really slim. The income supports are not enough and living in chronic poverty will affect the health of me and my kids. Provide decent living conditions, enough food for healthy diets, and support for education and employment to me now. This means that my kids will have a better chance of completing high school and post secondary education. They will be healthier so they won't be a drain on the health care system, and they will be successfully employed after they finish school which means they have a chance of getting out of poverty.

Child Tax Benefit - if I don't get it early and receive it all in one lump sum, it is deducted from my check and leaves me worse off financially.

The transition from OW to ODSP causes hardship because it isn't managed in a timely manner or appropriately.

Support to Navigate through Government Programs

The amount of legwork and running around I am required to do when I am disabled adds more stress and hardships to my life.

We need a crisis worker at ODSP for ongoing ODSP recipients to deal with their crises while on ODSP.

We should be granted ODSP at our first application. Who are they to override my doctor's diagnosis?

We are forced to apply for CPP-Disability: CPP-D is taxable income and doesn't provide us with drug cards.

EI transitional rules are problematic.

OSAP rules vs. Social Assistance rules.

The waiting period for EI is clawed back from Social Assistance.

The Child Tax Benefit calculation.

The transition from OW to ODSP is too slow.

Disability sends you to apply for Employment Insurance, even if you never worked, and tells you you're suspended till you do.

Are clients ever granted ODSP on their first application?

Increase Understanding and Supports to Address Medical Needs & Issues

Increase medical transportation allowance.

Forms!!! And some doctors charge us to complete the forms.

The rules force recipients to run the roads to address all of the paperwork.

The rules do not treat us with dignity.

18 cents a kilometre for medical transportation has not changed for 16 years or more. We need an increase badly. It is stressful for me and my parents.



The amount they give us for mileage to go to medical appointments is too low. It has not increased for years, while gas prices have gone up.

The rules need to be logical. Why, for certain items like orthotics, does the request have to be given to ODSP who in turn gives it to OW? This does not seem efficient or logical.

Having to keep all financial records for three years plus. This is confusing and stressful for someone with a mental illness.

ODSP recipients have to apply for CPP and if it is higher than ODSP you only get the CPP. Therefore you lose benefits and now have a taxable benefit which leaves you in a worse situation. It is not apples to apples.

Employment

There needs to be a better transition from OW to work – e.g., calculation of income calculations.

Transportation to work is not paid.

Workers in supportive workshops only make 50¢ per hour. Why?

E.I./ODSP problems - I got a job on ODSP. The job caused me mental health problems. I lost the job and didn't know that I had to apply for EI benefits. It all caused so many problems that it wasn't worth it to work.

When you apply for OW before EI starts, OW claws back the EI and leaves you in a worse off situation.

Question

5

Question #5

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

Self Esteem

Self esteem support group.

Need coats and proper clothing for adults.

Childcare

Child care – lose subsidy when recipients return to work putting us further behind.

Volunteer Opportunities

A recognition of volunteerism and less emphasis on only back to work programs.

Work Related Expenses & Issues

A professional clothing allowance - we need professional looking clothing when we go out job searching.

Unique back to work supports such as assisting with criminal pardons.

Added supports for dental work and other “cosmetic” needs that create barriers to work and diminish self esteem.

Funding for employment tools such as safety shoes, particularly as recipients go through a number of different employments.



Improve assistance for ODSP recipients to work at a modified career to accommodate their disabilities.

I would like to see OW help more with costs involved with finding a job such as funding for clothing for job interviews, licenses and transportation.

Bus pass.

Training

Support us in training elsewhere, if necessary.

The training programs contracted out are not adequate.

Help to get into university, college and the trades.

Assistance accessing post secondary education.

Accommodation of our disabilities by the educational institutions.

Bring back the Second Career for people with an education to train for more demographic-specific jobs.

I went to college & was on the dean's list 4 semesters. But when it came time to go to work, I was already washed out from the rigors of school. I was exhausted and unable to work.

I'm on ODSP and cannot work. If I could get a paid course at college I might be able to take photography or sign language.

A three year diploma, but they only cover two years.

Job coach - support on the job to help people at work with problems.

I'd like to see no cap on training. e.g., motorcycle training in Edmonton.

Is this whole thing pre-supposing that we want to work? I don't understand. The government is emphasizing work and doesn't recognize that all people can't work.



Is there any way of cutting off training funding provided by other agencies if the training is no good? The training these agencies provide isn't evaluated.

Transportation

Help to own a car and help to acquire a license.

Affordable bus passes for us and our children.

Supports

Human Rights Code being enforced for the disabled.

The temporary agencies affiliated with OW are problematic.

Support places for those social assistance folks having needs and not knowing where to go for help.

Sufficiently adequate housing, transportation, preparation procedures and expenses related to the goal.

Financial support and positive support from workers.

Other Consideration

I have approximately 15 years experience in a couple of different job areas. I often find that there is too much focus on education for the same job area where the employers are now focused on it because they feel the government is pushing it. Somehow get the employers to hire on experience like they used to and not the education.

I am unable to work again, according to my psychiatrist, plus I am nearing old age.

Employment supports need flexibility - flexibility **IS** a support.

Needs assessment should be conducted. These should be holistic and consider all factors in a person's life.

Give people a second chance. The mistakes I made when I was 19 shouldn't be held against me now that I am 40. I'm different now.



Question #6

What other supports do you need to be able to work or be a part of your community?

Transportation

Transportation.

Transportation Allowance.

A Bus Pass!!! I go to the Drop-In-Centre as part of my therapy every day and I have to buy my own bus pass.

Help to get a driver's license so that I can work.

Self Esteem & Dignity

Self-esteem workshops to help with motivation to get back out there.

Support Workers on Job site.

Help with gardening, housework – general help.

Access to social activities, especially with peers.

People who work for ODSP should practice empathy while dealing with me and not make me feel inhuman and worthless. Having mental illness is already debilitating and bad enough.

Help with my physical appearance. I'm missing a tooth in the front. As soon as people, particularly employers, see that, I become a stereotype. I need help to replace my tooth to help with how people perceive me. Then I might be able to get a job.



Health

Health Care.

Psychiatrist.

Proper medication.

Financial Supports

Subsidized child care. As soon as you start working you have to pay for child care, but you can't really afford it right away. We should have a transition period to help out.

More money – at least 90% more minimum.

Save for down payment on a house and be allowed a bus pass when I start working and, in time, be allowed to get a bank loan.

Administration

The application process- ensure that those requesting assistance through first point of contact understand the difference between “emergency” and “ongoing” assistance and the eligibility criteria for each to help avoid those that are falling through the cracks at this initial stage. This information should also be readily available for those applying for EI.

The interpretation of legislation and policies- Within large organizations there are always internal challenges in terms of staff training and turnover with the added changes to internal policies and external legislation. This information takes time to filter through and can contribute to misinformation and confusion for those seeking assistance. The process of communicating these changes must be improved.

The consistency and implementation of discretionary benefits- Individual counties have some flexibility within the legislation to identify and adjust some aspects of service delivery based on specific community needs. For example some counties have the ability to readily produce handwritten cheques in an attempt to secure housing.

"All Ontarians pay the costs of poverty through increased costs for health care, crime, social assistance and in the loss of tax revenue that accompanies low earnings."

The Cost of Poverty,
Ontario
Association of
Food Banks

Employment Agencies rely on welfare workers to work their low wage jobs and rotate us through their jobs.

Housing

A review of the rates-incremental increases have not kept pace with the cost of living namely rent and utilities.

Incentives for landlords to include utilities with potential property tax rebates or incentives.

Changes to municipal by-laws to allow for an increase in granny suite/ basement apartments.

A lack of quality rental units and the limited amount received from OW has increased the demand/ number of room for rent and rooming house situations. Often unsafe they are also unstable as tenants do not fall under the protections of the Residential Tenancies Act. Promoting a review and changes to this legislation to increase the shared accountability for both the landlord and the tenant, i.e., tenants who have paid a monthly rent but their tenancy has been terminated early would be eligible for the pro-rated balance (based on the rent paid and the days remaining) and a mechanism for enforcement.



Rent direct for individuals under the age of 21 and mandatory rent direct for those that have lost housing due to eviction.

Proposal for a local regulatory board that would be responsible for licensing landlords (like the local food regulatory body etc) Landlords would have to apply, pay a nominal licensing fee, and get a yearly review. This fee would be donated to the local rent banks.

Family deductions-children are living at home longer and in some cases parents are returning home to be cared for by their children. Often these circumstances penalize the income of the renter, as there is a limit on the amount that can be excluded when the primary income is ODSP/OW. These arrangements need more support.

When individuals are applying for OW, they are advised that they must use all avenues of income first before they can qualify. Eligible income may include credit cards when a balance is available. Having someone use the balance of a high interest credit card to provide relief only further adds to their long term debt crisis.

A Plan

I read the article about the Forum on Aug 05, 2011 and I thought I should contact you.

It's a very good idea to collect input from the clients and community. Just a pity, I will be working that day - yes almost 75 and still working, just part time. So, I cannot come.

But I would like you to know that I had ideas of how to revamp the system since many years. But nobody wanted to listen to them ... i.e., nothing got done about them.

Now it's your turn!! Ready?

As it is very difficult for people out of work and not with a lot of money to keep their mood up, I always thought we need to encourage them to do everything not to fall into depression or to lose valuable contacts, meaning social support.

My ideas would not cost a lot but would need organization and some community input.

Here they are:

- People on assistance need to maintain a regular day routine,
- People on assistance need to keep using their skills and develop new ones,
- People on assistance need to exchange ideas and support each other,
- People on assistance need to work on assertiveness and a realistic self esteem,
- People on assistance need to demonstrate to the community that they have a lot to offer and therefore deserve to be supported in their efforts.

How it's done? Actually it is rather simple:

People meet about four times a week in the morning, punctually and regularly, at a church hall or somewhere central.

There are group specific programs each morning, with the main topics centering around life skills, healthy cooking, family life, shopping and budgeting, conflict resolution, jobs and volunteering, social and citizenship issues and others.

People are not taught but encouraged to teach each other -- with some guidance.

Anyone who volunteers to teach or train others will get points, which means some financial benefits.

Shy people will be paired with someone who may encourage them to be a partial presenter.

A trained facilitator will organize, supervise the presentations, and help with the discussions afterwards.

On the fifth day the people will either volunteer in an agency according to their ability or they will spend time job hunting. I would start with a pilot program first, possibly with some incentives, like bus passes, free babysitting, meals to take home or other advantages.

Employment

A place where I could work for only a few hours a couple of days weekly.

Non-judgemental workplace.

I need help with my physical appearance and self esteem. Improvements in these areas will increase my ability to present myself to an employer and get a job.





Question #7

If people were required to get treatment or rehabilitation in order to be eligible for OW / ODSP and not get cut off, how would this affect you?

Pro

It would help them seek help.

I think that if you have a drug or alcohol addiction and will not get treatment you should be cut off. As part of receiving OW or ODSP, treatment should be mandatory.



Con

I think it sounds like a Police State.

Only when a doctor diagnosed the treatment/rehab, it should not be up the social assistance workers.

Might cause homelessness and further poverty for those not yet ready to seek help.

Should be tested after a prolonged time on social assistance.

Should we be treating people differently: addictions vs. mental health.

Let's not blame!!

The government needs to support local rehab first (There is a local methadone clinic but not a residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation

facility locally. If one wanted to become sober then he would have to go out of town.)

Mandatory testing might be done on the whim of a social assistance worker.

It is important that we maintain our right to make choices – even if they are bad choices.

My physical problems cannot be rehabilitated.

If it is for my benefit, it would not be a problem. If it is more red tape or an excuse to cut off or reduce benefits, I would have a problem.

Let the professional, licensed physicians make these decisions and function as they were educated to! Don't frustrate everybody!

I already get treatment – psychiatrist, medication, Canadian Mental Health worker and the Consumer Survivor Association, where people with similar illnesses socialize, attend peer groups, receive counselling, etc.

It would not affect me. I still have regular MRIs and trips to the Cancer Clinic in London.

"The social costs of poverty, in the private and public sector, represent about 6.6 per cent of Ontario's gross domestic product."

The Cost of Poverty,
Ontario Association
of Food Banks

Question

8

Question #8

While in receipt of Ontario Works benefits how much influence have you had over the activities you have to do to meet your participation agreement?

It's dictated to me.

Minimal – feels like none at times – dictatorial.

My relationship with Ontario Works was in my control and was a dynamic relationship until our split over discretionary subsidized transportation.

Little to none.



I had to apply for assistance when I left an abusive relationship. I had two kids and 5 months left to finish my college course. I was told that I had to drop out of school to be eligible. I didn't see the point of this because I knew that I needed the education to get a good job and not stay on assistance in the long term. I stayed in school and existed for five months on slightly more than the \$300 per month that I received in support. The Ontario Works supports should have been there when I needed it and I should have been allowed to finish school as my participation agreement. The rules put my family in a precarious financial situation.

Question

9

Question #9

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

Unknown, for information is hard to come by.

Mostly red tape and delays.

No I needed transportation to maintain work.

Yes – you always get the horrible threatening letter that you are suspended.

I have a degree and I can't find a job in my field in this area. I want to retrain but I can't get Second Career funding because of my degree.

Mandatory job searches are faked about 90% of the time.

OW recipients are forced to take classes and courses that take them nowhere, but they get no help getting a job according to their talents.

Having to complete a 20 place job search every month is a problem in smaller towns where there are only a few employers. Having to go back to the same places every month to ask for a job further stigmatizes us as they will soon find out that we are asking because we are on assistance and this might have an effect on whether they hire us when a job does come available.

The requirement to take the first job offered creates problems. If we take the first job, it may not pay enough, may not meet our skills, interests, and abilities. These concerns will affect how successful we are in the job.

Need to encourage people to get an education.



The government should help local businesses to hire people so there are jobs.

It is embarrassing to get my new boss to write me a note to prove that I have a job.



Question
10

Question #10

If people were required to sign a participation agreement in order to be eligible for ODSP and not get cut off, how would this affect you?

ODSP: we have proved we are disabled: why the emphasis on working?

Either we are disabled or not. Take that worry away.

We aren't just a number. The government needs to understand and respect that. We are persons with disabilities and living in poverty.

It must be individualized – mandating will not work.

It depends on the requirements. Reasonable expectations are welcome; unnecessary roadblocks are not. That would be reasonable. We would need to be allowed to give our input.

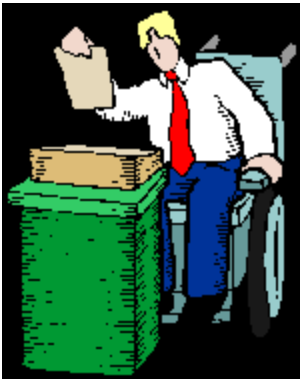
It would be useless to do this for ODSP to set up because one cannot participate?

Because of my disabilities I would have a problem – with transportation and the work itself. Side effects from my cancer surgery and treatment have left me with double vision, poor balance, compromised short term memory and more.

It seems like the government doesn't care about those with disabilities.

I would have more anxiety attacks and hospitalizations.

If this means getting treatment or rehabilitation, it may not be a problem. If this means having to go out and find a job and keep it, I would have horrible problems and may even have to be hospitalized.



Caseworkers need to understand each person's limitations.

It would be good if we could say what kind of job we want.

The program needs to be individualized.

ODSP shouldn't hold it over people's head and tell you what to do.

This is a slippery slope. If you start down this road, then you may go further and further and eventually it may affect whether people qualify for benefits. This is just plain upsetting.

What happens if you are put into a job and you don't have the qualifications and lose the job? What protection do you have?

ODSP workers have NO knowledge of the disability and never will unless we tell them. ODSP workers only deal with financial issues. If you make this change, they will have too much power over our lives.

The commissioners need to understand that the 2 programs are different.

I worry that this will lead to a dissolution of social assistance altogether.

The government needs to increase job opportunities or job searches are a waste of time.

Some concerns noted through Privacy legislation and some employers will not take job applications.

Why isn't there a discussion about volunteering?

Doing a job search in a small town is an exercise in futility.

Providing quality education is more important.

Programs negatively intersect with each other.

Recipients are being forced to disclose personal information to their caseworkers.

What about the hidden disabilities?

I am more disabled now than I was before.



You could be hired but not really qualify.

As ODSP workers are not apprised of recipient's disabilities, they are ill-equipped to administer this.

How will ODSP then differ from OW?

More paperwork!!!

Not !

Solution: Make government officials sign a participation agreement that they will do what they say they will and if they don't follow through, then they don't get paid.



Question
11

Question #11

What basic needs do you have that you cannot afford right now?

Basic groceries, rent, hydro, recreation, transportation.

Transportation, food, clothing, getting started in work.

Decent accommodation, decent food and dietary needs at times, transportation, and ability to afford social/leisure activities.

Transportation, engaging in regular exercise (a club membership paid for).

Shelter, food, transportation, phone.

I am a survivor of two brain tumours and a thyroidectomy, and for the past approximately 16 years have consequently been unable to work. Thus I am dependent on the system. Most recently I am required to be on a diet for two weeks prior to having iodine treatment at the nuclear clinic at University Hospital in London. For this I am required to be on a specialized diet for two weeks prior to the treatment. It was indicated that I should submit this extra expense which I did after I spent a lot of time going around from store to store to get prices and find out where I could get everything.

I submitted my list and it was denied which leaves me with little money for the rest of the month to get any other groceries. The allowance of 18 cents per kilometre for travel has been in effect for a long time and does not allow for the increase in gas prices. It is very difficult and stressful to exist on present allowances with all the increases over the past years in general living expenses.

Meats and dairy.



My pet dog needs to visit the vet, shots, licensing, etc.

Gas and upkeep for my car. I have a handicapped daughter, and we need personal, reliable transportation. Also there are some medical procedures and medications that are not covered by ODSP.

My supplements.



Question
12

Question #12

What is the most important thing you would need help paying for if you were transitioning into a job and leaving OW / ODSP?

First and last month's rent.

Every need, needed for the first three to six weeks of a job.

Adequate clothing and equipment needs to support the employment opportunity.

Transportation.

Gas, insurance, work clothes.

An employment start up allowance and an agreement that if I can't handle the job ODSP, will still be there for me and easy to resume.

I could not transition to a job. I couldn't do it.

Definite assurance that I would have no problems getting back on ODSP if things didn't work out.

I would need affordable, safe housing and transportation costs paid for. I would also need medical, dental and optical benefits paid for that are not covered by the job.



Question
13

Question #13

If the government wants to make sure that people are better off working, what could they do?

I need to stand and sit when I need to.

More funds to cover it in the first three months of working so one can keep the job.

Support training, education, job supports and coaching, after the (training) event provide supports and assurance that making a change will not leave one "out in the cold"; i.e., it is more attractive to work at self support than risk losing benefits.

Forgive or suspend OSAP loans until we can reasonably afford them. Allow us a start by helping with transportation.

Not cut us off welfare. Help us get jobs. Not go after our income tax.

Provide assessments to assess us mentally and physically.

If people are in receipt of OW, they should have to sign a participation agreement which would be followed up by training in a field they are suited for, then a guaranteed job. An exception should be made for mothers raising small children. People in receipt of ODSP are not able to work and went through gruelling measures to prove this, so they should not be included in this plan.

The government should not penalize people by taking half their wages and putting them below the poverty level. This would put anyone, especially those with mental illnesses, over the edge. Maybe that's the



whole idea. Then they wouldn't have to pay them anything.

I understand that there are some benefits that I can apply for to exempt earning on ODSP.



Question
14

Question #14

How do asset limits and income rules keep you from improving your life?

They deduct income at 50% of earnings and all other income is clawed back at 100%.

Any gifts and loans are clawed back.



My disabled daughter has Down Syndrome and earns a \$1 per hour in a sheltered workshop. Even adding her employment earnings to her ODSP entitlement does not bring her income to the Low Income Cut Off for a single person yet half of her earnings are clawed back.

In addition, she has to pay for transportation to work. Until today I didn't know about the monthly employment benefit that she is entitled to. So we will apply for that to help out.

I want to be able to save money like everyone else, say for a car.

I have to accept money from others to survive.

How can loans be considered income as they need to be repaid?

The rules cause recipients to lose anything gained by working causing them to remain in poverty.

Workers are not consistent in applying the rules.

I can't afford to pay for outside activities or holidays.

I can't own anything. I can't pay for anything, this keeps me from getting ahead.

Nothing left after basics are paid for. In fact, deficit spending or charity is often required.

Not allowed to earn much, can't borrow from banks, and can't have above a minimal amount saved. Can never be financially successful
Can never get ahead/afraid to for chance of getting cut off. Or when working and get let go from a job, I can't get help.

Rent goes up every year but we do not get a rent increase from ODSP or OW. That extra rent comes from the rest of our money.

They should help us get mortgages for homes instead of only renting. When I was initially accepted for ODSP I received a retroactive cheque for approximately \$3,000.00, which was added to my bank account (which was approximately \$500.00). I received a letter telling me that I had too much in assets. This was bewildering since I don't think that was the limit, plus they put the money there. The letter came just after they told me they put the money in my account.

If you are blessed enough to acquire a vehicle, you don't have any money to put aside to repair it.

We can't afford to replace anything in our homes except at "fleabag" places. We are forced to stay in rundown places and we are looked down at by society. It's demeaning and we become more stressed and sick and can't work.



Question
15

Question #15

If the Special Diet Allowance, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities and Temporary Care Assistance benefits were no longer part of social assistance, what do you think would happen?



A lot of people will suffer their health.

Death or illness.

People's health and well being would be severely compromised.

Things would go from very bad to much worse.

The clients would suffer and their families would be stressed.

People would not be able to afford to live or pay bills.

People would stay sick.

If they cut Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities my disabled son will fall through the cracks. He needs medication, which is NOT covered and respite care is UNAFFORDABLE. My son is 7 years old. Don't ruin his chances for a successful future!

Nothing good!

People, especially children and the elderly, would probably die or suffer excruciatingly, but the government wouldn't have to worry about them.

People who couldn't receive the Special Diet Allowance would become more ill – even to death.

Without assistance, Children with Severe Disabilities would not receive what they need to improve or survive.

This would be cruel, especially since we're "saving" other people around the world.



Conclusion

The residents of Sarnia-Lambton have spoken. They have articulated their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about how difficult it is to subsist on social assistance in the province of Ontario. They have outlined the unreasonable rules and regulations they face daily. Compounding their difficulties of constrained resources are the issues of ill health, unstable housing, complex rules, and agency staff who are unable to help them.

*"My friends,
love is better
than anger.
Hope is better
than fear.
Optimism is
better than
despair. So let
us be loving,
hopeful and
optimistic."*

*Jack Layton,
Leader of the
Federal New
Democratic
Party, 2011*

This report of the Social Assistance Review Forum held August 5, 2011 in Sarnia, Ontario will be forwarded to the Commission by September 1, 2011. Key themes identified at the Sarnia Forum include:

- A call to develop a system of service delivery that embraces respect for the individual receiving social assistance,
- The need to develop policies to ensure that staff help clients obtain the benefits they are entitled to,
- Real supports that make sense and help people get out of poverty instead of pushing them further behind,
- Concern that individuals in receipt of ODSP have qualified for this benefit by virtue of being disabled but there is now a focus on finding employment when it is impossible for many of them to do so,
- An absolute need for increases in living allowances that reflect the realities of present day rents and food costs.

Participants at the Forum are hopeful that the Commissioners, as Co-chairs, will consider the ideas provided in this submission to bring about real change as they move forward with their task of developing recommendations and a concrete action plan to reform the social assistance programs in Ontario to improve client outcomes.

The residents of Sarnia-Lambton who are in receipt of social assistance, who have been in receipt of social assistance, who have loved ones in receipt of social assistance, and those who work in the sector are optimistic that the introduction of revised legislation will better serve our most vulnerable citizens.

