



Pre-Budget Consultation Submission

Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo

March 22, 2013

Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group includes social service agencies, advocacy groups, and organizations. The Group has been mobilizing local voices in the Poverty Free Ontario provincial campaign and in consultations on the Social Assistance Review since 2011.

It is a diverse group of organizations, who may not agree on every strategy or demand put forward to advance our joint actions, but there is a shared agreement on a set of principles and values:

- Austerity is not the way to proceed with setting budgets in Ontario. **Investment is needed in public services and income security system**, which are great equalizers in times of growing economic and social inequality;
- There should be **no further piecemeal changes to the social assistance system**, while the Province develops a high level vision and an implementation plan for the social assistance reform. This implies that all transitional funding mitigating the cuts to the Community Start-up and Maintenance Benefits and Discretionary Benefits should be maintained until such a plan is in place;
- In development of the overall vision and implementation plan, **no future cuts should be made to existing services** in order to raise the rates or allowable earnings, such as elimination of special diet allowance, or work-related benefits to people on ODSP;
- The approach in setting Province's budget should **raise everyone from deep poverty and working poverty**, and go beyond the system that justifies "discretionary benefits" over basic human rights, such as shelter, healthy food, or good health:
 - o Social assistance rates should be raised to bring all recipients out of deep poverty (i.e. above 80% of the Ontario Low Income Measure)
 - o Minimum wage should be increased to 10% above Low Income Measure so that all full-time, full-year workers earn income bringing them above the poverty line
- **Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program should not be merged** as this will disadvantage ODSP recipients; we have to re-examine carefully the underlying assumption that everyone is able to work in the current labor market conditions.
- **Integrated policies should be guiding the investment to help people find and keep decent work**: increase of Child Benefit, accessible Employment Insurance, affordable childcare, workplace accommodations for workers with disabilities, and improvement and enforcement of employment standards.



Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo has organized three community forums on Social Assistance Reform and participated in many poverty reduction conversations in the community. We recognize how important investment of funds is for local communities in order to make sure that people with lived experience in the system are heard and rewarded for their contributions:

- Giving meaningful input, designing, and monitoring the reform implementation
- Supporting local dialogue across sectors and have impact on governments
- Working against prejudice and myths about people on social assistance through public education
- Providing support to individual **system navigation and advocacy assistance**

Our Commitment Statement

*Joint statement by Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group and participants at the third community forum on social assistance reform
Resolution for 2013 – Poverty Free Ontario, January 19, 2013.*

The Ontario Social Assistance Reform is at a turning point for the future of the people in the province. It is important to eliminate conditions that create, or keep people in, poverty. A successfully reformed system will help us all, as justly observed by a participant in the *Ending Poverty Project*¹: “We need government to play their role addressing poverty, so that communities and individuals can then take steps to decrease poverty”.

Above all, we stand firm that an austerity agenda should not be driving social assistance reform – the aim should be income adequacy and wellbeing of people, not targeted cost savings in government spending.

As a community, we support the short term recommendations of the Social Assistance Review Commission:

- A \$100/month increase to all single adult recipients (however this should not be paid for by decreasing other benefits)
- Increase minimum wage to 10% above Low Income Measure so that all full-time, full-year workers earn income bringing them above the poverty line
- Raising the asset limits allowed for OW recipients to the same level as ODSP recipients, allowing them to keep more earnings before benefits are reduced

And, the following should be applied to the longer term recommendations:

1. Adequate rates - Social assistance rates to bring all recipients out of deep poverty (i.e. above 80% of the Ontario Low Income Measure – this should be the key measure for poverty rates and tracking success on system outcomes
2. People are treated with dignity and respect – introducing a function of an Ombudsman, consistency in information and procedures, equal treatment of all service recipients, no focus on fraud
3. Fair labor market and employment policies - creating fair labour market conditions and job opportunities before making employment a focus of social assistance reform
4. Integrated system of supports
 - To not burden municipalities with the administration of programs without necessary financial supports and clear guidelines of administering funds within the social assistance programs.
 - To not create a piecemeal system that makes it more difficult to see the total impact on people (from what appears to be small cuts in multiple areas) or to implement the reform
 - To better integrate of provincial and federal supports so these work better for people – e.g. increase EI levels and eligibility periods; implement a national drug care program

As a community, we will aim to do the following:

- Engage our community at a grass roots level to mobilize and advocate for system change
- Contribute to public education campaigns breaking prejudice and stereotypes about poverty that are entrenched in policy making and service delivery
- Advise and lobby at all orders of government against taking a counterproductive austerity approach and to continue to educate our political leaders about the growing economic inequality and its impact
- Work to disseminate information to individuals and develop supports to help people navigate support systems
- Monitor the implementation of the reform and participate in local stakeholder advisory activities

¹ *Ending Poverty Project, 2008-2010, ISAC & Campaign 2000*



***Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo
Action Group Participants***

*Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo
Out of the Cold – First United Church Friday site
YWCA of Kitchener-Waterloo
K-W Disability & Human Rights Group
Opportunities Waterloo Region
Supportive Housing of Waterloo (SHOW)
House of Friendship
Homelessness Awareness Week
Canadian Federation of University Women Kitchener-Waterloo
Housing and Homelessness Umbrella Group (HHUG)
Waterloo Regional Labour Council
Awareness of Low Income Voices ALIV(e)*

On behalf of the Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group

Aleksandra Petrovic

*Community Project Manager
Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo
Community Information Centre Waterloo Region
300-151 Frederick St. Kitchener ON, N2H 2M2
Phone: 519-579-1096 Ext 3010*