

**Presentation to Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs**  
2014 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultation  
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I am presenting today from a perspective derived from the work we have done at the Social Planning Council with a range of community groups and events including the K-W Disabilities and Human Rights Group, Poverty Free K-W and Network of Women's Groups.

A year ago the Social Planning Council co-hosted a community forum with the local Fair Vote Canada group and TransitionKW at which community advocates involved in social justice, environmental sustainability and democratic renewal met to jointly define the values that drive their community action. Four principles emerged from this session.

- Equality
- Legacy for the future
- Compassion
- Community of voices

I offer these as the base values to build Ontario and guide the setting of the 2014 budget. We ask that all political parties in Ontario join the community of voices for equality and fairness, providing a legacy for the future and having compassion for our fellow community members, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

The Social Planning Council has supports Poverty Free KW and participates in Poverty Free Waterloo Region and Poverty Free Ontario. We share, with many groups active in Waterloo Region and in more than 20 other communities across Ontario, the imperative to eliminate deep poverty and end working poverty in our Province.

We affirm the following as key budget considerations:

- Target the increase of financial assistance rates (Ontario Works) to 80% of the Low Income Measure and that these rates are indexed to inflation in subsequent years.
- Rollback cuts to benefit programs
  - Increase the cap for discretionary benefits to at least \$15
  - Provide transitional support to be sure the community homelessness prevention initiative is working well to meet the real need in our community
  - Ensure special diet, health and medical expense allowances are adequate and available.

- That no steps be taken toward integrating OW and ODSP into a single system without adequate remedies that acknowledge and address the limits to employability for those eligible for the Ontario Disability Supports Program (ODSP).
- That income support programs NOT be defined in terms of employment
  - Not everyone can be competitive in our current employment market and
  - No amount of training will change the systemic issues in that environment
- Increase minimum wage to 10% above the Low Income Measure and index to inflation.

It is a fact that OW and ODSP benefit levels are way below the level of deep poverty. Income redistribution programs reduce poverty levels. Tax investment to increase income security is fair and appropriate and the ONLY way to create prosperity on Ontario.

Please do not buy in to the myths that somehow those in this situation prefer to be poor or are able to work but are just too lazy to do so. Wrong. Do not assume that everyone can be competitive in the marketplace – there are real limitations that people face with few environments able to support their contribution in a competitive market sense.

We need to understand that income supports are essential to prosperity; every dollar provided for income assistance is spent directly in our local economy.

Do not leave municipal governments holding the bag for covering the gap in discretionary benefits and the transition in housing support program. Income distribution through income tax is the appropriate base to fund social programs and government services.

Set parameters for good jobs and work environments. As listed above, increase the minimum wage so that full time workers earn at least 10% above the poverty level, LIM. Invest in inspectors to ensure that workplaces and work practices are safe and fair, especially in temporary employment agencies and businesses that hire individual workers through sub-contracts.

In addition to the above, I urge, all parties to call for an objective analysis of the significant increase in ODSP applicants to determine what factors in Ontario's employment and economic environment are contributing to this trend. If any proposed solutions put further pressure on people to function in a dysfunctional economic environment, the results will be MORE, not fewer people unable to work because of health.

Please commit to an adequate and honest assessment of the extent to which government sponsored programs provide direct and indirect subsidization to employers that provide low paying or minimum wage jobs, particularly in the areas of training and other employee supports such as health benefits.

It is fair and appropriate to provide assistance to help people meet basic needs and to deal with extraordinary circumstances. It is not fair to have to provide this support if employers are not adequately supporting their own workforce or, worse, are contributing to making people ill so

they must rely on publicly funded financial assistance. This cycle must be understood and stopped.

Employment supports need to be appropriate to the changing work environment and, where there are challenges for job seekers, training allowances should be sufficient to achieve good outcomes. Putting pressure on anyone to get work in today's employment environment is unfair and unproductive, putting pressure on them to do so when there are acknowledged barriers in the form of language, culture and/or disability is irresponsible.

Look also at the rising cost of health care and address the following two points.

First, investigate the role played by ancillary industries such as the drugs and insurance in increased health care costs. These industries provide high cost products that create unequal access when people can't access or afford insurance coverage. Ontario's health care system is subsidizing these industries and those companies that do not pay for health care costs of their employees.

Second, invest in creating healthy environments and measures that prevent illness— clean water, clean air, public spaces and recreation opportunities.

The social and physical and infrastructures of our province are complementary and together form the very foundation of our communities. It is imperative to have adequate, safe and well-functioning public facilities, transportation, water and sewage systems as well as a diverse range of softer services to enable the full range of day to day activity of individuals and their families and to support people at all life stages.

These services should not be provided by, coordinated or in any way accountable to the formal health care system. It is much more expensive to provide this model of care which does not support communities to explore and create local solutions that responds to needs and builds capacity and resilience within our communities.

Local communities need help to sustain their physical infrastructure and public spaces. Local community, educational, protective, social and health services help weave the fabric of social cohesion. Important strides taken with the adoption of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act standards will require diligent attention and investment to ensure these requirements are implemented to achieve the vision we have for accessible and inclusion communities.

Local communities are the source of innovation and funds should be available for social initiatives in open and fair funding programs that are available to smaller community organizations. Also, balance setting standards and common goals against the flexibility to implement programs in local communities - reduce the administration and accountability reporting loads that burden community partners.

Do not fund initiatives in the name of poverty reduction that do not add direct financial benefit to people and their families. 211 is an example of this – fund this initiative predicated on it being integrated with and not replacing local services but do NOT fund as a poverty reduction initiative – it can be a very useful part of the social infrastructure but it does not address poverty in a direct and material way.

Invest in conversations in local communities to determine what is needed and what is appropriate to be provided through public dollars and, of those which should be delivered by the Government of Ontario. Support a true cross-community, cross-party participatory budget process that will open dialogue about what we value and what we need. This conversation should also open the discussion of how we contribute to achieving the necessary common ground needed to provide for a fair and prosperous Ontario.

We need to look at any government budget deficit as the difference between the revenue we have and what is needed to provide the supports and services to everyone in Ontario. This is the gap we need to fill– if by cutting costs; then cut what is not necessary to meet the needs of people or to meet our shared public contract. If needs are to be met through revenue generation, then do so with fair tax rules that do not benefit some at a cost to those less able to bear the burden. Re-instate previous corporate tax rates; add a 1% income tax rate for all and 2% for higher income earners.

Austerity language creates fear without providing an honest appraisal of what our social contract should be as citizens and tax payers on Ontario. Consider the Ontario we create together, that is fair for everyone, improves accessibility and life chances and uses public funds wisely in the interest of all.

It is important that the provincial budget reflect what is important for people in a coherent and integrated way – a piecemeal approach that offers small gains for various groups will not reflect a rational perspective of what is necessary and appropriate for the investment of our shared tax dollars.

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