



**Poverty Free  
Kitchener-Waterloo**

**Resolution for 2013  
A Poverty Free Ontario!**

# **Community Forum on Social Assistance Reform**



## **Report**

**February 2013**



Report produced by the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo, in collaboration with the Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group, February 2013.

## 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



2013, Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo



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**COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRE**  
of Waterloo Region



SPCofKW

## Income Security System Review

### Community Focus since 2008

The beginning of the new year in 2013 was a good time to reflect on the Provincial Government's and our own intentions and commitments to determining the direction and implementation of social assistance reform in Ontario.

The Kitchener-Waterloo forum on social assistance reform, *Resolution for 2013-Poverty Free Ontario*, was held January 19<sup>th</sup> 2013 to give input on recommendations that have been made by the Social Assistance Review Commission to reform the income security system as a whole. This forum is the latest point in a series of dedicated local community driven conversations hosted by the Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group to support the implementation of the Ontario Government's provincial poverty reduction plan: *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*.

#### **Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy and Social Assistance Review Timeline:**

**2007** - Ontario Government makes commitment to create a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy by December 2008. Minister Deb Matthews appointed to lead the process.

**May 2008** – Social Planning Network of Ontario hosts a planning session with key provincial associations and presents the Blue Print for Poverty Reduction to Minister Mathews.

**May 2008** – Community Consultations begin

**July 2008** – Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo hosts Social Planning Network of Ontario Blueprint for Poverty presentation and assists with engaging participation in local consultations.

**December 2008** – Ontario government released "*Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*". The Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo facilitated a local response to this plan from local leaders and from members of the Disabilities and Human Rights Group.

**February 2009** - Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo joined others in the Social Planning Network of Ontario to request an immediate inclusion of \$100 per month to all social assistance recipients in the 2009 Ontario Budget as an interim step toward social assistance system reform

**May 2009** – The *Poverty Reduction Act* approved (Bill 152)

**May 2010** – Ontario Social Assistance Review Advisory Council published the "*Recommendations for an Ontario Income Security Review*"

**November 2010** – the Government appoints Frances Larkin and Munir A. Sheikh to lead the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

**June 2011** – The Commission finishes the identification of key issues and releases the first *Discussion paper: Issues and Ideas* and the consultation period starts

**August 2011** – Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo and partners in Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo

Action Group hosted a community forum to get local input on the first discussion paper, and convened a Livable and Inclusive Community working session to review how well the consultation process met principles of inclusion.

**February 2012** – The Commission published the *Discussion Paper 2: Approaches to Reform*, and sought further input on identified potential approaches to the reform

**February 2012** – Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and partners in Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group hosted a second community forum and responded with a submission in March 2012.

**October 2012** – The Commission published its final report and recommendations *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*.

**January 2013** – Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and partners in Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group host the third community forum to review the recommendations made by the SARC and to discuss criteria for monitoring the success of outcomes from system reform.

## **Resolution for 2013 – Poverty Free Ontario**

### **Forum Objectives**

**To continue the local dialogue on social assistance reform, the January 2013 community forum was held with the intention to:**

1. Help local community members better understand the recommendations made by the Social Assistance Review Commission as well as the implications of these recommendations
2. Begin to define local criteria for successful social assistance system reform
3. Define our own role in the development and implementation of system reform
4. Make a strong statement of commitment to contribute to successful reform at different levels

**To achieve these goals the forum included:**

1. Panel presentations with different perspectives on the Commission's recommendations
2. Table Discussions on local criteria that would help us monitor the implementation of a successful reform
3. Collective input into a local Commitment Statement to be used in communications to others we want to inform and engage

### **Panel Presentations**

The forum started with the panel presentation of various perspectives on the Social Assistance Review Commission's (SARC) recommendations and we had well informed and well prepared speakers:

### **Peter Clutterbuck, Social Planning Network of Ontario**

Peter raised the importance of adequate measures of establishing the social assistance rates, which will not be a subsistence measure, nor perpetuate a false test of “fairness” between social assistance recipients and working poor.

### **Kyle Vose & Naomi Ives, Co-chairs of the ODSP Action Coalition**

Kyle and Naomi addressed the ODSP related recommendations made by the Commission, particularly the earnings exemption calculation that leaves most of the recipients worse off, and inadequate employment policies regarding inclusion of people with disabilities into the labor market and work places.

### **David Dirks, Director of Employment and Income Support, Regional Municipality of Waterloo**

David spoke about the need for a fundamental system transformation and a shared community vision to guide the reform of service delivery for all low income people.

### **Marc Xuereb, Waterloo Regional Labour Council**

Marc raised concern that the Commission's recommendations put too much emphasis on finding ways to help the government spend less on social assistance.

### **Eleanor Grant, Alliance Against Poverty**

Eleanor stressed that the government should enhance and enforce labour standards so that social assistance recipients have safe and decent-paying jobs when they are ready to work.

### **Trish Hennessy, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario Office**

Trish spoke about the negative impact of austerity measures on both social and economic landscape in post-recession Ontario, and the importance of ongoing investment in the public sector services.

## **Forum Participation**

The forum was organized with the generous contribution of participating *Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group* members, particularly the YWCA of Kitchener-Waterloo, who provided the use of Mary's Place Community Room at 84 Frederick Street. Action Group members contributed to organization of the forum, from setting up the InfoAction Networking Tables to facilitation of table discussions.

The *Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group* is a collaborative of various groups and committees with a common interest in eliminating poverty. These include groups such as the Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group, Canadian Federation of University Women Advocacy Committee, and Awareness of Low-income Voices - ALIV(e). A number of organizations and groups came out for InfoAction Networking: Alliance

Against Poverty, Disability and Human Rights Group, Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group, Waterloo Regional Labour Council, and ALIV(e).

## Timing

Saturday, a weekend day has been chosen in order to attract a diversity of participants, both people with lived experience, agency staff, activists, elected officials and the general public. The date was chosen to be timed to after the final 2013 Waterloo Regional Budget approval scheduled for January 16<sup>th</sup>, and to be before the Ontario Liberal Party Leadership Convention scheduled for January 26, so the outcomes of the forum could be shared with all of the candidates who would potentially be the next Premier of Ontario.

## Participation

A total 56 people were present and took part in the table discussions, representing the range of diversity the forum planning group had intended to engage. Many of the participants were already involved in poverty reduction work, had past or present experience in the social assistance system, or were members of groups and agencies working with people on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.

## Participant Feedback

Comment cards were collected at the end of the forum. Participants agreed they came out of the forum with more information. For example one comment was “Very informative, I didn’t know much about the ODSP before this meeting”. Other positive feedback included: *Excellent forum! Keep these talks ongoing; More of these and more often (2x year or more); Distribute the links to the panel video widely!; [A] great number of actions to be taken. Don’t lose the momentum!; Critical thought/advocacy essential!*

Getting more awareness of this type of event and increased participation were the main suggestions of how to improve future events such as this. Examples of comments received:

- *Promote sooner, promote and contact schools, where students can benefit and are interested.*
- *More online information of meetings!*
- *Find ways to get the event and their outcomes/issues addressed into the media.*
- *Improve awareness of events like this so they have a wider reach of attendees.*
- *Use economic language to engage business/chamber of commerce, etc.*





## Forum Outcomes

One of the objectives of the forum was to make a strong statement of collective commitment to contribute to successful reform at a local level. In the two social assistance review forums hosted in Kitchener-Waterloo in August 2011 and February 2012, people had already spoken up about the need for adequacy of supports, dignity in the process, fair labor market policies and integrated support systems. These issues are common to those identified in communities across Ontario and are on the poverty reduction agenda of campaigns such as 25 in 5 and Poverty Free Ontario. These key outcome directions formed a draft statement of commitment for participants at the January 19<sup>th</sup> Kitchener-Waterloo forum. This statement was presented at the January 19<sup>th</sup> Kitchener-Waterloo forum and finalized with input from participants during the forum.

The Commitment Statement has since been sent to the Ontario Liberal Leadership candidates, elected officials in the region, social service agencies, and the wider public. It is hoped this statement will provide a platform for a united message that can be used by local stakeholders in their ongoing efforts to ensure income security for all.

## Our Commitment Statement

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*<sup>1</sup>: “*We need government to play their role addressing poverty, so that communities and individuals can then take steps to decrease poverty*”.

Above all else, 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)
- Minimum wage to \$12.50 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 recipients to keep more earnings before benefits are reduced

<sup>1</sup> *Ending Poverty Project, 2008-2010, ISAC & Campaign 2000*

**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.
  - Do 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
  - Better integration 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





## Creating Kitchener-Waterloo Criteria to Monitor System Reform Success

The intention of the January 19<sup>th</sup> Kitchener-Waterloo forum was to further define what successful social assistance reform would be, both at the system level, and in people’s daily lives. This will provide a foundation for developing criteria or guidelines for monitoring the outcome of changes to the system. The guidelines outlined here will be expanded in future conversations amongst Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group members and with community members, service agencies, municipal and provincial partners.

Outcome	Description/examples	Possible Outcome Measurement
<b>Adequate assistance levels to support well-being and health</b>	All essential needs are met beyond bare sustenance, living wage indexed at inflation rates, including transportation, communication, healthy nutrition and health care. People feel well and are healthy.	Objective measure against a standard poverty level – 80% of Low Income Measure (LIM); Community participation rates of social assistance recipients; Health status of social assistance recipients; Self-reported well-being and health status.
<b>Support to all low-income people and for a range of needs.</b>	Childcare subsidies, health and dental benefits, support for savings.	Eligibility requirements do not restrict or deny access.
<b>People are treated with dignity and respect in the process</b>	Discrete, caring, equal and fair service delivery based on relationship building that does not punish or blame, stressing that everyone has a role to play in the society	Feedback from service recipients; Staff training program include evaluation in these areas;The extent to which staff roles include advocacy and problem solving discretion.
<b>Greater accessibility to and navigation of the system</b>	Application process is simple and understandable, improved communication including translation, timely, transparent, advocates, in collaboration with external partners.	Feedback from service recipients; External review of forms and process; Assessment of staff roles and requirements e.g. case load, time for client visits, location for visits.
<b>Employment support</b>	Jobs not forced on people, adequate employer support, recognition and compensation for the volunteer work done in the community, keeping more income from work for gradual transition out of social assistance, support in job retention, additional help for entrepreneurs, access to training and education.	Job retention rates; Comparison of budgets for support programs vs. income support costs; Policies for non-working and volunteer participation; Self-reported experience of social assistance recipients and those who have transitioned to work and are no longer receiving assistance.

Outcome	Description/examples	Possible Outcome Measurement
<b>Fair labour market, practices and employment policies</b>	Non punitive workplace practices for people with challenges, stop ripple effect of policies creating precarious and low income labour markets, support collective bargaining, demonstrating fair hiring practices, encourage employers considering experience from outside Canada.	Range of employment options; Minimum wage level; Harmonized programs for transition to employment.
<b>Integrated systems and appropriate investment by all orders of government</b>	Harmonization of allocations from different levels of government, consistent supports through provincial and municipal funding of programs, collaboration among different players in service delivery, standardization of information and communication, consistent eligibility criteria, fair taxation.	External review of policies, programs and budgets; Integrated plans – cross ministry and governments harmonization; no cuts to existing services, reverse cuts to essential supports; adequate funding levels based on local needs; reduced income inequality after government transfer income.
<b>Underlying assumptions and philosophy of system plans and reforms are not blaming or punitive</b>	Negative and judgemental attitudes; emphasis on fraud prevention; stereotypes of lazy welfare bums.	External review of key documents, policies, plans and program requirements; Adequate support focus on long term gains not short-term costs.
<b>There are accessible and meaningful ways to participate in the planning, decision making and assessment process</b>	Being heard, looking beyond the formal and high level input structures, decision-makers connected to local conversations, not assuming technologies and Internet connections are available to people.	Accessible language, adequate time to formulate suggestions, funds allocated for communities to host meaningful conversations, tailored opportunities to provide input, and creation of the welcoming environment for engagement with the feeling of hope about the outcomes, diversity of players present.

## Next Steps

Our Commitment Statement and guidelines for Kitchener-Waterloo criteria to monitor the implementation of the reform are early steps in a continuing process to ensure wider promotion and engagement around the poverty reduction. As many participants in the *Resolution for 2013-Poverty Free Ontario forum* pointed out, we must build on the momentum.

It is important that political leaders be attuned to input from local groups and communities, and make a commitment to encourage, support and listen to ongoing local conversations such as are happening in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo will develop further strategies to extend its reach and impact in the local community, and develop a monitoring framework through open and collaborative processes.

Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and all members of the Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo Action Group will work together and with partners in Poverty Free Waterloo Region and Poverty Free Ontario to further the local dialogue and to continue participating in province wide initiatives.

*“This brings us to the question of what we value in our society. We need adult conversation about taxes. Middle earning family benefits from about \$40 000 from public services per year. As citizens, we value our contribution to the society and the quality of life we help finance.”*

***Trish Hennessy, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives  
from the panel presentation***