

ONTARIO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REVIEW
Discussion Paper 2: Approaches for Reform

K-W Poverty Free Action Group
March 16, 2012

The Kitchener-Waterloo Poverty Free Action Group includes representatives of community organizations and poverty reduction advocate groups in Kitchener-Waterloo and area.

Members of the KW Poverty Free Action Group have met to discuss the 2nd discussion paper released by the Ontario Social Assistance Review Commission. A summary was prepared from the August 2011 K-W forum input to the Commission's 1st discussion paper which included feedback submitted to the Commission from across the province and the key directions from the Commission's 2nd discussion paper (Appendix A).

On Wednesday February 29th, the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and its partners in the K-W Poverty Free Action Group hosted a forum to engage members of the Kitchener-Waterloo community to discuss and give input on the first three chapters of the Social Assistance Review Commission discussion paper. More than 40 people participated, including those who receive support through Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program, interested community and family members, students, retired professionals, social service providers, faith community members, business and political representatives and social advocates.

The event was structured according to the Commission's workbook with discussion areas for the first three of the five main issue areas identified by the Commission: *Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment*; *Appropriate Benefit Structure*; and [making the system] *Easier to Understand*. There were also additional discussion areas focussed on 1) the context of the Commission's discussion paper and 2) the outcomes of a successful social assistance system. Participants were invited to circulate and join a discussion and leave their comments on any of the issues that were a priority for them. Facilitators were available to encourage discussion and support participation. At the end of the evening, the group came together as a whole to reflect on what had emerged in the discussions.

The following is a report prepared by the Social Planning Council of the discussions held by the KW Poverty Free Action Group and input received at the local session to give input to the Ontario Social Assistance Review.

The Broader Context of the Social Assistance Review

There is a general concern that the Commission's 2nd discussion paper does not reflect the input received during the first stage of consultation and is based on inappropriate and misleading assumptions. When we engaged local discussion about the 2nd discussion paper, some expressed a readiness to give up – why bother when we aren't being listened to? There is dismay that giving input into this discussion paper is avoiding the real issues of inadequate social assistance rates, the negative impacts on the health and well being for those reliant on social assistance and on the external economic realities of increased costs and an insecure and poor employment environment.

Frustration and exhaustion were expressed by local advocates as well as by those who are surviving on social assistance. Poverty reduction advocates are discouraged because a lot of time and effort has been invested in participating in these consultations but, when community input is not reflected, they have little hope there will be constructive system change. On the other hand, those who are relying on social assistance are feeling exhausted and discouraged because they are struggling to survive on a day to day basis and they don't see any constructive way out of this situation.

Everyone that has taken part in local K-W discussions has been sincerely interested in giving input to help improve the life situation of those living on social assistance. However, on top of the daily struggle to survive, those who rely on social assistance must continually withstand negative stereotypes about poverty. Unfortunately, these myths are still evident in the principles and emphasis of the 2nd discussion paper.

Further points, raised during the February 29th community forum:

- The discussion paper directions are based on punitive assumptions
 - “Fairness” language pits the vulnerable against each other – those receiving social assistance should not be in competition with those who are working in part time, insecure and low paying jobs
 - Assumes an *'austerity' agenda*, with cuts to the most vulnerable and growing income inequality
 - The emphasis on employment is contradictory, as it does not address the employment environment and the Commission cannot make recommendations on employment issues such as minimum wage and the practices of temp agencies
 - Avoids talking about specific needs
 - Reopens the debate of defining poverty
 - Perpetuates a dichotomy of *'deserving'* and *'undeserving'* poor

- Should the Commission address the urgent need to increase social assistance rates?
 - Yes, without hesitation
 - In terms of costs: the long-term effects of low rates will cost us more in health care costs

Many observations during this stage of local consultations mirrored the comments from the community forum hosted in August 2011. There was also a concern that not only did the discussion paper present the wrong

questions but the questions were too technical for the general population to have any true input without a great deal of background knowledge. For those questions the participants in the February 29th forum felt confident in answering, the following was expressed:

- Current levels are not sufficient for recipients to live a healthy, full life
- There is too much focus on which Ministry should fund which service, rather than on providing adequate funding to recipients
- There is too much short-term thinking about costs, and we end up paying more in the long-term
- The austerity agenda is false – corporations and the wealthy could pay more taxes. “All of the people talking about austerity make over \$100,000 a year.”
- There is too much focus on getting employment without any focus on the type of jobs available
- “People should be encouraged to better themselves – volunteering, back to school – no one should feel like a burden, be made to feel like a burden. I’m on ODSP; sometimes I feel like a burden, even though I volunteer. I’m a case.” This isn’t addressed in the document or the discussion questions. People should be treated as individuals, not case numbers
- Survival is not enough – people should be able to live
- There is an over-emphasis on fraud, which contributes to the misconception of the public that fraud is rampant in the social assistance system
 - “The system pays more to detect fraud than we lost in fraud!”
 - This also leads to recipients feeling stigmatized within the system, and that they are treated as guilty unless proven innocent

Chapter 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

- People with disabilities should not be forced to participate in employment activities
- Requirements should be individualized, on a case-by-case basis
- A standard tool to assess work capacity could be useful to help identify strengths, but no one tool could adequately assess everyone, and if a tool is implemented it must allow for exceptions
 - What is “standard” and who defines it?
- Employment supports could be more effective by:
 - Hiring more people to assist with job searches, particularly those who are currently unemployed and/or with lived experience of social assistance
 - A culture of encouragement instead of threat
 - A focus on finding good sustainable jobs, instead of any job
 - Giving employers incentives to hire social assistance recipients
- Employers could be encouraged to hire more social assistance recipients through:
 - Considering experience from outside Canada
 - Educating employers about the hidden stigma against recipients
 - Financial incentives, including funds for adapting a workplace to disabilities
- There should be a focus on other types of employment-related activities, such as volunteering, and on gaining sustainable employment, not any job

- A housing benefit could be useful, but would be difficult and confusing to implement
- Income supplements could be delivered via tax credits
- Incentive to work is not the problem, and an earned income supplement is an insult to those who want to work and cannot find it

Chapter 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

- All people should receive an adequate income to live a healthy life
- People should receive a fair wage compared to the general population – at least equivalent to minimum wage
- Minimum wage could be raised to balance “fairness”
- There should be no two-rate system – all Ontarians should be funded at an adequate level
 - If a two-rate system is implemented, there should be exemptions from starting at a lower rate for single parents and people with disabilities
- There should be a separate program for those with severe disabilities
- The basic rate should cover:
 - Transportation
 - Telephone service
 - Healthy food
- A Guaranteed Annual Income for all would reduce complexity
- All Ontarians should receive health benefits
 - The cost could be covered by closing the wealth gap and fair taxation, including reapplying the tax brackets which were discontinued in recent decades

Chapter 3: [Making the system] Easier to Understand

- Asset limits should be raised or omitted
- The focus on fraud is a waste of resources which could be better used in focussing on reducing poverty
- An audit system would be better than the current approach, as it would not assume everyone is attempting to defraud the system, but the system requires a greater culture shift
- OW and ODSP should not be combined into a single program, as they have different priorities
- First Nations should be supported by:
 - Better access to medical care, housing, nutritious food, and educational opportunities
 - Eliminating social stigmas
 - Including First Nations in decision-making

Chapter 4: Viable over the Long Term and Chapter 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Regardless of the approach the Commission decides to take, and however OW and ODSP may be integrated, the focus should be on providing recipients with adequate supports. Whether a person is on OW or ODSP, they should be able to access employment supports which will help them to find sustainable employment and to participate as active community members. They should have the financial supports to participate as full members of the community. The question of how these supports are best provided should be secondary to establishing a basic principle and policies to ensure adequate levels of support must be provided. Since the Low Income Measure has been adopted as the measure of poverty by the Government of Ontario, the LIM should be the guide for setting assistance rates and additional support levels.

In addition, in regards to the Commission's consultation process, the questions are being asked in a way that is overly technical and cannot be answered by those who should be specifically engaged in this review process. Many people with lived poverty experience who are supported within the system have barriers which would prevent them from being able to participate in the review as it has been set out by the Commission. A more diverse consultation process which actively invites the participation of as many community members as possible would produce the most thorough results.

The fact that other programs' shortcomings may increase the caseload of social assistance is problematic, but as the Commission has no authority over those other programs, it does not seem to be a very relevant topic for conversation. Why can the context of other programs be considered, but the context of the current labour market is not one to be commented on? The interactions between social assistance and other programs should be studied in a larger context. The great impact which the current labour market has on social assistance, particularly considering the reinforcement of the goal of getting people off of assistance and into the labour market, is one which should have had considerable impact on the review.

Chapter 6: First Nations and Social Assistance

The K-W Poverty Free Action Group members preferred that the discussion on this chapter be done directly by local First Nations community members. Local groups were not able to coordinate this meeting within the timeframe of the consultation.

The comments that were received on this chapter were that the directions in this Chapter seemed to be more anchored in what First Nations communities experience and want to see happen. Furthermore, the Commission's consultation process with First Nations communities is a model to follow for all consultations with communities.

Outcomes of a Successful System

As a way to help make this consultation more accessible, participants at the February 29th forum were invited to consider what a successful system would look like. It is hoped this can be the start for developing outcome measures to assess the system, however it is or is not changed through this review process. We believe it is imperative that the success of Ontario's social services support system be measured against how well it is working to improve the daily lives and life chances of those who must rely on the system, regardless of how long they need this assistance. To measure success through dollar costs or management efficiency is short sighted and not valid. We must assess success by considering how well the system makes a difference for people facing challenging life situations.

- What is the application process like in a successful system?
 - Applicants would be treated with respect and dignity
 - The process would be consistent and accessible
 - There would be only one application required
- What is the administration and reporting experience for recipients in a successful system?
 - Supports are individualized
 - Employment-related activities would focus on community engagement
 - The stigma would be minimized
 - It would be respectful
 - Support would be more than the bare minimum necessary to survive
- What are the outcomes in people's day to day lives with a successful system?
 - Recipients can access the supports they need
 - They would not feel stigmatized or belittled
 - They would be healthy and happy
 - Recipients would not be afraid to earn some minor income or receive gifts
 - They would be able to live independently

A Final Comment

A key issue that continues to arise in our discussions is the importance of dignity and respect. The Commission's discussion paper refers frequently to a need for a *culture change* which we see as directly tied to how people are viewed and treated once they access the *system*. Second only to insufficient rates to support a healthful standard of living, being treated with dignity and respect is the most important system change need. Sadly, the costs to do this would be nothing.

