

**BRIEF FROM THE ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**  
**EASTERN BRANCH**  
**TO**  
**THE HONOURABLE MADELEINE MEILLEUR**  
**MINISTER OF COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

Margaret Nelson, Chair, Social Justice Committee  
Helen Saravanamuttoo, Member of Social Justice Committee  
Barbara Carroll, Executive Director, Debra Dynes Community House,  
Member of Social Justice Committee  
October 10, 2008

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

I would first like to thank you, on behalf of the Eastern Branch of the Ontario Association of Social Workers, for seeing us today. My name is Helen Saravanamuttoo and I am a constituent of yours. I am accompanied by Margaret Nelson, Chair of the Social Justice Committee and Barbara Carroll, Executive Director of Debra Dynes Community House. We are delighted to have the opportunity to meet with you again. We very much appreciated our time with you in 2006. This Brief will address the following topics:

- the Ontario Child Benefit
- Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Consultation, when implementing new programs, with front line workers, managers in community houses and others who will be in charge of administering the programs.
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I would first like to turn this presentation over to Margaret Nelson, who chairs the Social Justice Committee and will tell you about the Branch.

## **2. THE EASTERN BRANCH OF THE ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

The Eastern Branch is one of 15 branches of OASW, our provincial association in Ontario. Our area includes Ottawa and the surrounding counties of Renfrew; Lanark, Leeds and Grenville; and Stormont Dundas and Glengarry. OASW is one of ten provincial/territorial associations of social workers belonging to the Canadian Association of Social Workers which is, in turn, a member of the 78-nation International Federation of Social Workers. Eastern Branch represents more than 400 members, most of whom work and or live in Ottawa. Our Social Justice Committee speaks out on issues affecting vulnerable populations within our area. We are here today to speak to you about people living in poverty in eastern Ontario, and especially about our concerns for people who are receiving social assistance.

## **3. THE ONTARIO CHILD BENEFIT**

The Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) has the potential to become a potent tool in Ontario's poverty reduction strategy. We are very supportive of the idea of taking children off social assistance. At present, however, we have severe reservations about the implementation, finding that it promises more than it apparently delivers. The amounts allocated to families on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) seem painfully small. Although the "clawback" of the National Child Benefit Supplement was abolished, thus increasing income by \$122 per month, the basic needs allowance for children has been cut so much that the increases in payments are, unfortunately, largely academic. In some cases the extra money received is literally less than \$10 per month. While we understand that the OCB will increase over time, implementing such a program without increasing the amount of the allowances in any significant manner does nothing to build confidence as the Province brings in its Poverty Reduction Strategy.

We understand that Ontario is facing much reduced tax revenues, due to the significant financial difficulties facing the Province. It is, nevertheless, important to realize that poverty has significant negative impacts on the health, education, criminal involvement and life chances of poor children. The cost of dealing with these difficulties, which are very detrimental to society and the communities in which these children live, works out to be considerably more expensive than increasing the living allowances to where they would cover the true cost of raising healthy children.

It appears from figures obtained from the Income Security Advocacy Centre that the basic needs allowance for young people of 13 and over will be cut, in stages, until \$42 per month is deducted. The reason for this cut is that the “Older Child Differential” payment is being abolished: this payment was granted to cover the extra costs of feeding and clothing older children. Although we are led to understand that this cut is being phased in over time so that families are not yet experiencing the full impact, a number of points remain:

- first, very little information has been available in advance and sometimes workers themselves do not understand the allowances, which means that recipients have been and will be faced with cuts in income, often without warning.
- the rationale for this particular cut is not clear, as older children have not suddenly stopped eating more than younger children, nor stopped needing larger and more expensive clothes as they mature physically during adolescence.
- these cuts are happening, despite the fact that they are contrary to the promise that no family would receive less money after the change to the Ontario Child Benefit.
- lastly, we understand that this situation is under review. Nothing, however, has apparently been decided, despite the fact that over three months have passed since the new program was implemented. It is not fair to subject families with older children to the extra stress of additional poverty by having to wait so long at such a critical life stage.

The “Back to School Allowance” and the “Winter Clothing Allowance” have been reassigned and divided up to add to the monthly payments. There will be no annual cheques to cover either of these peak expenses. Recipients are expected to save the additional money over the year to provide for these expenses. In August 2008, there had been no warning that this would happen and, in fact, the Social Services Department only started to add the increases to the Benefit cheques in July, when the new Ontario Child Benefit was introduced. There had, therefore, been no opportunity for families to save for these peak expenses, a situation that was felt to be particularly unfair. In Ottawa, the City Council has been given provincial permission to send out a one time payment to cover part of both allowances added together. Although the Ministry will recompense the City and other jurisdictions who received similar permission to provide the cheque, this payment will be made on the clear understanding that such an arrangement will not be repeated.

The ending of the “Back to School Allowance” and the “Winter Clothing Allowance” is very unfair to families with children on OW and ODSP, whose allowances are so far below the poverty threshold as to make it impossible to save for times when large expenses will happen.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

***We recommend that:***

***1. Staff at Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program be given additional training on how the Ontario Child Benefit works and be instructed to continue to inform all clients of the changes in benefits.***

***2. The Older Child Differential Program be fully re-instated immediately.***

***3. Allowances for families on OW and ODSP be increased as soon as possible, in keeping with the Poverty Reduction Strategy.***

**4. The Back to School and the Winter Clothing Allowances be reinstated as lump sum payments in 2009.**

**4. POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY**

While we recognize that the chief accountability for Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) is with the Honourable Deb Matthews, Minister of Children and Youth Services, this initiative has a large impact on the work of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, particularly with people on OW and ODSP, as well as members of the increasingly numerous "working poor". We are, therefore, including our comments on this initiative in this Brief.

You will remember that Margaret Nelson and Helen Saravanamuttoo co-signed a letter, along with Jacquie Maund, Coordinator, Ontario Campaign 2000 on this topic. A copy of this letter is attached as an appendix to this Brief.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy, announced in the Throne Speech in November 2007, has the potential for drastically improving the lives of low income Canadians and we strongly applaud the Premier for bringing poverty back on to the Government agenda and for his commitment to the betterment of the lives of low-income Canadians.

We, of course, share with the Premier concern about the financial situation facing the Province and are aware of the recent statements which indicate that the Government may not be able to fulfil its commitments in the time frame originally set out. We would, however, respectfully emphasize that, while the financial situation will undoubtedly affect the timing of the PRS implementation, it does not affect the fact that a specific target is required - **a 25% reduction in poverty within 5 years**. In fact, we recommend that Ontario draw up **a five year plan**, which will leave plenty of time for the economy to recover so that substantial investments can be made to achieve this goal. As indicated in our letter, this would result in cutting the poverty rate from 10% to 7.5% and would lift more than 350,000 Ontarians out of poverty. Success would, however, require a comprehensive package of investments in such areas as: **good jobs; continued minimum wage increases; overhaul of the Labour Standards Act and provide sufficient resources to ensure enforcement; substantial raises in rates for social assistance and the Ontario Child Benefit; affordable housing and in early learning and high quality child care.**

We are very pleased that the Premier is overseeing the initiative by administering and planning it under the auspices of a Cabinet Committee. In order that no momentum be lost, it is important to ensure that there is continuity of purpose, by enshrining in legislation, a Poverty Reduction Secretariat, which will consult with a Citizen's Advisory Committee, which has representation from business people, grassroots leaders, including front line managers and workers, program participants, especially youth, experts and people living on low incomes.

The success of a program is best determined by accountability and evaluation. In order to anchor program goals in the economic reality of low income families, the target needs to be based on a credible income measurement. Following the lead of the 25 in 5 Coalition, **we support the Low Income Cut-Off Line measure (LICO), developed by Statistics Canada**. This measure is recognized internationally and is widely used and supported in Canada. Indicators need to cover areas such as health, education, employment, housing affordability.

Public acceptance of the program will be very important and should be attended to early in the program implementation. The savings in program costs associated with adequate funding have

been referred to earlier. Thus, It is a good idea to demonstrate how investing in children pays dividends for the whole community. In addition, any increase in benefits will be spend in local communities, thus acting as a stimulus in the local economies.

In regard to the importance of reducing child poverty and family poverty, our Social Justice Committee would like to recommend to you some resources that we have found very helpful. The first is Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO). We have included in our package a document prepared by CPO, by way of example of the kind of work that is being done by that body. The vision of CPO is: "Ottawa is a community in which individuals, families and neighbourhoods are safe and feel safe". It's mission is: "To contribute to crime reduction and enhanced community safety in Ottawa through collaborative evidence-based crime prevention." The evidence shows that poverty is one of the root causes of youth violence. To quote from the document in our package, "poverty is at the root of many of the issues that lead to youth violence. There is a well documented increase in the gap between rich and poor in our province. The task force should consider ways in which to mitigate the worst effects of this growing gap on children and youth. For example, the focus groups for Ottawa's Pathways to Education program identified one of the major barriers to school attendance was the cost of bus passes. In fact, the "jacking" (theft) of bus passes is a crime problem in some Ottawa neighbourhoods – it gets very cold here and financial assistance is only available to those who live more than 3 kilometres from school." We are very fortunate to have this resource that does research, offers informed guidance and brings community groups together to find solutions and put them into effect. We urge you to support CPO and use it as a key resource in your Ministry.

A second resource is the Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network (CPAN). We have brought along one of their leaflets, which contrasts the child living in poverty with a child who lives in a family that is not impoverished and not at risk. The child living in poverty faces many obstacle and often has parents who are too stressed or/and overworked to give him adequate support. He is at risk of failing in school, developing poor self esteem, feeling stupid, giving up, and of having behaviour and mental health problems leading to lack of success in life. Again, the work that is being done by CPAN shows how vital it is not to delay the implementation of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy.

## **Recommendations**

### **We recommend that:**

#### **5. The Government:**

- **set a target of a 25% reduction in child poverty within five years.**
- **establish the Low Income Cut Off Line (LICO) as the appropriate income measure by which progress on the reduction of poverty can be measured.**

#### **6. In order to meet this target, the Government draw up a comprehensive plan to make investments in such areas as:**

- **affordable housing**
- **supportive social services**
- **high quality child care and early learning**
- **increased Ontario Child Benefit and social assistance rates, while indexing both payments to inflation and**

#### **take legislative measures to:**

- **ensure phased raises in the minimum wage**

- ***bring in a stronger Labour Standards Act and invest adequate resources to enforce it.***

**7. In order to ensure accountability, the Government**

- ***develop a set of indicators which correlate with reduced poverty.***
- ***develop a campaign to build public support for the initiative by publicizing the societal benefits of reduced poverty.***

**8. In order to ensure continued strong governance for the initiative, the Government**

- ***create a Poverty Reduction Secretariat to advance the program, to track progress and to report publicly on progress.***
- ***In order to receive feedback on the public acceptance of the program, the Government establish a Citizens Advisory Committee with strong representation from business people, grass roots managers, and front line workers, experts and people living on low income.***

**5. FOCUS ON YOUTH PROGRAM AND THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES STRATEGY**

First of all, we would like to compliment the Ontario Government for introducing these programs. They are innovative and have selected a period in a child's life that can determine his or her whole future. Summer employment programs for youth at high risk, aged 15 – 18 in the community, are very much appreciated.

**a) Consultation on Program Implementation**

Unfortunately, the implementation does not do justice to the vision but puts barriers up in such a way that the program itself cannot live up to its potential. In Ottawa, the Ministry consulted with the Ottawa police and the schools, who with the best of intentions, do not always understand how the community operates. To fully implement the vision, the Ministry also needs to download more responsibility for administering the program to the front line agencies involved in job creation and delivery of the programs.

For example, eligibility criteria were changed without consultation with agencies in the second year of the program. This restricts youth to participation for one year only yet this does not address the pressures and constraints on families and their children living in high risk communities. There would appear to be insufficient money allocation for the program to be implemented fully throughout the province and thus youth are limited. Need, however, does not respect such limits:

- For example, the Debra Dynes Community House serves a family where a young person, the oldest child in a family with seven children, has so far resisted the temptation to make easy money. One year's participation in the program, combined with the young age, is not sufficient to build the necessary skills to secure a job the following summer. This young person needs longer community support, but the organization is powerless to provide it.
- Another example is a young girl whose parents work in the market economy and live seven people in a two bedroom apartment. Families who manage with such severe restraints often put a high emphasis on education for their children and therefore do not allow them to work so that they can concentrate on their studies. For families like these, summer employment is critical for their older children. These provincial initiatives are one of the few opportunities for them at this age, but we were only able to accommodate this girl in the program for one summer.

- Research shows that the poverty rate among new immigrants is very high. Because of this statistic, families new to Canada, especially their youth, will have great difficulties adjusting to their new country. It is very important to help them to integrate fully into Canadian life. It is very important that these youngsters have access to programs, such as this one for a sufficient length of time to fill their needs.
- Youth who have had *any* employment experience are also restricted from the program yet there is ample evidence in the marketplace and retail world that many jobs for youth have no permanency and may last only a few weeks to meet the needs of employers.

These young people need more than one year of this excellent program in order to counteract the dangers they face in the community on an on-going basis and the pressures they live under as part of low income families.

While we have addressed individual programs, the same problems associated with lack of consultation with community organizations happens with other programs.

#### **b) Funding needs to be downloaded**

Delivering the program takes time, which is not compensated for by funding. At the community level, we have to create the program and administer it. This takes time and means that other programs suffer. Community programs are the least expensive of all major interventions, yet, because staff are well known and trusted in the community and because they have learned about community customs and beliefs, they are among the most effective and accepted interventions. Front line agencies who are involved in job creation and ongoing daily supervision of youth are not consulted or compensated for the very important work that they do in the delivery of these programs.

#### **c) The program needs to start at an earlier age** (You may want to keep this or not Helen.)

While the Focus on Youth and the Youth Opportunities Strategy are important and valuable initiatives. It is recognized by many Front line agencies that engaging younger youth at risk has significant positive benefits. Junior High and 1st Senior Youth are too old to enrol in summer camp activities and often too young to be employed. This group is at significant risk from peer pressure and is often a prime target to be coerced into negative and risk taking behaviours particularly in areas of poverty and communities with multiple barriers.

As a cost effective and long term preventative strategy the Province through its program development for youth could adopt smaller employment initiatives such as the First Work Experience program used in the Debra Dynes Community that addresses this age group and their particular issues.

Programs for youth at risk are important in the lives of the youth who can access them and also to the families and communities that benefit from them. A broader consultation that includes front line agencies and staff will allow these initiatives to grow and develop in meaningful ways that benefit all parties. As it is, the programs are spread too thin and cannot live up to their potential. While we laud the Ministry for bringing in such innovative and creative programming, we strongly urge improved implementation, as indicated in our recommendations. While we recognize that the Province has a financial problem at present, neglecting these points will result in youth slipping through the cracks and the impact of the programs being much diluted. The alternatives of high rehabilitation costs and considerable underachievement of youth at risk are not a future that we wish for the province and its families and youth. Instead we hope that with input from Front line workers and community agencies that these programs can grow and evolve to allow youth in our communities to reach their full potential.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**9. As a matter of priority, the Ministry consult with people familiar with the situation in the community, where any new program is provided: i.e. front line workers, managers in community houses and others in charge of administering the program.**

**10. Community programs be given funding for the administration costs and the creation of work opportunities.**

**11. The program be extended so that youth at particular risk be allowed to participate for more than one year, depending on the maturity level and skills developed, as well as the on-going risk present in the particular community.**

**12. The program be evolved to have a complementary component that addresses the needs of youth who are too old for most summer camp and day program activities and are too young for employment, thus allowing them to build maturity and skills important for younger children at high risk.**