



Submission to

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

by the Ontario Federation of Labour

September 1, 2011



ONTARIO FEDERATION OF LABOUR (CLC) • FEDERATION DU TRAVAIL DE L'ONTARIO

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The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) welcomes this opportunity to share our thoughts with the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. The OFL is the largest provincial federation of labour in Canada. The OFL represents one million workers in 54 unions. Our members work in all economic sectors and live in communities across Ontario, from Kenora to Cornwall and from Moosonee to Windsor.

Our members are concerned about social assistance and the quality, availability and range of services needed by Ontarians and the ability of Ontarians (our members) to deliver these services when and where they are needed. It is important for the success of this review that the perspective of the labour movement labour is both heard and understood.

It is our belief that the social assistance system exists to assist Ontarians in a variety of ways in their time of need.

Labour's Vision for Social Assistance

Our vision for social assistance evolves from a broad and shared perspective:

- Workers and their unions who understand the importance of social assistance and are attempting to provide needed services in spite of challenges, such as the lack of needed resources, and the political agenda's which negatively affect the implementation of needed services.
- Workers who serve as members and volunteers with agencies providing services in the community.
- Workers who in the past used or continue to use the services available in the community.
- Workers as citizens and taxpayers who want quality and accessible services in their community.

Existing OFL Policy

The OFL has always sought to improve the social assistance system in our province. For example, the 1964 OFL convention called on the Ontario government to adjust the income limit in line with the cost of living for recipients of Mothers' and Dependent Children's Allowance. In 1967 there was

a call for the Ontario government to introduce needed youth programs. In 1975 there was a call for the Ontario government to amend existing legislation to better provide for the needs of recipients. In 1995 the OFL opposed the Conservative government's 21.6% cut to social assistance.

Ontarians in need are not second class citizens. As early as 1957 the OFL was opposing the use of means tests on mothers applying for allowances under the *Mothers' Allowance Act* and on blind adults applying for blind persons' allowances. By 1966 the OFL was opposing the use of all forms of the means test by the Ontario government. The 1961 convention opposed the decision of the Ontario Municipal Association to call for municipal welfare recipients to do civic employment in return for their benefits. In 1997 the OFL opposed *the Social Assistance Reform Act* with its provision for mandatory workfare which was an important tenet of the Harris Conservative agenda.

More recently at our last convention (November 2009) delegates discussed and endorsed an Action Plan which stated in part:

“The Ontario Federation of Labour and its affiliates will work to:

- a. Introduce a \$100 monthly Healthy Food Supplement to begin to address serious deficiencies in the Basic Needs Allowance of all adults receiving Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP);
- b. Index social assistance rates, commencing with the 2010-11 budgets;
- c. Increase OW and ODSP asset levels to reduce asset stripping and allow those recipients to accumulate an economic cushion;
- d. Eliminate rules that punish sensible money management, such as sharing accommodation, choosing room and board accommodation and living with family;
- e. Eliminate archaic income rules, including the treatment of loans as income, deductions from rates where family/friends assist with groceries and dinners;
- f. Streamline the level of eligibility monitoring. For example, limit the withholding of benefits for failure to provide information to only those circumstances that involve serious issues of current eligibility; eliminate income reporting where there is no income; and reduce ongoing documentary review to a practical level;

- g. Remove income penalties for dependent children who leave school and for children over 18 who stay within the family household;
- h. Allow recipients to continue receiving OW/ODSP income support while enrolled in post-secondary education instead of taking out OSAP loans, and remove restrictions on singles accessing post-secondary education;
- i. Stop the deduction of gross income from other sources when the recipient is actually receiving a lower net amount;
- j. Explicitly include in the upcoming review of social assistance a commitment to ensuring high quality and effective education, training and employment support programs for recipients of OW and ODSP;
- k. In the interim, extend eligibility for all provincially funded and/or delivered employment support and training programs to recipients of social assistance;
- l. Ensure that every annual plan required under the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement explicitly includes the provision of high quality and effective education, training and employment supports to people receiving OW and ODSP;
- m. Increase the Ontario Child Benefit to \$125 per child per month in the 2010 Budget. This increase should be available to all children regardless of the source of their parents' income; and
- n. Introduce a housing benefit that would be available to all low-income Ontarians. The benefit would be equal to 75 percent of the difference between actual rent paid and 30 percent of low-income individuals and families' income."

These positions reflect a policy consensus both within the Ontario labour movement and in the wider community regarding the kinds of positive changes which need to be implemented within our existing social assistance system.

Such policy recommendations are known to the Commission and we hope they will play a central role in the advice you give to the Ontario government.

Social assistance cannot be viewed in isolation.

In Ontario there are short-comings in existing governmental policies on a wide range of issues such economic strategies, training, pay equity and labour law reform. These policy short-comings do not serve the best interests of Ontarians in their time of need. Many Ontarians are forced by circumstances to turn to the social assistance system.

The OFL's policy recommendations to the Ontario government to address these short-comings may be seen in such documents as our January 31, 2011 *Preparing for the Future the 2011 Pre-Budget Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs* which is available on the OFL web site at www.ofl.ca.

At the Federal level the important on-going work of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) to improve the Employment Insurance system (EI) to assist Canadians in their time of need needs to be continued. Because of the faults in this system many workers in Ontario do not receive EI benefits to which they should be entitled and those who do often exhaust their benefits before they find meaningful employment. They are then forced to turn to the social assistance system.

Workers in the Social Assistance system

Like the wider labour movement our members who are workers in the social assistance system share the concerns that the system needs to be is working in the best interests of Ontarians in their time of need. Two of our affiliated unions the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) represent the vast majority of workers in the social assistance sector. CUPE represents the workers involved with Ontario Works while OPSEU represents the workers involved in the Ontario Disability Support Program. Both unions have presented submissions to the Commission reflecting the experiences and recommendations for positive change from their membership. The OFL is supportive of their recommendations.

From their unique perspective there are particular issues which must be addressed. In their July 2011 submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) outlines two of such issues: Workload and Technology.

“Workload Recommendations:

- The province must provide adequate funding and other resources to address the problem of high worker caseloads. As OMSSA states, “an overburdened caseworker is an ineffective caseworker”, which results in clients receiving poorer quality service (OMSSA, 2009).

- Fund set caseworker-client ratios similar to the funding of set teacher-student ratios in the education system, and the child care system funds set caregiver child ratios (OMSSA, 2009).
- Adequately fund the social assistance system in order to support caseload ratios bargained by employers and unions.
- Discretionary funding available to service managers for clients must remain as the entire costs of OW are uploaded to the province (OMSSA, 2009)

Technology Recommendations:

- New technology is welcomed since SDMT has never been effective; however front-line workers and their unions must be consulted in the design and implementation of the new technology.
- The new technology must be safe for workers given the increase in WSIB claims related to repetitive strain injury for OW workers.
- The new technology must be compatible with voice-activated software that should be available to workers and clients with disabilities.
- The intent of the software must be to *assist with determining eligibility* allowing the worker more time to get to know each client so as to discuss appropriate opportunities for employment and training, and appropriate referral to community agencies and supports.
- The system generated letters should use plain language for clients to understand.

The OFL is also supportive of the concerns raised by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) such as:

“Viable over the Long Term:

- Provide the resources and staffing needed to maintain a sustainable program.
- Allow for additional time required to better assist recipients with goal setting and the creation of action plans.
- Recognize that not all recipients will be able to become self-supporting.

- Better connection to labour force activity.
- Institute a five year, 10 year and 20 year action plan with measurable targets.
- Exclude any company with \$10 m or more in profit from receiving tax breaks.
- Eliminate/waive NSF and disconnection fees for social assistance clients.
- Bring down the number of caseloads from the current 230-280 range per worker.

An integrated Ontario Position for Income Security

- Do not use a one-stop shopping model. Recipients require a flexible and specialized referral process to appropriately match needs.
- Embrace nuance and complexity, recipients present with complex issues that do not always fit into obvious solutions.
- Focus on recipients as individuals and not as “benefit units” or other abstractions.
- Empower staff to liaise with support networks.
- Ensure that individuals who qualify for ODSP received specialized services when they are referred to government funded community programs and services.”

Nothing about Us without Us

The OFL has longed believed in the phrase “Nothing about us without us” which says that Ontarians directly involved in an issue should be directly involved in the policy discussions to address this issue. This involvement should begin at the beginning of the process and not as an after-thought. The unique perspective of recipients in the social assistance system should be seen as an invaluable resource for the work of the Commission. In that spirit we would encourage the Commission to listen to and understand the recommendations for policy changes put forward by such groups as the ODSP Action Coalition.

Conclusion

In our brief submission we have shared with you the existing policies of the Ontario Federation of Labour both concerning social assistance and wider economic and social issues in our province. As well as our support for the policy recommendations put forward by our member unions. We believe that the active involvement of social assistance recipients is central to the success of this undertaking.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Respectfully submitted,

Ontario Federation of Labour

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