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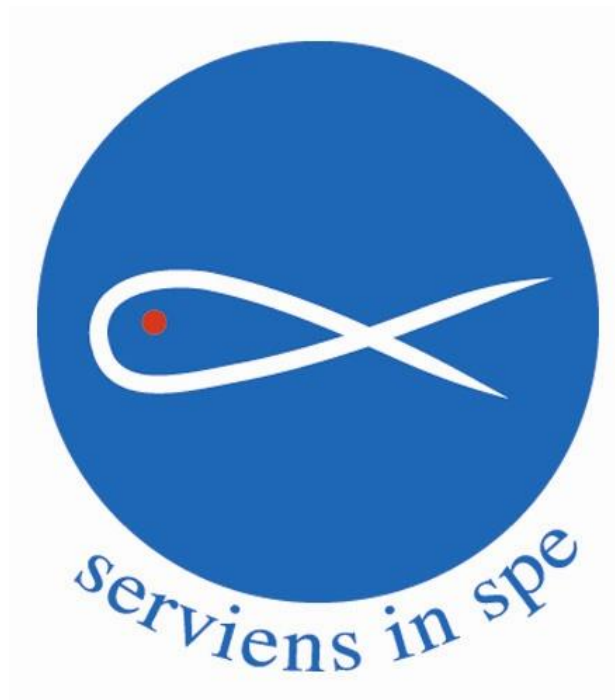
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Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

Social Assistance Reform in Ontario: Offering a hand up to our neighbours in need

Submitted by Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Toronto Central Council

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Social Assistance Reform: Offering a Hand Up

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a nonprofit registered charity that has been serving our neighbours in need in Ontario since 1850. Throughout the province of Ontario, 4600 of our volunteers make thousands of visits to people seeking assistance annually. In the Greater Toronto Area alone, over 1200 of our volunteers make over 20,000 home visitations assisting 65,000 people. This assistance is predominately in the form of food and furniture vouchers.

Our involvement in home visitations has also prompted us to become involved in other affiliated works. In Toronto, we operate four emergency and transitional shelters for women funded by the City of Toronto. Provincial funding allows us to operate three homes for the developmentally disabled and provide residential and counselling services for people battling addictions. An affiliated corporation is a registered nonprofit housing provider, operating a 164 unit affordable housing building.

We have participated in the focus groups assembled for the poverty reduction legislation, the long-term affordable housing strategy project and the current social assistance review initiative. Listening to those participating in these consultations and our interaction with thousands of individuals and families struggling to cope with poverty has made us acutely aware of the fundamental inadequacies and systemic barriers inherent in the current social assistance regime. We acknowledge the importance of the task undertaken by the Social Assistance Review Commission and its co-chairs Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh, and appreciate the opportunity to participate. We are hopeful of a positive and productive outcome.

Flowing from our participation in the Social Assistance Review dialogue process, and our personal interaction with people living with poverty, we offer the following comments regarding the five key issues outlined in the Commission's Discussion Paper:

Issue 1: Reasonable Expectations and Necessary Supports to Employment

A holistic approach

We recommend that reform to Social Assistance in Ontario reflects a holistic approach that does not place too heavy a priority on the recipient gaining immediate employment.

As front-line volunteers and service providers, we know firsthand that the causes of poverty are diverse, complex and numerous. Sometimes poor or failing health (both physical and mental) is the main culprit, robbing people of the ability to obtain employment. For many people living in poverty, the daily stress of trying to make ends meet becomes intolerable and grinds them down.

Frankly, many people on social assistance need to improve their mental and physical health before they can pursue productive employment. Counting how many recipients are placed into ill-suited, precarious employment should not be the prime measure of success when considering reforms to the social assistance program. The first priority is to design a social assistance framework that looks instead at the whole person, and addresses their physical and mental health so that individuals and families might be able to move forward and build a better quality of life.

Work placement opportunities

We recommend that Social Assistance reform looks at incorporating the opportunity for recipients to engage in some kind of work placement in order to gain confidence and practical experience.

A model for this type of approach can be found in Ontario's community colleges. Many courses of study provide the opportunity for students to garner real-world practical experience through a supervised work placement. Employers in the public, private and nonprofit sectors should be encouraged to provide similar opportunities to social assistance recipients meeting some type of qualifying criteria pertinent to the placement and who are ready to pursue employment.

Issue 2: Appropriate Benefit Structure

Realistic benefit levels

We recommend that Social Assistance benefits be based on a realistic, comprehensive cost of living index in order to assure access to adequate housing and nutrition.

Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program need to adjust their benefit levels to reflect the actual cost of living in Ontario. An objective, realistic set of criteria needs to be established that would assure that recipients are not unduly penalized when economic factors beyond their control cause the cost of shelter, food and other basic necessities to rise beyond their capability to pay.

Strictly speaking the issue of affordable housing lies outside the Commission's mandate. Nevertheless the shortage of affordable housing has a direct impact the cost and quality of the standard of living of recipients. Therefore, the Commission should recommend that the Government accelerates the expansion of affordable housing stock so that more people may benefit of readily available safe and affordable housing.

Offering a hand up

We recommend that appropriate levels of benefits and entitlements be maintained for recipients that obtain employment.

People should be allowed to retain more of their earned income for an extended period of time before their social benefits are reduced or eliminated. A more flexible arrangement would encourage more recipients to enter the workforce, knowing that they are not putting the welfare of their families in jeopardy by the immediate loss of daycare, healthcare and housing benefits. This approach would also address the precarious nature of low-paying employment by providing some stability to workers in jobs that are temporary, lack benefit packages and are part-time or subject to flexible hours.

The Commission's concern with "the trade-off between ensuring adequate income support and ensuring that people are better off working" appears to be valid only if the wellbeing of the recipient is the primary concern. If those on assistance knew that their daycare, housing subsidy and health benefits were protected up to a certain level of earned income, they naturally would have the incentive to pursue employment since it would actually allow them to get ahead and afford a better quality of life. The levels and types of benefits to be provided, and for how long, needs to be determined through a rigorous statistical analysis and in-depth discussions with recipients in order to construct a realistic framework that provides the proper incentives.

Issue 3: Easier to Understand

Reforming the rules

We recommend that the current excessive regime of numerous, and sometimes contradictory, rules that govern Social Assistance programs be reduced to a set of guidelines that are more easily understood by prospective recipients while at the same time maintaining the necessary boundaries of sound governance.

Since current recipients appear to be the best resource to determine which rules and regulations present the greatest barriers, it seems obvious to engage them as participants in an ongoing continuous improvement program. A more coherent, streamlined set of rules and regulations would also have the additional benefit of being easier and less expensive to administer.

Renaming the system

We recommend that the various Social Assistance benefit programs be reformed, integrated and renamed the Income Support Program.

This would reflect a more streamlined, less complicated system. Instead of stressing the negative connotation of ‘relying on benefits’ subject to a punitive and complex array of criteria, regulations and rules, the new focus would be on supplementing people’s incomes so that they might be able to provide their families a reasonable quality of life. It would also emphasize the objective of assisting people transition through periodic episodes of poverty.

Issue 4: Viable over the long term

Integrating service delivery

We recommend that Ontario provide accessibility to Income Support programs similar to the ServiceCanada or ServiceOntario model.

People who are entitled to social assistance and income support should be able to gain access to all available programs through one portal or gateway. Eligibility and entitlement to provincial, municipal and federal assistance should be administered in a co-ordinated and integrated manner to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and long-term viability of the programs.

Prioritizing poverty reduction

We recommend that Social Assistance reform be an ongoing process considered within the context of the Government’s commitments and responsibilities outlined in the Poverty Reduction Act, 2009.

Long term viability is contingent upon the state’s fiscal and social policy. Since the wellbeing of all citizens must be the primary mandate of any level of government, any Income Support programs should be enshrined within the political, social, and economic fabric of society. The objectives of Social Assistance reform cannot be achieved in isolation, but are dependent upon a co-ordinated, horizontal approach involving all government Ministries and resources.

Issue 5: An Integrated Ontario Position on Income Security

Affordable Housing

We recommend that a comprehensive reform of Ontario's Social Assistance program include an initiative to engage our municipal and federal counterparts, as well as the nonprofit and private sectors, to participate in the provision of quality affordable housing.

Increasing the stock of safe, stable, quality affordable housing would play a considerable role in enabling families to lift themselves out of poverty. The provision of a housing benefit to supplement families and individuals paying market rents in private sector housing is merely a temporary stop-gap measure. Studies have shown that landlords tend to overlook families on assistance as possible tenants. Also, market rents tend to rise in response to subsidies, thus offsetting the intended benefit. Permanent social housing stock assures a lasting, dependable supply of affordable accommodation.

Conclusion

Just as those living in poverty have tough choices to make, we as a society also need to make some choices in order to effectively address the issue of Social Assistance reform. Figures show that in spite of a prolonged period of economic expansion in the past 30 years, families in the top 10% of the income spectrum have realized an average income growth of 41% whereas families in the bottom 40% of the spectrum have actually lost ground. Although recent events highlight the reality of limited economic resources, we as a society have a responsibility to distribute them in a fair and effective manner.

It is important to remember money spent helping to raise people out of poverty is a sound investment that reaps long-term rewards. A system that keeps people mired in poverty dooms them to subsistence, whereas a reformed system that supports and assists people transition through difficult periods helps to build a healthy, productive community.