

December 21, 2017

The Honourable Helena Jaczek
Minister of Community and Social Services
80 Grosvenor St - Hepburn Block - 6th Floor
Toronto ON M7A 1E9

Dear Minister Jaczek,

Re: Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

St. Stephen's Community House and Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services are writing this joint letter to provide a response to the recently released report "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change". We commend the Ontario Government for taking steps to improve the lives of people living on Ontario Works and on the Ontario Disability Support Program. We work with many people who struggle to survive on these programs. Our organizations have consistently advocated that the Ontario Government raise social assistance rates to reflect the true cost of living in Ontario, eliminate unnecessary social assistance rules to allow for a more respectful program, and allow people on social assistance to keep more earned income.

St. Stephen's Community House is a multi-service neighbourhood centre in the City of Toronto serving 27,000 people every year. We provide a variety of free services to people living in poverty, we focus on children and young families, at-risk youth, newcomers to Canada, people who are homeless, people who are unemployed, and senior citizens living alone. Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services provides legal advice and representation to hundreds of people each year in matters concerning income security, housing, employment and immigration. Our organizations have many community members and clients in common.

On December 14, 2017 St. Stephen's and Kensington-Bellwoods hosted a forum on Income Security attended by thirty people who were mostly local residents. We heard presentations from a panel four speakers, followed by discussion:

- Mindy Lopes, Community Legal Worker, Kensington-Bellwoods
- Gary Newhouse, Chair of Kensington-Bellwoods and lawyer for injured workers
- Liz Walker, Provincial Organizer, Income Security Advocacy Centre
- Andrea Hatala, Member ODSP Action Coalition

The forum also heard from several members of the audience who are on social assistance.

These participants shared very difficult stories about how the current low rates forced them into homelessness and poor housing, resulted in long periods of hunger, poor health and anxiety, led to unmanageable debts, and isolated them from their families. Two of the stories were single parents who were separated from their children due to homelessness. The participants' stories showed the intersectionality of their experiences: low social assistance rates, lack of rent control and systems that seem to support landlords, overcrowded shelters, negative impacts of children's aid and criminal justice system involvement, predatory credit/consumer situations, and chronic poor access to health care. These stories underscore the need to overhaul the social assistance system.

The following ideas were also shared by program participants and community members at the forum:

- Use the tax revenues from the legalization of marijuana to fund health and housing benefits for all low-income people, and to fund a significant increase in social assistance rates.
- Implement real rent control on all units, including those which become vacant.
- Work with other levels of government to build new affordable housing for those in deepest need.
- Ensure those who are homeless get quicker access to affordable housing which meets their needs, including parents who need enough bedrooms to accommodate their children. At present, the system divides families.
- Raise the OW rates to \$1,416 and ODSP rates to \$1,916 for a single person to reflect the amounts people are receiving on the Basic Income Pilot Project.

We are pleased to see the report includes a call to combine the shelter and basic needs rates for one flat payment, and a call to raise these rates consistently over three years. We also applaud the call for health benefits and portable housing benefits available to all low-income Ontarians, as we know many of our program participants make up the ranks of the working poor and lack such benefits. For us, health benefits include pharmacare and dental, vision and hearing care for the working poor.

We are however concerned that these changes are expected to take ten years to fully enact. We concur with our forum participants that these benefits need to be introduced quickly, to assist those living in deep need. The number of people who fall through the cracks continues to rise.

We also concur with the report in its recognition of colonialism, calling for First Nations control of social services. We see many urban Indigenous peoples at our programs who could benefit from such program design.

Finally, St. Stephen's Community House and Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services endorse the calls for change from the ODSP Action Coalition and the Income Security Advocacy Centre, whose submissions you will also receive. We support these organizations in their call to include a substantial down payment in the upcoming 2018 Ontario Budget that would show a commitment to change and would build on "A Roadmap for Change" Report recommendations.

Thank you for seeking input into the proposed changes to social assistance in Ontario.

Sincerely,



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cc: Han Dong, MPP, Trinity-Spadina