



Community Advocacy & Legal Centre

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Bancroft Belleville Madoc Napanee Picton Trenton

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August 29, 2011

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario  
Suite 400 – 2 Bloor Street West  
Toronto ON, M4W 3E2

**Re: Social Assistance Review Submission**

Please find our submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario attached for your consideration.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Yours truly,

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Staff Lawyer  
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DM/pk

Enclosures: Submission

cc. Nancy Vander Plaatz, ODSP Action Coalition

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

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## **Introduction**

The Community Advocacy & Legal Centre (CALC), a non-profit community legal clinic. We serve low income residents of Hastings, Prince Edward, and Lennox & Addington Counties. Our main office is located in Belleville. We have satellite offices in Trenton, Picton, Napanee, Bancroft, and Madoc. Our clinic provides legal services to a large rural population. It is over 150 km from our office in Picton to our office in Bancroft. There is no public transportation available between our service areas. Many of our clients do not have cars or phones. Many do not have internet or even reasonable access to the internet through free public services.

We partnered with the ODSP Action Coalition to hold a community focus group on August 8, 2011 at the Belleville Public Library. Individuals who were currently, or had previously been, receiving social assistance (Ontario Works, or Ontario Disability Support Program) were invited to the focus group. Nineteen individuals attended the focus group. This submission is a summary of that focus group.

## **One Change**

Participants were first asked the question: what one change would you like to make to social assistance, and how would that change affect your life?

Changes suggested by the focus group members included the following:

- Increase the rate for basic needs
- Increase the rate for shelter
- Match rates to inflation
- Increase support for diabetes/medical expenses
- Make extra money for available for unexpected repairs for home owners (i.e. one participant was forced to pay the cost of removing snakes from the walls in their home)
- Respect
- Divide the monthly cheque into two payments (i.e. one at the beginning, and one in the middle of the month)
- Provide support for individuals with low literacy levels
- Provide better support for individuals living in rural areas
- Provide more help with maintenance costs support for people who need assistive devices, i.e. braces, wheelchairs
- Increase dental care (no local dentists who will take people on OW/ODSP)

Participants were asked the impact this change would have. Their response was that if rates were increased to match inflation:

- The system would be more respectful to people
- There would be fewer people living on the streets
- People would be healthier – physically and emotionally
- Life would be a lot easier if there was more money to live on. I could buy better groceries and get out of debt
- One individual drew a chart depicting how ODSP rates have not stayed on par with inflation
- Life would be a lot easier
- No stress
- Extra money would help with all expenses such as food, rent, laundry, and phone bill
- Going hungry isn't funny
- Wearing dirty clothes is very unhealthy
- Not able to pay rent makes me look bad
- No phone is hurtful because I am unable to keep in touch with employers
- More money would allow me to feel more complete and more respected within myself
- More money and paid bi-monthly would make it easier to be sure we have the things we run out of often or sooner
- If rates were raised then I would go from living in poverty, depression, hunger, hopelessness, with low self-esteem, sick, and unhappy ☹️ to being happy and healthy

If individuals were given a realistic shelter allowance:

- Recipients of ODSP/OW would be able to find safe and affordable housing for themselves. Often recipients can only afford a room to rent.
- The places they live would be clean, bug free, drug free, in a nicer part of town, they wouldn't have to "room", and they would have more choices
- **Before:** mom sleeps on couch, small kitchen, kids eat in living room
- **After:** bedrooms for everyone, can eat as a family at the table, play area for kids
- Increased rent would allow more people to move to decent housing, which would allow shelters to house those most in crisis
- We could move out of social housing to a safer neighbourhood (i.e. no drugs)

Other effects that these changes would have included:

- If I had a job I would feel confident and not useless
- ODSP acceptance rate low (especially those who are applying for the first time). The DAU acceptance process needs to be re-evaluated, especially concerning mental health.

- Coverage for glasses would provide me with glasses
- People with poor dental care are afraid to smile! Everyone needs to smile and be confident in their looks
- I would like the choice to choose my dentist

### **Making OW / ODSP Work For You**

The group was then asked what was needed for social assistance programs to work well:

- Skills training
- Support for self-employment
- Proactive
- Accountability
- Equality
- Sensitivity training
- Transparency
- Understanding
- Realistic
- Dignity
- Respect

### **Social Assistance Rules**

The following questions were discussed in small groups within the focus group:

1. Recipients were asked to talk about rules that aren't working and the impact each rule has had:
  - Discretionary benefits change from location to location
  - When on ODSP you have to go to the OW office for discretionary benefits for dentures, hydro, etc.
  - Individuals have to travel too far and not practical (i.e. Bancroft people going to Belleville ODSP office)
  - Amount of money you are allowed to have in your bank account is too little – doesn't help you save to get safer housing, etc.
  - Not enough money per km for medical appointments
  - All rules revolving around travel need to be reviewed
  - Rules surrounding money coming in such as inheritance, gifts, etc. need to improve
  - OW review every three months is too invasive / excessive

- Work earnings rule about money coming off when working, discourages people from wanting to work
- No monetary support from ODSP for education
- Employment supports are not always adequate for people with disabilities
- Too many rules that are difficult to understand and abide by
- Not knowing the rules and not knowing when the rules change
- Not knowing where to get info about the rules and interpretation differs from worker to worker at ODSP and OW
- Example of a complicated rule is life insurance policy / cash surrender value gets too high and then you have to cash in your policy
- Rules make people stay on ODSP, don't help them get off
- Have to give up everything to get on OW, even your car – supposed to be short-term but you have to give up all you have to get on it
- Need to restore the winter clothing allowance
- Rules encourage people to lie because they need to get by and don't get enough money to survive
- Workers do not know rules
- Penalties: suspension when forms are not filled out – no phone calls, no contact from the worker
- Timelines for internal review requests: when clients need support to read forms, by the time they find someone time limits to respond have passed
- Employment Insurance deductions shouldn't be 100%
- Community start-up needs more flexibility for start-ups
- Better coordination needed between ODSP, FRO, Social Housing
- Loans should not be considered income
- ODSP recipients should get cheque for themselves – even if they have a spouse to maintain independence

## **Employment Supports, Education, and Training**

2. Participants were asked what employment supports, education and training programs are needed to get the kind of career you want?
  - ODSP needs to buy tools of the trade, i.e. hairdressers need scissors, etc.
  - Transportation to and from school
  - One on one teaching assistant for learning disabilities
  - Large print materials so people with low vision can get jobs
  - Change people's attitudes so they hire people with disabilities
  - Employment support workers need to be able to assess whether someone is even able to work
  - Not pushing people back to work when they're not ready
  - Subsidized childcare for people on ODSP or OW who are working or trying to find work

- Need someone to go with client to a job to help explain job tasks and train them (job coaching)
3. Participants were asked what other supports are needed to be able to work or be a part of your community
- Independent living skills
  - Transportation supports
  - Peer groups: people on OW / past recipients – help those who are on OW now
  - Phones so employers can call you
  - Money for transportation to get to jobs and interviews
  - Assistance for right type of clothes for jobs and interviews
  - Reimbursement for gas money, childcare when volunteering
  - Large print materials
  - Change in attitude so people accept you and give you opportunities
  - More accessible buildings
  - Bus passes for everyone on OW to look for work
4. Participants were asked if people were required to get treatment or rehabilitation in order to be eligible for OW / ODSP, how would this affect you?
- It is difficult even for people who want help to get help, especially with mental illness so it shouldn't be mandatory
  - It is too judgemental for someone to force you to get help
  - This would just cause people more stress and fear of cut-off
  - This would be a violation of human rights
  - You can't force somebody to take treatment, however you can provide perks for participating rather than punishing them for not participating
  - Fear of workers starting to diagnose clients
  - Treatment needs to be voluntary to work
5. Participants were asked for OW GROUPS: How much influence have you had on the activities you have to do to meet your participation agreement? Have you had any problems getting your benefits because of these requirements? FOR ODSP GROUPS: If people were required to sign a participation agreement in order to be eligible for ODSP and not get cut off, how would this affect you?
- Inconsistency → some people have to follow participation agreements strictly, others do not
  - People do not understand what they are agreeing to – they have no choice but to agree
  - Some can be unrealistic, i.e. 120 hours a month for a job search activity
  - Stressful – feel pressured, you have to satisfy these conditions
  - Services need to be individualized
  - People are on ODSP for a reason: they are disabled

- Where are the jobs? What is the point of job searching 100 hours per month in a rural area without jobs?
- The group agreed that people on ODSP should not have to have a participation agreement because they have a disability
- It should never be forced on people with disabilities. This would cause people stress and fear, people on ODSP would then be cut-off and homeless if they breached their agreement.

### **How Much Money You Get and How You Get It**

6. What basic needs do you have that you cannot afford right now?
  - Hydro, utilities
  - Water tank rentals
  - Bus passes
  - Chiropractors and physiotherapists
  - Car repairs
  - More needles for diabetics and more test strips
  - TV to stay informed / cable
  - Cleaning supplies
  - Travel expenses / Transportation / Gas costs
  - Repairs for scooters / wheelchairs
  - Internet for research, job search
  - Glasses
  - Hearing aids
  - Winter clothing
  - Orthopaedic shoes
  - Herbal medications and other non-covered medications, i.e. vitamins
  - Inadequate funding for special diet needs
  - Can't get the food on the food guide (i.e. 4-6 servings of grains, etc.)
  - Telephones
  - Recreational costs (i.e. kids' sports)
  - Emergency costs, repairs, routine maintenance for home owners
  - Personal hygiene items
  - Dental
  - Licence / ID – can't get ID due to costs
  - First and last month's rent to move from unsafe housing
7. What is the most important thing you would need help paying for if you were transitioning back into the workforce and no longer on OW / ODSP?
  - Transportation costs
  - Clothing allowance > options outside of second-hand stores
  - Winter clothes

- Life insurance
  - Telephone / Internet
  - Childcare
  - Medications
  - Would still need drug card, hearing aids, medical transportation, bus passes, child care, physically accessible work environment
8. If the government wants to make sure that people are better off working, what could they do?
- Let ODSP people keep more of the money they earn
  - Make the rules easier to understand
  - Keep the first \$1000 you earn
  - Create more jobs
  - A decent living wage
  - Stop clawing back the money made by people who are working
  - Paid transportation
  - Incentive: 1 year working do not claw back wages – don't start subtracting earnings until year 2 – reward people for going to work
  - Career counselling support – support for the job you want – career vs. job
9. How do asset limits and income rules keep you from improving your life?
- No incentive to work
  - Can't save money
  - Living in fear and intimidation of losing benefits, payments
  - Feeling you can't trust the Social Assistance providers
  - Can't get better education
  - Feeling degraded, may need to resort to working under the table
  - They prevent you from saving enough money to get off assistance
  - They prevent people from owning homes because they can't save enough for a down payment
10. If the Special Diet Allowance, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities, and Temporary Care Assistance benefits were no longer part of social assistance, what do you think would happen?
- The Special Diet Allowance should remain part of social assistance
  - The Special Diet Allowance needs to cover more people and conditions
  - Need to keep the temporary care assistance or more children will end up in CAS care
  - People would die without these benefits
  - These benefits can keep people alive – special needs children, diet
  - The benefit should be extended to all low income people
  - It is impossible to reach the federal government so need to keep these programs local

## **Conclusion**

In general, the focus group agreed that the rates needed to be increased and then matched to inflation. Since rates are too low, people cannot afford healthy food, transportation, clothes, telephones, or other things necessary for daily life.

The focus group also agreed that the social assistance rules were too strict, too invasive and too complex. They felt there was too much disrespectful surveillance and monitoring. They felt that the excessive emphasis on rules restricted their ability to live their lives comfortably. They also indicated that there was too much inconsistency and that some workers enforced rules very strictly while others didn't. They wanted more information about all the rules.

People feel that the rules are restricting their ability to work. For example, a person on ODSP has very little incentive to try to get back to work. Firstly, they have difficulty even finding work because there is little support for the costs required during the job search process (transportation, child-care, telephone, internet, etc.). If they do work, their hard-earned money is clawed back and they work in fear of losing benefits provided by the ODSP program. Any money they do manage to make is restricted by the asset level rules.

In conclusion, the focus group felt that it would be better if the social assistance programs had simpler rules that everyone understood. The programs need to be administered in a way that is more sensitive, respectful, and empowering.

The participants were thankful to have had an opportunity to participate in the Social Assistance Review process. They are hopeful that as a result of this review the Commissioners will recommend changes to the social assistance programs that embrace the values of respect and dignity while ensuring that people no longer live in poverty.