

# The Hamilton Spectator

Nov 20, 2008

## Time to stop penalizing poor families

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An Ontario government policy is punishing families on social assistance whose children go to college or university and, like most other students, work.

Members of the Hamilton Branch of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) were appalled to discover recently the earnings of post-secondary students are considered income for families receiving Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program. Fifty per cent of what they earn is deducted from the total benefit of social assistance received by the family.

This is an unjust, unfair and draconian policy, and totally counter to the well-recognized philosophy that society should promote the education of children living in poverty as the best way to extricate them from social assistance and to break the cycle of poverty within generations of families.

We do not expect students in other families to support their families financially while they are in school.

Moreover, at a certain level of earnings, these students are no longer considered part of the family benefit unit. They are deemed to be boarders in the family household and a \$100 boarder's fee is deducted from the total social assistance amount.

Students who receive money from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) experience similar deductions from their family's cheque. This allows the government to save money by reducing payments to the family, but leaves the student to repay the total OSAP loan after graduation.

Ontario's Liberal government said in a March 17 press release about its poverty reduction strategy: "The government's plan for a strong economy is centred on Ontario's greatest resource: its people. If Ontario is to succeed, we need everyone at their best. That's why investing in opportunities for low-income families to get ahead is so important."

Is this all just rhetoric? Can the government justify penalizing families living on social assistance when their sons or daughters attend college or university and take jobs to help pay for their education?

We were shocked to learn that this is so.

This government practice is demoralizing to post-secondary students whose earnings are considered family income, especially since these students are working to cover education costs such as tuition and books.

There is a simple remedy to change this unfair application of calculating social assistance. The present regulations, which exempt the earnings of secondary school students, could be broadened to similarly exempt the earnings of full-time post-secondary students.

This would not require a change in legislation, would not cost the government a lot of money and could reimburse families for the "clawbacks" that shouldn't have happened in the first place.

This additional exemption would be a small step but an important measure to kickstart poverty reduction.

Premier Dalton McGuinty made a pledge during the last election to develop a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario. It is designed to be a comprehensive plan with targets, timetables and measurable results. Now that we are experiencing a downturn in the economy, with prospects of a recession looming, there are discreet comments about the need to be "flexible" and not expect many commitments to be achieved.

It is useful to remember that McGuinty boosted health-care and education spending and later increased the allocation to colleges and universities while they were labouring under an inherited massive deficit. More money was invested in roads, bridges and public transit when the books were balanced.

However, there never seems to be a good time to invest in people, particularly those at the bottom of the greasy pole.

We remind McGuinty the poor are also consumers and they spend their meagre income in the local economies. And it is recognized that health and social costs spiral upward when people continue to live in ever-increasing poverty during bad times.

The time to invest in poverty reduction is now.

Our organization, the CFUW, with a membership of 6,000 in Ontario, has a mandate to advocate for educational and social reform. Consequently, we have committed to join the growing groundswell of support coming from many different organizations and strenuously support the efforts in urging the Ontario government to expand immediately the current regulation that penalizes families living in poverty.

**Norma Ducao, Maureen Leyland and Pat Lyons wrote this article on behalf of Canadian Federation of University Women -- Hamilton Branch.**

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