

## **Clawbacks wound Ontario's poorest**

Maureen Leyland, Norma Ducau and Linda Hall  
CFUW Hamilton

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"Deceptive" and "discriminatory" are two words to describe the Ontario government's restructuring in July of the social assistance program.

These words are unavoidable when we see the lower amounts of money some families are now receiving on the Ontario Works (OW) and on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). A central piece of the government's plan to reduce poverty in Ontario includes an initiative called the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB). It meant that all families with children would receive a benefit of \$50 per month for each child. In July, the government announced with great acclaim the Ontario Child benefit would be increased to \$92.

We know the Ontario Child Benefit includes the former Back to School Allowance and the Winter Clothing Allowance -- two lump sums mailed out in August and September. These cheques were much needed add-ons to the regular monthly support payments to augment the meagre allowances provided for children. Unfortunately, that same money accounts for some of the increase in the Ontario Child Benefit.

The most revealing example of the punitive impact of this "restructuring" is a single mother on the Ontario Disability Support Program with a 14-year-old daughter. In early August of this year, she received a cheque for the Ontario Child Benefit showing an increase of approximately \$420. However, at the end of the same month, she discovered that the Basic Needs portion of her support had been reduced by almost the same amount as the child benefit had been increased. Her net gain was \$1 -- a clear case of a "clawback".

This "clawbacking" of already inadequate income is particularly upsetting given the announcement by the Ontario government that the increase would benefit all children. In fact, the increase is distributed in a very discriminatory way. Low-income families who do not receive social assistance receive the full amount of \$92.

Yes, deceptive, discriminatory and clawback are most appropriate words to describe the government's "restructuring" of social assistance.

The social assistance program has been severely criticized as being a hodgepodge of rules and regulations and benefit rates that are pathetically low. The so called "restructuring" of the program results in "giving with one hand and taking away with the other".

Dalton McGuinty himself admits the current system "stomps people into the ground".

On Dec. 4, 2008, the government made a commitment to undertake a comprehensive review of the social assistance program as part of their poverty reduction strategy. On the anniversary of this commitment, the 25 in 5 Network made plans to hold a public forum in Hamilton to publicize the record of the McGuinty government on its poverty reduction measures. On the eve of this event, the government took the opportunity to announce the formation of a panel of anti-poverty activists to advise them on what needs to be changed. The government is to be commended in finally taking heed of the crescendo of voices clamouring for this review. It remains to be seen how substantial it is.

In the meantime, people are still living in dire poverty and children still go to school hungry. Campaign 2000 in their latest report card on child poverty identify that one in four children in

Hamilton are living in poverty, more than twice as many compared to the provincial figure of one in nine. There is a tremendous urgency to do something to relieve the grinding poverty and to feed the children.

A survey recently conducted in Hamilton by the Do the Math Campaign showed what it costs to live at some level of decency in this city. This survey revealed that the social assistance amounts received by recipients are totally inadequate to cover the basic necessities of life. Each month, recipients are forced to choose to pay the rent or buy nutritious food. Their last resort is the food bank, which is a very demeaning experience and does not provide a nutritious food basket to guarantee good health.

Given that nothing is more basic than food, the 25 in 5 Network in partnership with the Association of Public Health Agencies has launched an Ontario wide campaign for an immediate introduction of a \$100-a-month healthy food supplement for all adults receiving social assistance.

Although this may be seen as a stopgap measure, it is essentially a "timely investment" to ensure that adults and children can afford nutritious food for a healthy diet. After all, underfed children do not do well in a learning environment.

The Hamilton Branch of the Canadian Federation of University Women earnestly calls on the Ontario government to stop the "clawbacks", restore the basic needs allowance to its former levels without "clawback" and provide a \$100-per-month healthy food supplement for all adults without "clawback."

To quote Nelson Mandela "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental right, the right to dignity and a decent life."