

UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S CLUB NORTH YORK

PUBLIC FORUM ON POVERTY

November 1st, 2006

"Fairness For Us All: Income Security for the 21st Century"

Poverty is an issue that should not be swept under the carpet, even if one has a carpet! Too many people in Ontario work full time, all year and don't earn enough to pull themselves out of poverty. This is unjust and need not happen.

In the fall of 2004, the Toronto City Summit Alliance and St. Christopher House, (a multi-service neighbourhood centre that works with low income people) organized a task force "Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults". Co-chaired by David Pecaut, Chair, Toronto City Summit Alliance and Susan Pigott, CEO, St. Christopher House, the purpose of the Task Force was to analyze the reasons why so many are trapped in poverty and to offer practical recommendations to facilitate positive change. The Task Force envisioned "an income security system for working-age adults that treats people with dignity, enforces the value of work for those who can obtain employment and does not leave those for whom "work is a distant prospect" to live in destitution. Furthermore,

- § everyone should have access to basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter).
- § individuals working full time, full year should not live in poverty.
- § children should not be an impediment to parents' participation in the labour market.
- § everyone should have the means to improve their situation.

The report of the Task Force "Time for a Fair Deal: Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults" was issued in May 2006.

Recommendations to the federal government were:

- § reform Employment Insurance to address the significant decline in coverage of the unemployed
- § create a new refundable tax benefit
- § provide and administer a national income support program for persons whose disabilities are so substantial that they are unlikely to enter the paid labour force.

Recommendations to the provincial government were;

- § establish an independent body, with representation from labour and employers to recommend periodic increases in the minimum wage.
- § implement an integrated child benefit platform for all low income parents with children that pays benefits outside the social assistance system.
- § provide basic health (prescription drugs and vision care) and dental coverage to low income workers and families.
- § strengthen enforcement of employment standards.
- § raise social assistance asset limits.
- § revamp the disability determination process.
- § improve and expand employment supports, training and upgrading for social assistance recipients and for low income workers with an emphasis on building individual skills and capacities.
- § upload social assistance benefit costs for the municipally delivered Ontario Works program, and all social assistance costs (benefits and administration) for the provincially delivered Ontario Disability Support Program, from municipalities to the province.

The Status of Women and Human Rights study group of UWC North York decided to give members of their club and community an opportunity to learn more about this report and its focus on the working poor. The MPs, MPPS and city councillors for all ridings/wards in North York were also issued an invitation to attend the session. The group arranged a forum "Fairness For Us All:

Income Security for the 21st Century" that took place on November 1, 2006. Involved in the program for the evening were Moderator Mary Deanne Shears, former Managing Editor of the Toronto Star, Susan Pigott, who discussed the report, and, on the reaction panel, club members Ann Cooper and Victoria Bowman. Ann is a former Public Health nurse and now is a volunteer at St. Christopher House and involved in social justice issues at her church. Victoria, a social worker at the WoodGreen Centre, is in daily contact with Ontario Works recipients and welcomed the opportunity to speak on their behalf. These women were effective catalysts for a great evening of learning and exchange of ideas.

The forum was financed by a generous grant from the Grace Morgan Fund and by contributions from members of the group.

Resources used by UWCNY in studying this issue included:

- § *From Welfare to Work in Ontario: Still the Road Less Travelled*: TD Economics Special Report, September 8, 2005 www.td.com/economics. Choose Canada and scroll to date above.
- § *Poverty by Postal Code. The Geography of Neighbourhood Poverty 1981-2001* www.unitedwaytoronto.org
- § *Time for a Fair Deal. Report of the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults May 2006* www.stchrishouse.org or www.torontoalliance.ca

If any club wants to arrange an event on this topic, and it is certainly a subject of great importance to many Ontarians, we would be glad to offer the benefit of our experience.

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