

4.2

Request to Speak to a Committee of Council

If your request is for a specific committee meeting, this form must be received by NOON the day before the scheduled committee meeting. Requests for Monday meetings must be received by NOON the Friday before the meeting. Requests for meetings scheduled for the day after a statutory holiday must be received by NOON the last business day before the meeting. For summer meeting requests (July/August), please contact the City Clerk's Office at (905) 546-4408 for further information.

Committee Requested

Kindly indicate which Committee: *

Emergency & Community Services

If you selected Advisory/Sub-Committee from the above list, please indicate name of Committee:

Requestor Information

Name of Individual: * Susan Muma

Name of Organization: Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination (H.O.P.E.)

Contact Number: * 905-627-2844

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Reason(s) for delegation request: * to address concerns about the final report from the Social Assistance Reform Commissioners, Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh.

Will you be submitting a formal presentation?* ☐ Yes ☒ No

Are you a lobbyist ? ☐ Yes ☒ No

(The information collected for the Lobbyist registry system was implemented by City Council in 2004 and the information provided is on a voluntary basis.)

If your answer is Yes to the lobbyist question, who are you representing? :

Requests to speak to Council are forwarded to the Committee for consideration. Once considered by Committee, and approved, you will be notified of the date for your presentation.

This form is not for the purpose of presenting unsolicited proposals by Vendors to Committee. Such proposals are subject to a competitive process as required by the City's Purchasing Policy.

The City makes a video record of Committee and Council meetings. If you make a presentation to a Committee, the City will be video recording you and will make the recording public by publishing the recording on the City's website.

The City collects personal information as authorized under Section 5.11 of the City's Procedural By-law No. 10-053 for the purpose of entertaining individuals requesting an opportunity to appear as a delegation before Committee. The Procedural By-law is a requirement of Section 238(2) of the Municipal Act. Questions about the collection of personal information can be directed to the Manager, Legislative Services / Deputy Clerk, City Hall, 71 Main St. W., Hamilton, ON L8P 4Y5 (905 546-2424 ext. 4304).

The Voluntary Lobbyist Registry is a public document and will be available for viewing in the City Clerk's office.

Holding onto Hope

Response from **Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination (HOPE)**
to *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*

December 2012

Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination (HOPE) has a vision of an Ontario in which all citizens can live with dignity and have the resources necessary to allow them fully participate in the life of their community. On October 24, 2012, Commissioners Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh released their final report *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario*. Keeping in mind the HOPE vision, we have looked at the report with the following questions in mind: How do the recommendations made by the Commissioners improve the lives of those receiving social assistance in Ontario? What will happen if a government follows the Commissioners' recommendations, fully implementing them? What will happen if they don't, or if they pick and choose among the recommendations?

Affirmations

Members of HOPE find some recommendations made by the Commissioners helpful for social assistance recipients and responsive to our previous submission to their second report, *A Discussion Paper: Issues and Ideas*. We especially applaud the acknowledgment by the Commissioners that the \$599 rate for singles on Ontario Works is too low and should be increased immediately by \$100 per month as has been long suggested by the Put Food in the Budget Campaign. Although this \$100 increase falls short of an adequate rate, it is a start.

We appreciate the Commissioners acknowledgment that there must be a rational method of determining what rates should be. We like the idea of standard rates (differing according to region) which are **adequate** and will cover the cost of safe, secure housing, nutritious food, and other household expenses for all those receiving social assistance.

Allowing social assistance recipients to earn \$200 per month before claw backs, to retain more assets, and to be allowed gifts up to a certain amount on a yearly basis are good recommendations which should benefit recipients. The new definition of spouse and recommendations around child support should help recipients as well. We support the concept of peer navigators who are social assistance recipients themselves being hired to help other recipients navigate the system.

Moving benefits such as extended health, children's benefits and disability benefits outside of social assistance, and making them available to all low income earners is another idea we can support as long as there are no corresponding claw backs to social assistance recipients.

Concerns

There are warning signs around other recommendations made by the Commissioners. It is extremely important that the Special Diet Allowance be maintained as is until the province sets a standard rate which allows all social assistance recipients to afford nutritious food, adequate housing including household expenses and transportation.

We fear the mention of a **standard way** of defining the needs of recipients based on their distance from the labour market, and it is easy to see that Pathways to Employment could turn into the Participation Agreements of today.

When the minimum wage today is so low that those working full-time, full-year still live below the poverty line, we cannot favour the use of the minimum wage as the reference wage when determining a Basic Measure of Adequacy. We are not unhappy with the amalgamation of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program as long as there is recognition that there are some recipients who will never be able to enter the labour force and as long as this amalgamation is not just used to save money. There is a great fear among ODSP recipients of the use of a standard measurement to determine disability. The measurement used in England has been disastrous.

For the purpose of this report, the members of HOPE would like to look specifically at recommendations in the following areas: Rates and the determination of rates; Additional Benefits; Employment and supports, Accountability and Income Inequality.

Rates and the Determination of Rates

We support the recommendation for an immediate rise in rates of \$100 for singles receiving Ontario Works as an acknowledgement that the current rate (\$599 per month) is far too low. This rate increase can and should be implemented immediately. It is important to note that the \$100 increase should not result in the cancellation of the Special Diet Allowance. If the SDA is to be cancelled, it cannot happen until a standard rate, differing by region, is set. This standard rate must be enough to provide recipients with special dietary needs with the funds to buy what they need.

This standard rate also needs to recognize the costs of housing, nutritious food, transportation and other household expenses in various regions of the province. These costs vary a great deal. The Commissioners suggest that the standard rate be set in a rational way. Presently, there is no such method used: rates are set in a purely arbitrary way.

The members of HOPE believe that rates should be determined by an arms-length Board. Legislation to establish this board has already been written. It is contained in Bill 235 which died when the legislature rose prior to the 2007 election. Bill 235 would have its members look at the **real** costs of housing, nutritious food, household expenses and transportation in various regions of the province, and rates would be set accordingly.

Consequences

If an Ontario government were to raise the OW singles rate by \$100 immediately, it would show a serious commitment to improving the lives of singles living on OW. But, we would only believe in the sincerity of this commitment if the government continued work on establishing an adequate standard rate for all those on social assistance determined by region in a rational way preferably by an arms-length Board.

A government that sincerely wishes to improve the lives of its most vulnerable citizens will regard the increase in social assistance rates to an adequate rate as an investment in human potential. Social assistance recipients spend all of their income in their local communities thus supporting their local economies. As well, the sense of well-being that comes from having **enough** will enable recipients to contribute to their communities in ways they cannot do now when just ensuring that they and their families get enough to eat and have a roof over their heads consumes every minute of their time and all of their energy. Being kept as poor as many on social assistance are right now is really a full time job.

Warning

If the government were to cancel the Special Diet Allowance before setting a standard rate which would allow recipients to afford the special dietary needs they have, it would be disastrous for those recipients and send the message that government has no intention of trying to improve the circumstances of the most vulnerable in our province.

Some members of the government encouraged the Social Assistance Commissioners to be bold in their recommendations. We encourage members of the government to be bold in their implementation of the recommendations to increase social assistance rates to an adequate level, to take citizens out of deep poverty, and to ensure that, in the future, rates will be set according to real costs in various regions of our province. And we encourage ordinary citizens to learn more about the inadequacies of present system and to pressure their MPP's to ensure that all citizens of our great province can live in dignity.

Additional Benefits

Moving benefits such as child benefits, health benefits and disability benefits outside of social assistance and providing these to all low income earners is a recommendation HOPE members can support. The health benefit, in particular, will provide an incentive for social assistance recipients who may be reluctant to take low-income jobs when they know they are giving up health benefits. Making this benefit available to both social assistance recipients and low-income earners is a positive step.

We must caution, though, that we do not want to see any claw backs for social assistance recipients when the benefits are moved outside social assistance. Too often, we have seen the province give with one hand and take with the other when addressing the needs of social assistance recipients. (The introduction of the Ontario Child Benefit resulted in the cancellation of the Back to School and Winter Clothing Allowances. And this is just one

example of such a claw back.) The Commissioners also talk about a housing benefit to be made available to both social assistance recipients and low-income earners and to be delivered by an organization such as the Ontario Trillium Benefit. This benefit, too, would be offered to both low income earners and social assistance recipients. The real need in terms of housing is for a much greater supply of affordable housing.

Consequences

If the government were to move the benefits – health, disability and child - outside of social assistance and make them available to low income earners as well, life would improve for those on social assistance as well as for low-income earners. Low income jobs do not usually offer health benefits, and for social assistance recipients, giving up health benefits to take jobs which will ensure they are kept in poverty is not at all enticing and is a disincentive to taking such jobs. A housing benefit is very important in this mix. It is very hard to work if housing is sub-standard or consumes too much of the monthly budget. Life improves for people when they are assured of a decent and affordable place to live. We need many more affordable housing units in this province. It is up to government to decide how this need is met.

There is a **caveat** to the optimism we might have if benefits are moved outside social assistance and offered to low-income workers as well. There can be no picking and choosing among the recommendations offered by the Commissioners. If the government does not follow the recommendations to standardize rates at an adequate level, then the lives of those living on assistance will not improve even with the movement of benefits outside of the system. Claw backs will, again have won the day.

Employment and Supports

A well-paid job with benefits is, of course, the best way out of poverty. But in the economy we live in today, it is hardly the most achievable goal for many. People on social assistance, both those on OW and those who are disabled and on ODSP want to work, but it must be recognized at the outset that some of these people will never be able to work. Those who cannot work, the most vulnerable in our communities must have an adequate level of support, and it is up to government on behalf of the citizens of Ontario, to ensure that this is so.

Having said that, the Commissioners do make some good recommendations regarding employment and supports. The recommendation that there be pre and post- employment services and supports tailored to individual needs is much-needed. The Commissioners also recognize that some recipients will only be able to work sporadically because of various disabilities and their recommendation that developing a strategy for supporting and enhancing alternative forms of employment for social assistance recipients such as self-employment, social purpose enterprises, and peer-led employment and training is well worth supporting. Other recommendations regarding employment are questionable. There are still promises of punitive measures if certain conditions are not met. While we realize people must suffer consequences for their actions, we would hope that social

assistance workers have time to clarify expectations and help recipients clearly understand what their actions may lead to. There remains the danger that caseworkers may not have the time required to deal with the complex problems of some of their clients. In recommendation 11, the Commissioners state that "people with disabilities 'should' ^[sic] not be penalized, **in the short term**, for failing to meet the commitments in their plans. The recommendation is vague and confusing. As well, in this economy, we are not sure that employers will be eager to set up special programs to help social assistance recipients retain employment. Neither are we convinced that corporate leaders will want to partner with government to champion the hiring of disabled people. We do fear that social assistance recipients may become cheap labour for some unethical employers. Even the Commissioners recognize the problem of precarious labour which is widespread in this economic climate.

Consequences

If the government were to ensure there were enough caseworkers to help social assistance recipients with their individual needs, it would be a very good thing for both social assistance recipients and workers. Pre and post-employment services, likewise, would help recipients, many of whom have little of the confidence needed to retain employment. But the support has to be there, and it has to be ongoing and available to all who need it.

If the government does not employ enough workers to help social assistance recipients individually, very little will change. Likewise, if supports and services are not supplied when and as needed, recipients may find themselves no better off than they are now. Precarious employment, too, is a very real problem in this economy, and there are many unethical employers willing to take advantage of those who are poor, uneducated or just plain desperate for work to pay the bills. Employer-driven initiatives are a good idea as are corporate leaders championing those with disabilities. But, in this economy, we fear there may not be many takers for such initiatives. Which employers are going to want to put in the time and effort necessary to employ people with special needs?

Accountability

The Commissioners make some positive recommendations regarding accountability. We especially like the recommendation that the Province establish a stakeholder advisory body which includes people with lived experience. We like the idea of tying the transformation of social assistance to the Poverty Reduction Strategy and of having an annual report card on the Social Assistance System showing its progress as it is transformed. Setting specific goals to be met along a time-line would keep things moving.

There are also some good suggestions for recipients: exceptional reporting where OW recipients only report income when there is a change cuts down on reporting and the need to preserve pay-stubs etc. which can be very difficult for those who may be living chaotic lives and changing residences often. Information sharing among ministries will cut down on the necessity for paper documentation when verifying and reviewing the eligibility of social assistance recipients. But there are problems that remain. Attitudes toward those

receiving social assistance need to change. It is up to all of us, and especially to those in government, to challenge the unfair assumptions that we hear, see, and read about.

Consequences

The establishment of a stakeholder body which includes recipients of social assistance, the tying of the transformation of the Social Assistance System to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, and an annual report card reporting on the achievement of specific goals in the transformation of the Social Assistance System will force the Ontario government to be open and transparent. We should see clear progress toward the transformation of the system on a yearly basis if the government chooses to follow the recommendations made by Ms. Lankin and Mr. Sheikh.

Rising Income Inequality

The recommendation that the Province engage the Federal government to begin a review of rising income inequality and the failure of the tax-transfer system to address this inequality is another positive suggestion. There is an important role for the Federal government, and we need to engage them in the fight against poverty.

Conclusion

Poverty costs all of us too much, both financially and in lost potential. Those who are poor are weaker and sicker and cost us millions in health care dollars. Poor people experience more physical illness and suffer more from mental health issues. The lack of opportunity for those who are poor results in more costs in the justice system: youngsters with no money and nothing to keep them occupied are more likely to get into trouble with the law. This costs us all in terms of the costs of policing, of the court system, and of the penal system. It is hard to stay in school if one is poor, and the cost of being a drop-out is life-long. Gone are the days when a person with little education has much of a chance of getting ahead.

But the biggest cost of poverty is the loss of human potential. If we want to take advantage of the human potential of social assistance recipients, we must **raise the rates**. Being fair, giving people opportunities, and supplying those who are out of work temporarily, or even long-term with incomes sufficient to allow them to buy nutritious food, to keep a decent roof over their heads and to live a life of dignity is an investment in human potential. It is important also to remember that those who receive social assistance put any money they receive right back into their local economies. They pay rent, buy groceries and take local transportation. They do not put their money into RRSP's or TFSA's or overseas tax shelters: they don't have enough to do so. Professor Atif Kubursi of McMaster University has produced a report which shows the ways in which providing social assistance actually benefits the local community.

The major goal of any government implementing the final report of Ms. Lankin and Mr. Sheikh must be to ensure that **no-one in the system is worse off**. We cannot emphasize enough that the culture of Ministries administering Social Assistance **must change**. No

matter what their present position, all of our citizens in both Ontario and Canada deserve to be treated with respect. No-one merits the assumption that h/she is lazy, undeserving, and a cheat; government Ministers, officials, and Social Assistance workers in the community must proactively reject these assumptions and state their belief in citizens receiving social assistance. That is the only way to change the culture and myths surrounding social assistance recipients. We must be able to depend on our leaders to lead. We need to look at the kind of Canada we want to leave for our children and grandchildren. Do we want a country where it is every person for him/herself, or do we want a country where everyone has the opportunity to live a life of dignity? Do we want a country where we deprive people of both respect and financial supports to help them get ahead, or do we want to invest in our fellow citizens, offering them the opportunities we take for granted?

The members of Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination are holding on to **HOPE**. We want to see a Hamilton, an Ontario, and a Canada where all people can live in dignity and have the opportunity to contribute to the best of their ability to their local communities, their province and their country.

