

## **Delegation to Emergency & Community Services Committee**

Re: 2013 Proposed Discretionary Benefits Budget Options

---

Chair and Members of the Emergency & Community Services Committee:

My name is Bob Wood and I'm a Community Development Worker at the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic/Clinique juridique communautaire de Hamilton.

Community Legal Clinics have a long history of providing poverty law services in Hamilton. Dundurn Clinic (established in 1976) McQuesten Community and Legal Services (formed in 1978) and Mountain (1985) amalgamated 2 1/2 years ago to form one clinic.

A big part of our work is providing representation and summary advice in regards to all aspects of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and providing information, advice and representation on Ontario Works (OW), CSUMB and special benefits.

We've read the staff report on the proposed discretionary benefits budget options.

We understand the assertion that "municipalities do not have the capacity to independently fund social assistance programs without provincial assistance."

We appreciate the staff efforts to come up with a reduced discretionary benefit program within the constraints of operating under this new \$10 cost shared cap that must cover combined non-health and health discretionary benefits.

Nevertheless, we believe that any reductions in discretionary benefits at this time would not be appropriate.

The impacts of the recommendation will be profound to many Hamilton residents.

For example, as staff notes:

The reductions "will result in significant health consequences or other hardships to the Hamilton residents currently eligible for these services."

Dental benefit reductions "will significantly affect the ability of OW/ODSP/low income residents to access necessary dental care."

Utility arrears fund reductions will be cut in half even though there will be greater pressures on this fund because of the CSUMB cut and the reductions could result in residents living "without utilities, or foregoing other essential items in order to cover utility costs."

As members of Council are aware the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario released its final report last week.

While few have of us have had the opportunity to thoroughly review the 183 page document and its 108 recommendations there is no doubt that, based on a comprehensive review of a complicated system, the report presents a way forward for much needed reform of the social assistance system in Ontario.

This report makes concrete recommendations towards establishing an appropriate benefit schedule for all social assistance recipients.

It articulates “a simple building blocks approach” which will take us to a “fully transformed system.”

Such a system would include a rational methodology for setting rates and a simplified special benefits system that would apply to all low income Ontarians (for health related and non-health related benefits.)

While the report commends the province for taking steps in the right direction to address goals of simplification and improving local flexibility the authors state quite clearly that:

“As the Province implements our recommendations for block funds in place of separate special benefits, funding should be maintained at current levels. Simplification and local flexibility need to be sufficiently resourced, not funded at a lower level.”

With much fanfare the government appointed the SAR Commission two years ago. That Commission has just come back with a blueprint for action on restructuring and reforming the whole social assistance system and provided detail recommendations regarding special benefits.

We need to advocate strongly for the government to respond to the report.

In that context we ask, then, that the City not go forward with these reductions at this time.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Wood  
Hamilton Community Legal Clinic/Clinique juridique communautaire de Hamilton  
November 1, 2012