

## **Presentation to the General Issues Committee of Hamilton City Council**

Monday December 10, 2012  
1:30 pm  
Council Chambers, City Hall

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## ***Introduction***

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am a staff lawyer at the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic / Clinique juridique communautaire de Hamilton ("the Clinic"). I appear before you today in order to express the Clinics support for the staff recommendation of the Housing Stability Benefit Implementation Plan, and also to discuss some areas of concern around the implementation of this new benefit.

This Housing Stability Benefit arises out of the cancellation of the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit, a former mandatory benefit for recipients of provincial social assistance benefits through the Ontario Works program and the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Hamilton Community Legal Clinic is a community based not for profit agency whose diverse team of caring professionals and volunteers provides legal services to low income individuals and communities to promote access to justice and to improve quality of life. We do this through: summary advice and referral, representation, community development, law reform and public legal education. The Clinic was launched on April 1, 2010. Our not-for-profit organization is an amalgamation of the three independent community legal clinics that had been operating in the City for over thirty years, Dundurn Community Legal Services, Hamilton Mountain Legal & Community Services and McQuesten Legal & Community Services. The clinics merged so they could provide legal services to more low income Hamilton residents. The clinic is run by a volunteer board of directors and we are funded by Legal Aid Ontario.

## ***The Cancellation of the CSUMB***

The effective cancellation of the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit ("CSUMB") is a public policy decision by the Provincial government that has the

potential to substantially increase homelessness in communities across Ontario. At that Hamilton Community Legal Clinic we regularly witness individuals and families who, but for the emergency assistance provided by the CSUMB, would be homeless. It is appalling that the Provincial government chose to make this severe cut to social assistance benefits in the 2012 budget, at the same time as they cut funding for discretionary benefits, and in advance of the final report of the commission to Review Social Assistance in Ontario (a Commission that the Provincial Government had itself appointed).

### ***Staff Consultation***

Staff should be congratulated on their responsiveness to messages heard at the limited community consultation held at a meeting on October 19, 2012. While this limited form of consultation – a single meeting of city staff with agency representatives and representatives of community groups – is not ideal, it is acknowledged that City staff were presented with a very challenging timeline for developing a new benefit that will be critical to efforts to combat homelessness in our community. City staff heard messages from many stakeholders at the meeting that the current CSUMB eligibility criteria needed to be retained. Staff responded by revising some of their planning and presenting the report in front of you today. This report is largely reflective of the community stakeholder voices heard by staff at the consultation on October 19, 2012.

### ***Some Reasons Why it is Crucial to Retain a CSUMB-type program***

- Individuals and families in receipt of Ontario Works benefits are some of the most vulnerable members of our community, and should not be asked to fund a new rent bank program for all low income individuals and families;
- There is currently insufficient data to inform any evidence-based changes to the eligibility criteria and the maximum benefit amounts;

- The proposed municipally-funded CSUMB program should be tied into a robust research and evaluation initiative that will allow the community to make informed and evidence-based decisions about the continuation of, and/or the modification of the program when the City of Hamilton Housing Division undertakes a comprehensive review of housing services in 2013;
- The replacement of the CSUMB with a new program will make it considerably more difficult to advocate for the reinstatement of that critical program;
- The political environment may be more conducive to advocacy for the reinstatement of the CSUMB in mid-2013;
- A robust research and evaluation initiative tied to the CSUMB benefit will hopefully provide a strong evidence-based case for the reinstatement of the CSUMB and also regarding the need for evidence-based social assistance rates generally;

### ***The Leadership of Hamilton City Council***

Hamilton City Council has shown great leadership in agreeing to continue to fund the Housing Stability Benefit at levels approximating 2011 CSUMB levels for the first 6 months of 2013. This decision by Hamilton City Council is being discussed around the Province, has been brought to the attention of the Minister of Community & Social Services, and underlines Council's concern for the most vulnerable members of our community. This Council decision is also very supportive of the broad-based efforts across the province to convince the Provincial Government to reverse this ill-advised cut to some of the most critical social assistance benefits. Hamilton has again taken a leadership role in these advocacy efforts and will be holding a provincial meeting, organized by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, this Friday, December 14, 2012.

## ***Some areas of Concern***

### Service Delivery for ODSP Recipients

There is some concern over the delivery of the benefit to ODSP-recipients who are not in shelters. It is proposed that these benefits be delivered by the Housing Help Centre. While we agree that this service delivery recommendation will allow the leveraging of other services provided by the agency such as housing search assistance and tenant advocacy, we are concerned regarding the need for new staffing (4 new staff) and the ability to train new staff in time for a start-date of January 1, 2013. It should be noted that this is also a concern expressed by Staff with regard to Option Two in the Staff Report regarding the potential delivery of this program by the Ontario Works Special Support Unit (2 new staff). It is acknowledged that, because Ministry staff will no longer be able to deliver this program, any new service delivery model will require staff training in an insufficient amount of time; We do not mean to suggest that the problem is with the Housing Help Centre, but rather that the short timelines for program implementation will create problems in staff training generally.

We also suggest that City Staff monitor to ensure that benefit eligibility decisions are made in a timely manner as there are often very short timelines between when a client applies for the benefit, and an impending eviction or lease-signing.

### Data Collection and Program Evaluation and Planning

We agree with staff that it will be crucial to engage in a more robust data collection and evaluation plan to monitor the program and ensure that any changes to the program are evidence-based and are thus the most effective changes for preventing and reducing homelessness in our community. We recommend that City Staff work closely with community agencies who are also

doing research in this area, particularly the Social Planning & Research Council of Hamilton, to develop a plan for data collection and evaluation.

#### What Happens if The Cuts are Reversed?

We recommend that the City be prepared to reinstate the program in a way that is seamless for applicants, in the event provincial advocacy efforts are successful and the Minister reverses the cancellation of the CSUMB.

#### ***What are we recommending?***

1. That the Emergency & Community Services Committee approves the staff recommendation for the Housing Stability Benefit Implementation Plan.

