

Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

Submission to Government of Ontario, Ministry of Community and Social Services Regarding Income Security: A Roadmap for Change, January 4, 2018

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction was formed in 2005 to tackle the City's unacceptable levels of poverty. Roundtable members work collaboratively, including leaders from various sectors, government, education and faith communities as well as individuals who experience poverty daily. Our goal: to reduce and eliminate poverty. The Roundtable doesn't offer programs or direct services; our role is to build understanding about the need to invest in poverty reduction to create a healthier, inclusive and more prosperous Hamilton. We work locally, provincially and nationally on policy and systems-level change to achieve long-term solutions to poverty. The Roundtable was pleased that campaign coordinator, Laura Cattari was appointed to the Income Security Reform Working Group and played an integral role in the development of the report.

It is from this perspective why we can say that we are pleased to see this comprehensive plan to deal with poverty through the lens of income security in Ontario.

In November, 2017 shortly after the release of the 'Roadmap' the Roundtable and community partners hosted a Town Hall on Income Security to review and hear feedback on the recommendations. More than 150 community members attended and had the opportunity to comment on the recommendations.



What we heard was overwhelmingly positive. The Roadmap provides a pragmatic yet visionary plan for moving forward on income security in Ontario. It's focus on removing barriers for those with low income, addressing income security on numerous fronts and yet still providing individualized social supports, is exactly what is missing from the current system.

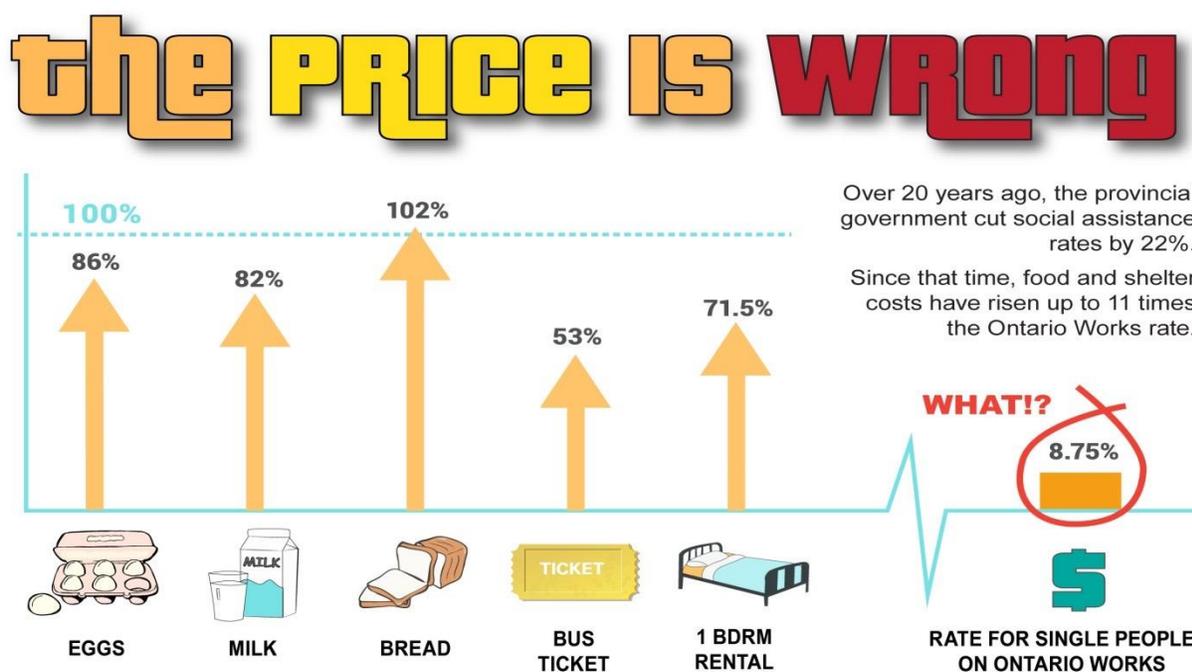
PRIORITY 1: INCREASE RATES IMMEDIATELY

Given our relationship with both non-profit service agencies and those living in poverty, we must stress the urgent need for action on rates. While ten years may seem like a reasonable amount of time for changing government systems, in the lives of those impacted by poverty it can mean undue hardship or even long-term harm in health or aspirations.

Over the last two decades, costs for food and shelter have risen by eleven times the rate of increase to social assistance benefits. As a result, food bank use amongst social assistance

recipients is at an all-time high. According to Hamilton Food Share, seventy-one percent of all visitors to food banks in our City are in receipt of either Ontario Works or ODSP benefits. In a very real sense, the government has institutionalized hunger amongst social assistance recipients through a decades-long policy of low rates and inadequate supports. This must change immediately through an immediate rates-increase.

Budget 2018, must include a 10% increase in Ontario Works rates and a 5% increase in ODSP rates as a downpayment towards the full implementation of the Roadmap's 3-year recommendation for a 22% increase in Ontario Works rates and a 15% increase in ODSP rates.



PRIORITY 2: STACKING BENEFITS WITHOUT DEDUCTIONS & DEFINING INCOME ADEQUACY IN ONTARIO

Even with a portable housing benefit many social assistance recipients will still be dangerously housing insecure, and unable to afford food. The Roadmap's recommendations around stacking all benefits must enable recipients to reach adequacy without clawback.

Currently, the practice of deducting spousal income from ODSP cheques negatively and severely impacts the ability of persons with disabilities to form long-term relationships and causes harm to potential partners. A prospective, employed partner not in poverty can become so just by living with an ODSP recipient for 3 months due to income deductions. The Roadmap briefly addresses the issue of employment deductions from these households but makes no determination on the course of action. This is due to some households requiring the spouse or partner staying home to care for the individual. In households that require a non-disabled partner to substantially assist someone with a disability in day to day living, a new caregiver category should be created.

There is also a need to allow people to earn to the new Minimum Income Standard without deductions regardless of which program they are on. It is with this in mind, that we hope the Ontario Basic Income Pilot will provide valuable feedback as to the effect of higher income thresholds on individuals and families in general.

The new Minimum Income Standard must be based in actual cost of living in regions of Ontario or be consigned to being irrelevant. Current methods of analysis and measure are relative but do not determine efficacy or quality of life. Nor do relative income measures like PRS LIM help grasp what the nature of poverty actually is i.e. what barriers are individuals and families actually experiencing. To be frank, relative income measures lead to poor policy decisions. We applaud the call for a new made in Ontario measure of adequacy and remind the government that Bill 6: the Ministry of Community and Social Services Amendment Act (Social Assistance Research Commission) passed second reading in the Legislature unanimously in September, 2016 (with support from all three parties) and provides an optimal framework for establishing this adequacy measure.

We demand that the Government move Bill 6 forward for hearings at the Ontario Legislature's Standing Committee on Social Policy so that this new adequacy measure can be implemented as the new standard.

PRIORITY 3: SYSTEM MODERNIZATION, RESTORING DIGNITY

Lastly, we have grave concerns about SAMS and other system modernization proposals. Like the co-design recommended in other sections of the roadmap, we believe the system modernization should actively include front-line workers and program recipients. For example, negative-optioning of monthly statements (the need to checkmark statements in the system despite someone having no income) has led to increased work-load for caseworkers and undue stress to clients because of unnecessary suspension letters. Online applications are of no use to individuals who are computer illiterate. To allow for dignity of the individual, applicants should be able to easily navigate the system on their own and not require outside community supports to work with MCSS for claims, benefits or other services. All design should facilitate entry for all people, including those without access to technology.

We believe the aforementioned are not only challenges but the three most important aspects to address. Change that does not incorporate these recommendations will not significantly reduce barriers enough to create sweeping change to the lives of those most vulnerable in Ontario.

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