

For People For Change
FAMILY SERVICE TORONTO

April 14, 2010

Gail Nyberg, Chair
Social Assistance Review Advisory Committee
c/o Daily Bread Food Bank
191 New Toronto Street
Toronto, ON
M8V 2E7

Dear Ms. Nyberg:

We understand that your committee is currently formulating recommendations regarding the scope and focus of the proposed review of social assistance in Ontario. We respectfully submit the following concerns primarily regarding the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). This program has a significant impact on the conditions that individuals with developmental disabilities face in their daily work, parenting, caring and mentoring roles. ODSP also serves to shape the number of choices that people labeled with developmental disabilities may or may not have.

Through the Options and Passport programs, Family Service Toronto works with people who have developmental and physical disabilities to build inclusive partnerships and break down barriers. We provide information, person directed planning facilitation, counselling and connect people to opportunities for employment, supportive living arrangements and community participation supports.

On behalf of the individuals that we work with and our staff, I want to highlight some of the issues that we believe the upcoming review must address. I will also include suggestions for future information and feedback that will strengthen the review of social assistance. We hope that the government leaders receiving these recommendations will move expeditiously toward a full review. It is long overdue.

From our experience, many applicants to the ODSP have to go through an appeal process. It is notable and of serious concern that approximately 50% of the appeals to the Social Benefits Tribunal are granted. We believe that this high number of overturned applications likely reflects systemic problems.

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Key issues affecting access to Ontario Disability Support Program

- The process of applying to ODSP needs to be much more respectful of the accommodation needs of people who have a developmental disability. This includes ODSP staff training about developmental disabilities, the use of plain language when providing information to applicants and in the application forms, and ensuring that examples provided in the forms reflect the situation of people with intellectual disabilities.
- The process of communicating the nature and outcome of the application and appeal procedures must become easier to understand and more transparent.

It's time to re-think the role of employment, training and employment supports

In recent years, the potential for assistance in training and employment supports has significantly shrunk for people labeled with developmental disabilities. This trend is opposite from what the people we work with tell us is needed; most of them, both those who may be deemed 'job ready' and those who may not be deemed ready yet, want to be involved in productive enterprise. Ideally, they want a paid job.

Currently, there is no money for training programs for people on ODSP; instead, it appears that all programs are exclusive to people on Ontario Works. Indeed, in the coming years as Canada faces labour shortages, more economists and policy makers are urging employers and policymakers to consider what may be needed to employ more people with disabilities and to build in appropriate supports, including the option of part-time work. We believe that publicly provided training supports are an essential part of this approach and we urge you to re-think this aspect of public policy and programs.

We also want to ensure that there are training and job supports for all people on ODSP. The current focus is on job retention for people who are job ready. We want to see the re-introduction of job supports for people and retraining for people who are not yet 'job ready' but want to become prepared.

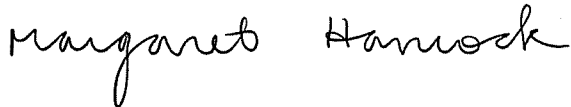
We're urging you to commit to a broader review of social assistance

As you finalize your recommendations to the Minister of Community and Social Services, we urge you to put forth a broad vision for improving the lives of individuals and families who face marginality daily and who are seeking to live in conditions of dignity, decency and independence.

Family Service Toronto serves more than 63,000 individuals and families in the city every year. Most of our clients are vulnerable and marginalized. We therefore have a wealth of first-hand knowledge of the challenges faced by individuals who use social assistance. We have additional suggestions regarding the delivery of services and the financial status of people who must rely on ODSP and we look forward to the opportunity to share those with you as part of the upcoming review of social assistance.

Thank you and your committee members for considering these reflections and suggestions and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret Hancock". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Margaret Hancock, Executive Director

Cc: Ana Vicente - Director, Building Inclusive Communities
Kacper Kalin - Clinical Manager, Options