



SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REFORM: SIX POINT PLAN FOR ACTION ON POVERTY ERADICATION

The new Premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne, has just declared that she would like to be known as the "social justice premier." She lends hope that serious consideration will be given to the recommendations outlined in the report, "Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario," of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. On March 8th, 2013, cross-community partners in Poverty Free Ontario (PFO) convened in Toronto and discussed a good faith start to a social justice agenda. A Six Point Plan for a Social Justice Agenda was developed. Premier Wynne is urged to incorporate these six measures into the upcoming provincial budget. These are six practical, achievable steps that will positively impact the lives of Ontarians living in poverty. I wish to share this six-point plan with you as Halton continues to work for poverty alleviation.

Joey Edwardh

A Good Faith Start to a Social Justice Agenda

Since assuming leadership of the Ontario Government, Premier Kathleen Wynne has not been very specific about her social justice agenda. The Throne Speech in March included only a few brief references to affordable housing and several recommendations from the recent social assistance reform report by Commissioners Lankin

and Sheikh were mentioned. Besides generally referring to an interest in helping social assistance recipients move into employment, the only specific recommendation that the Premier has suggested she would act on is the \$200 per month earnings exemption for working social assistance recipients before the claw back on earnings would be implemented.

Neither NDP nor Progressive Conservative opposition party leaders have shown any greater interest in serious social justice action to this point. PC leader Tim Hudak's policy proposals harken back to the worst visions of workfare and punitive practices of the Mike Harris days. Andrea Horwath (NDP) has shown little inclination to go beyond the earnings exemption recommendation in her negotiation on the spring provincial budget with the Premier. Social justice for the most vulnerable is searching for a champion among our political leadership in Ontario.

It has been almost five years since the social assistance reform was announced as one of the cornerstones of the Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Such lengthy research, consultation and study were not required for an earnings exemption to be the only specific measure under consideration.

The budget being delivered in April offers an opportunity for the Kathleen Wynne to show “good faith” in her expressed intention to be the “social justice premier” for all Ontarians.

Still, more than 100 Poverty Free Ontario (PFO) leaders from more than 20 communities across Ontario came together in Toronto on March 8. They discussed and endorsed the following **Six Point Plan for a Social Justice Agenda**:

1. Increase the Basic Needs Allowance by \$100/month for Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) recipients as the first step towards adequacy in social assistance rates.
2. Index Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) rates, starting immediately, to keep up with the annual inflation rate.
3. Ensure that all increases to social assistance or changes arising from the proposed integration of the current programs do not lead to any reductions in basic needs and housing allowances for persons currently receiving Ontario Works and ODSP, or to cuts in benefits such as the Special Diet Allowance or the Disability Worker’s Benefit.

4. Introduce an earnings exemption for social assistance recipients with working hours so that a 50% claw back on earnings does not apply on at least the first \$200/month earnings and preferably not on the first \$500.¹
5. Commit to the principle that the minimum wage should ensure a full time, full year worker earns an annual income 10% above the Ontario Income Poverty Line [LIM 50], and to an implementation plan that will achieve that goal.
6. Index the minimum wage immediately to keep up with the annual inflation rate.

1. It is fitting to footnote here that Commissioners Lankin and Sheikh’s recommendation for the \$200 earnings exemption in their report actually proposes that the clawback on additional earnings be increased from the current 50% to 57% — not indicated in the body of their report but in footnote #46 on page 73, reducing the benefit to recipients of even this minimal measure of reform.

Reference

Poverty Free Ontario's “Bulletin #11 – PFO’s Six Point Plan for Action on Poverty Eradication” can be found at <http://www.povertyfreeontario.ca>



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