

YWCA Toronto

Submission to the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario

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Advocacy | Employment & Skills Development | Girls' & Family Programs | Housing & Shelter

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I. INTRODUCTION

YWCA Toronto is an association by, for and about women and girls. Our programs promote equality, economic security and lives free from violence. We offer a range of housing options, employment and training programs, community support programs, girls' programs and family programs. We also engage in systemic advocacy.

YWCA Toronto primarily works with women and girls whose lives have been impacted by trauma and poverty. For a variety of reasons, including loss of employment, relationship breakdown and domestic abuse, many of the thousands of women and children we work with rely on social assistance at some point in their lives.

YWCA Toronto agrees that the current social assistance system generally fails to provide meaningful support to individuals and families struggling to make ends meet and gain greater security and improved well-being. Further, the YWCA is concerned that the social assistance system fails to support or integrate with other systems and strategies to support Ontarians and improve the short and long-term economic prosperity of the province.

We are pleased that the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario has been established and is seeking the insight and advice of a diversity of Ontarians. As part of the YWCA's process of preparing this submission, we consulted our frontline staff and more than fifty clients.

II. WHY GENDER MATTERS

Often policy is developed without sufficient attention to the ways in which policy impacts different people differently. Further, there is often a failure to appreciate that to achieve the desired policy outcomes, differentiated approaches and treatment may be required. Using a "gender lens" means paying attention to the ways in which different policy options: i) reduce or deepen women's equality and ii) respond to and impact women's real lives. In the case of social assistance policy, the ways in which social assistance policy should respond to the realities of women's roles as the primary caregivers of children and women's experiences of violence need to be carefully examined.

III. EMPLOYMENT

Currently, social assistance requires people to take the shortest route to employment and generally enforces participation agreements with minimal flexibility or sensitivity to the challenges some may face in fulfilling the agreements. However, it is the belief of the YWCA that it is better for the individuals involved – and, in the long-term, for the provincial purse – to support social assistance recipients' efforts to identify and pursue suitable and sustainable employment.

YWCA Toronto offers a diversity of employment programs, including one for women receiving Ontario Works and another for women who have experienced violence. There are a number of factors that we have found are important to creating effective and accessible employment services.

a) Assessment

Our experience demonstrates that high-quality assessment of clients' skills, interests and needs is critical to ensuring clients access relevant employment supports. Attached to this submission is the assessment tool developed by the YWCA.

We believe that an assessment tool used by OW and ODSP should examine what are suitable employment goals and participation requirements for each individual client. Child rearing responsibilities, for example, should be considered.

Presently, it is often the case that the emphasis on finding the shortest route to employment is blinding. As one YWCA client explained, "My worker wanted me to take a night job. She didn't take the time to listen to the realities of my family life. I can't work nights because I have two small children. But my worker doesn't seem to care about that small little detail of my life. She just wants me off welfare – even if it means my kids suffer."

b) Pre-employment programs

The YWCA has found that many clients facing multiple barriers require access to pre-employment programs. For some, such pre-employment programs may focus on healing from violence and building the necessary confidence and capacity to move towards paid employment. For others, pre-employment programs may focus on developing basic employment readiness skills or literacy skills. If the assessment of clients' needs is done well, the suitable pre-employment program can be identified and barriers can be diminished.

A YWCA client who has experienced violence explained, "I needed time and help to build up my strength. After years of being told I was a piece of garbage, I believed I was. There was no way I could have sat through a job interview. But now that I've done this [pre-employment program] I actually feel like I might be able to do something with my life."

c) Support and planning

The YWCA has found that clients are more likely to succeed when staff work with clients to develop realistic and suitable employment plans. Critically, we have also found that clients are more likely to follow their plan when they have easy access to a single staff person who is responsible for providing ongoing support. As one YWCA client put it, "I can never reach my OW worker. But now that I can talk regularly with my counsellor at the YWCA I have a plan that works for me. And my counsellor helps me deal with problems as they come up. My life is complicated and I need that help."

The YWCA has also found that for many clients facing multiple barriers access to a single caseworker who has sufficient training to provide broad support and make a wide range of referrals is enormously effective. Indeed, many of the women we work with require assistance not just with employment – but also securing child care, housing, counselling and medical help. While there are some OW workers who seem to have a high level of training and are deeply committed to supporting their clients, the OW culture tends to be one marked primarily by surveillance and punishment.

d) High quality training and education

The YWCA believes that access to high-quality training and education is critical to supporting people who are trying to find suitable and sustainable employment. The YWCA believes there should be greater access to college and university programs for people on social assistance, as well as high-quality community-based programs.

The YWCA also believes more resources should be devoted to developing apprentice programs in the skilled trades. We have run highly successful apprentice programs in collaboration with George Brown College. However, these programs, to date, are very small and their potential has not been fully realized.

e) Participation agreements

The goal of participation agreements should be to support the implementation of the client's individualized plan. In addition to outlining the client's goals and her action plan, they should also indicate what resources and support will be made available by social assistance.

Further, participation agreements must be flexible and responsive. They need to reflect the realities of clients' lives. At present, they generally do not. As a YWCA client explained, "That [participation] agreement is really about finding a way to cut you off. My kid got sick. I had to leave my already very unstable part-time job to get [my daughter] at school. She was really sick and so I couldn't work for a number of days. I wasn't surprised when I got fired. But I was really mad when I got cut off OW because I got fired. What was I supposed to do? Leave my feverish 7-year old at home alone? Or should I have just called CAS myself and asked them to take care of my kid? This system is so crazy. It makes getting ahead impossible. It makes most days impossible."

f) Working with employers

YWCA Toronto has successfully cultivated scores of relationships with employers, many of which are long-term. Critical to this success is spending sufficient time to really understand employers' needs, ensuring the employees we refer are fully suitable and well-trained for the position and providing ongoing support to the employee.

We have also found that wage-subsidies are an important incentive for employers. We encourage the Commission to examine the potential impact of enriching existing wage subsidy programs.

IV. BENEFIT LEVELS AND APPROPRIATE BENEFIT STRUCTURE

a) Adequacy

"I just can't make it on this amount of money," said a YWCA client with one child. "I know I am supposed to report gift and gift cards, but I can't. I get gift cards from my church which is what feeds me and my child. If I didn't get those cards, I don't know what we'd do."

“The desperately low benefit levels are dangerous and counter-productive to the emphasis on getting people back to work,” reported a YWCA staff person. “We have found that if we don’t provide food at our training sessions people just can’t focus....And it is so frustrating that women have to spend so much time figuring out how to scrape by when they have so much potential to learn, grow and work. So much of that potential is wasted – and for what?”

YWCA clients and staff have reported for years that the very low benefit levels are a primary obstacle to women achieving success – let alone maintaining a reasonable standard of living.

YWCA Toronto believes that social assistance rates need to be increased. The benefit levels should be established using a tool that captures the real costs of living.

b) Benefit structure

YWCA Toronto agrees that the Ontario Child Benefit was an important policy innovation. Further, we believe a housing benefit is worth further exploration.

That said, we are concerned that there are issues related to delivering benefits through the tax system that require further examination. We are particularly concerned with how family law and tax law will be reconciled when defining spousal relationships, as well as how a fair and transparent appeal process will be established and implemented.

c) Assets and income rules

As the Commission’s discussion paper notes, concerns have been expressed that the current asset rules often deepen and extend recipients’ poverty. The YWCA believes that asset rules should be amended to allow recipients greater security and opportunity to climb out of poverty more quickly.

The YWCA also believes income rules should be amended to clearly exempt gifts under a set value such as \$100 per person in the benefit unit per month.

V. EASIER TO UNDERSTAND

The YWCA agrees that the 800+ rules make the social assistance system very complicated and hard to understand. However, we are even more concerned that the complex rules are indicative of the purpose of the current social assistance system, which in our view, is primarily to disqualify people from receiving social assistance.

The YWCA believes the goals of social assistance should be clearly articulated and simple rules should flow from those goals.

The YWCA believes the goals of social assistance should be rooted in the principle of poverty reduction and should largely be focused on providing people with relevant and suitable support to improve their access to opportunity, income security and well-being.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, YWCA Toronto believes that many of the important issues were captured in the Commission's discussion paper. However, we are concerned that there has not been sufficient examination of the current goals of social assistance and the urgent need to clarify those goals as a primary part of the social assistance review.

Social assistance reform should be guided by the principles and commitments made in the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Act, including:

- creating access to real opportunities
- treating people with dignity and respect
- promoting social inclusion
- advancing equity by acknowledging the differential impact of poverty on equity-seeking groups.

Finally, while the YWCA appreciates the limited mandate of the Commission, we feel it is essential the Commission's recommendations acknowledge the important relationship between social assistance policy and labour market policy.

After many years of discussion and advocacy by a diversity of stakeholders, poverty has moved up on the policy agenda, and with it the need for social assistance reform. While being fiercely pragmatic, the Commission must also be bold and visionary.