

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD on Social Assistance!

The Ontario Government has committed to create a comprehensive Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario by the end of 2008, complete with specific targets and timelines.

A Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction, chaired by Minister Deb Matthews, is developing the Strategy. More info is at

www.premier.gov.on.ca/team/committee.asp?Team=15.

The Government's consultations on Poverty Reduction have begun.

- Minister Matthews is holding round-table consultations in 13 cities: Peterborough, Cobourg, Ottawa, Kingston, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Windsor, London, Kitchener-Waterloo, Durham, Peel, Hamilton, and Toronto. The meetings began on Monday, May 5 and will continue until the end of June;
- MPPs are expected to hold meetings in their own ridings; and,
- People can contribute their own ideas in writing, either through the government's website at www.growingstronger.ca, or by fax or regular mail.

When you attend a consultation meeting or send in your ideas, tell the government that the following changes should be made to help people who rely on social assistance:

Income support programs must be made consistent with a Poverty Reduction framework.

- **Government must hear this important message.**
- For too long, Social Assistance in Ontario has been focused on the shortest route to employment, instead of providing the supports and services that people need.
- Ontario Works (OW) should provide an opportunity to ensure that people leave the program better off than when they came on in the first place.
- And access to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) should be expanded so that people who can't work receive the support they desperately need.
- Social assistance supports should be tailored to the needs and challenges of the people who need assistance – so these programs should respond to the reality of who is on assistance, and why.
- **Within the framework of Poverty Reduction, government must:**

a) Increase incomes for people on social assistance.

- OW and ODSP rates are so low that most people can't even cover basic necessities, like rent and food.
- Even with much-needed recent increases, people on OW are 40% below 1995 income levels, and people on ODSP still suffer from 10 years with no increases.
- A Poverty Reduction Strategy must include a plan to restore the income that people on social assistance have lost.
- And it must also include a plan to protect income levels so that people on assistance don't continue to fall behind – through policies like indexing incomes to inflation or creating a Social Assistance Rate Board for income oversight.

b) Refocus program rules to support Poverty Reduction:

- In 2004, Minister Deb Matthews issued a report that identified over 800 destructive and punitive rules in the Ontario Works and ODSP systems – rules that are counter-productive to helping people out of poverty.
- Reforms must address rules that punish constructive and rational behaviour, like sharing accommodation, and rules that intentionally impoverish people, like extreme asset stripping.
- Some reforms have been undertaken, but much more work is needed.

c) Make the Ontario Child Benefit do more for people on social assistance.

- The Ontario Child Benefit was put in place specifically to help lift children and their families out of poverty.
- But families on social assistance will not receive the full benefit of the OCB. This is because OW and ODSP rates are being restructured at the same time that the OCB becomes a monthly benefit.
- All children should benefit equally from the OCB – no matter if their parents' income comes from work or from social assistance.
- And the full amount of the OCB should be available to families now – not gradually phased in between now and 2011, as the government is planning.
- More info is at: www.incomesecurity.org/campaigns/OntarioChildBenefit2008.html.

d) Reinstate the Back-to-School and Winter Clothing allowances.

- We must not take down existing bridges before the new ones are fully built.
- Government is “rolling in” these allowances in the Ontario Child Benefit.
- Families on social assistance won't be able to save for these high cost expenses.
- More info is at: www.incomesecurity.org/campaigns/OntarioChildBenefit2008.html.

e) Help people on social assistance afford the rising costs of energy.

- Rising energy costs have an impact on all Ontarians, but low-income households are hit hardest.
- Comprehensive action – including both conservation and energy affordability programs – must be taken to support low-income consumers of energy.
- More info is at: www.lowincomeenergy.ca.