

Helping Us Move Forward: Submission to the Social Assistance Review Commission from the People's Blueprint

"When I went on social assistance people started looking down on me, avoiding me. I wasn't included in a lot of things, mostly because I couldn't afford them."
People's Blueprint project interview

There is stigma associated with poverty. Stigma associated with social assistance makes it even worse.

People receiving social assistance have hopes and dreams for themselves, their children and their community. They want to work, be productive and contribute. In fact, in spite of the odds against them, many are already doing so in many different ways.

People receiving social assistance are gifted writers, thinkers and analysts. They are strong project managers. They are compassionate and empathetic interviewers and peer support workers. Some already have formal accreditation and degrees and are former attorneys, dentists, communications managers and scientists.

Many want to turn their own lived experience and knowledge into an asset by working to help others. Ultimately, people want to live as independently as possible given their circumstances.

Yet the day-to-day stigma created by poverty comes in different forms that create serious barriers to these hopes and dreams. Stigma is internal and external. You can't fix your teeth, you can't fix broken appliances or furniture in your home, you can't participate in family functions, you can't afford food from a grocery store. Children are teased if their parents can't provide nice clothes for them or pay for school excursions or sports. People feel like a burden to friends, family, or potential partners. For those dealing with addiction, there is the stigma of dealing with substance abuse on top of poverty and need for financial assistance.

Stigma in relation to social assistance begins with a visit to the welfare office, which gives one the impression of going to jail. There are glass partitions, no privacy, and chaos and mayhem. The form letters people receive also add to the stigma as it usually means they're about to tell you something is wrong and they may cut off your money.

Rules around receiving social assistance that contradict societal values create stigma. It is normally ok to get help from others, or be in a committed relationship and move in with a significant other.

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Yet rules of social assistance penalize people for getting assistance from friends or family, and reduce much needed income when entering a relationship and deciding to live with somebody. Social assistance should not contribute to the stigma of poverty, it should help alleviate it. Social assistance should not be seen as a last resort. It should be seen as a bridge.

A vision of a new non-stigmatizing system

A new system needs to:

- Recognize and support people making headway in getting back on their feet.
- Challenge the stigma of welfare as a whole. A new system should educate the public on the realities of poverty and the reasons people need social assistance, and challenge the language that stigmatize people receiving it.
- Focus on income security, enabling people to save money and reduce clawbacks as well as receive help from friends or family.
- Be realistic and accommodate what it costs people to live in order to cover necessities.
- Acknowledge that being able to afford the cost of living is a requirement for dignity.
- Enable caseworkers to have a mutually healthy, trusting and stable relationship with their clients as well as counsel them and be held accountable to them.
- Be more individualized, not discriminate and encourage people to advocate for themselves.
- Ease the transition from income support to financial independence.

Helping people rise out of poverty: training, education and employment

Clawbacks on earned income is a major barrier. The ODSP and OW systems on their own don't help people escape poverty. People on ODSP on OW barely survive from payment to payment. The system should facilitate, as much as possible, getting extra income from employment. People would like to see the system help them make the transition to work, such as by maintaining benefits until you get back on your feet, which doesn't necessarily happen right away.

When people on ODSP find a job, they shouldn't lose their benefits. Many people with disabilities still need extra financial support whether they have a job or not. Having a job doesn't eliminate someone's physical, mental (and sometimes invisible) disability. Therefore, social assistance should be more individualized to take into account people's strengths and areas of needed support.

People need adequate training programs that help them find the jobs they want. The designing of employment or education programs also has to look at the bigger picture, as well as more carefully consider those who are providing employment.

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There should also be an expansion on programs that address the need to take individual circumstances into consideration when supporting people into education and employment.

There are many in the province who spoke about their desire to work with their peers as counselors, system navigators, and caseworkers, which would demonstrate the possibility of upward mobility, and would keep staff with academic credentials, but not necessarily lived experience, aware of not only the realities of poverty but also the potential of the recipients. There is also a realistic awareness that business is not likely to hire people with gaps in their mouth from lack of dental care, or large gaps in their resumes. However, if they were a part of the system as workers, former clients could lead by example and show the benefits and possibilities work provides.

People want to further themselves through higher education, and not denied getting this education due to restrictions around receiving the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and receiving social assistance. Education is expensive. Social assistance programs should give money to people who are trying to get into university or college, so that when they graduate, they can get a career. This is important because many jobs are impossible to get without a university degree or college degree/diploma. For those with foreign credentials, there should be assistance with re-certification.

The system needs to constantly consider the labour market overall in providing training and education programs and be flexible in order to correspond to what's currently in demand. There appears to be a serious lack of communication between social assistance services and the current economic climate, and what is considered a "good" job needs to be redefined. A good job should not just be "any" job.

There needs to be clear communication of programs that are *already* available, and what those programs are designed for. There should be support for paid internships and pre-employment programs that are organized for success so people can "win". These programs should also be flexible enough to be individualized and understanding of an individuals' circumstances and barriers which may include physical or mental disabilities, addictions, transportation, or childcare.

The system needs to find employers who are willing to accommodate disabilities. Also, there are those who are seeking work who need assistance themselves to understand how best to accommodate their disability for the job that they are working at.

Help those with criminal backgrounds in getting a pardon so they can enter the work force. Getting a pardon costs money which not everyone has.

All sectors of society need to be involved. Non-profits, the private sector/businesses/corporations, the government and the community have to work together to provide supports and opportunities.

Low cost loans for start-up of small businesses catering to the community would also be helpful. People have amazing ideas, ability and talent but just need help to start.

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Be realistic with how much money it takes to survive

Rent is expensive, food is expensive and transportation is expensive. Social assistance payments are not enough to get by. Having enough income to survive is about human rights. Human rights refer not only to how we treat other but also includes a basic level of income so individuals can participate in their community. Help people get more money to eat now or pay much more in health costs later.

Allow people who depend on social assistance to save for the future so they can get out of poverty.

Government and non-profit organizations have to acknowledge and accommodate access to transportation as part of enabling everyone to fully participate in their community. Provide access to transportation for everyone, as this will to assist people find work.

Stop making me feel bad for needing assistance

Acknowledge the importance of the relationship between the caseworker and person receiving assistance. There needs to be a shift from monitoring to supporting clients if progress is going to be made. There also needs to be improvement with the attitudinal behaviours in regards to how clients are treated at all points in the system, from the organizational level to the front line support and administrative level. The shame and intimidation people feel already is strong; this should not be made worse by the system.

It is important for people have someone to talk to, and that there is someone who can help people find a clear path to get to their goals.

It is very important for the caseworker to establish a trust with the client, when that happens the real benefits begin. This involves trying to see who clients are and the type of needs they have as well as find out more of their likes, goals and talents. This also involves sharing more information on what social services has to offer.

Help us find housing that is affordable and safe

The cost of housing is a huge barrier for those living in poverty and trying to escape it. But there are other issues that are important to address in addition to just cost .The money from social assistance does not provide what is necessary to live in a clean, safe environment.

People are living in housing that is unsafe, with no security, and in poor physical condition, which affects or exacerbates mental health issues. Housing that is not near essential services and separate from the wider community lead to segregation, isolation and stigma. Housing that is not letting people get ahead, preventing them from furthering education and employment opportunities, and not knowing where they would be in the future. This is especially an issue for those living in rent-g geared-to-income (RGI) housing. People living in RGI housing are in danger of not being able to afford their housing if they find work due to rules that would simultaneously increase their rent while reducing their income.

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There is also concern about how housing, social or supportive housing in particular, creates barriers for people with physical disabilities. These barriers include the fact that couples with disabilities cannot afford to live together because they would lose ODSP benefits if they do and also lose attendant care. However, the amount of money they are left with, is not enough to live on without the ODSP benefits.

People need affordable, accessible housing, and more choice in regards to where they want to live.

People need housing that is integrative, offers choice and flexibility, and provides a sense of community and a social network.

Learn more

To find out more about how social assistance affects people and what needs to be changed, visit the People's Blueprint website at <http://peoplesblueprint.ca/>. Also keep asking people with lived experience how programs and policies affect them, and develop policy with their help.