

Submission to Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs (SCFEA) from the Hamilton Social Work Action Committee

Introduction

We are a Committee of Social Workers formed in 1997, after a PC Government cut 21.6% from social assistance rates. Since then, we have advocated for recipients who are trying to survive on inadequate incomes. A woman in her 30s told us recently that her single parent mother had been able to keep the family together until that drastic reduction, but was forced to place the children in foster care and the family was never reunited.

Many families were broken up at that time: the Children's Aid Society in London found that 82% of the children in care came from homes with single mothers on social assistance. Since then the very small cost-of-living raises to social assistance have not kept up with inflation. This year, for the first time since 2003, there has been no increase to the rates, and people trying to live on social assistance are in **crisis**.

We are asking members to urge the Province to make a substantial increase to social assistance rates, to compensate for giving no increase in 2019, a year of unusually high food prices in Ontario.

Inflation with no government response last year has led to a crisis for Ontarians dependent on social assistance

Food prices increased by 7.6% in 2019: this was the biggest annual increase in a decade (Report by Toronto Medical Officer of Health to Toronto Board of Health, October 16, 2019)

The effects of inflation on people dependent on social assistance have been ignored by the government: after a 1.5% raise to social assistance in Sept. 2018, they have given no cost-of-living increase related to the inflation in 2019.

The hardships of people who depend on social assistance in Hamilton are shown by the 2019 annual report on the cost of a *Nutritious Food Basket* by Hamilton's Public Health Services. It is available on the Internet as: "How much does healthy eating cost?"

Single recipients of *Ontario Works* are worst off: after paying an average monthly rent for a bachelor apartment, they are \$236 short of being able to afford a *Nutritious Food Basket*, as calculated by *Public Health Services*. There was a deficit in 2018, but it was only \$101 per month. Their situation this year has escalated into a **crisis**.

Robert, in his early 60s, was able to find precarious work until the past few years, but is now dependent on *Ontario Works*. His comment on the situation this year was, "I have never been this poor." The constant downward trend since the big drop in 1995 is shown on a chart attached to this submission.

Government unresponsive to Advocacy

As an advocacy group, we have approached the Ministry of Community & Social Services (MCSS) with letters, and attendance at Queen's Park, urging them to respond to the growing gap between social assistance and the cost of living.

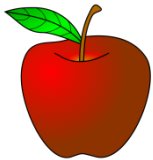
We have sent almost 1,000 letters, like the one attached, in batches of 60 to 80, signed by people with lived experience and their supporters, to the two consecutive Ministers of Community & Social Services—630 to Min. Lisa MacLeod and 361 to Min. Todd Smith. The Ministry's only response to the batches of letters was one under each Minister, written by a civil servant. Their responses did not really address our concerns, e.g. they spoke about having given a raise in 2018, with no mention of 2019.

We visited the Ontario Legislature on Dec. 5, 2019 when MPP Monique Taylor asked Min. Todd Smith about the lack of increase in 2019. In responding he incorrectly said, "Our government already increased rates by 1.5% to those on social assistance earlier this year" (reported in Hansard for Dec. 5, 2019). There was no increase in 2019.

We appeal to your Committee to pressure the government to make social assistance rates consistent with inflation. Otherwise our poorest citizens will keep falling further behind in meeting their basic needs for food and shelter.

Thank you for your attention to this **crisis**,

Sally Palmer, Chair, Hamilton Social Work Action Committee



HEALTHY FOOD INACCESSIBLE FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS

Date: _____

To the Honorable Todd Smith,

As an advocate for people trying to live on Ontario's present rates of social assistance, I am looking forward to seeing private members Bill 60—An Act to amend the Ministry of Community and Social Services Act to establish the Social Assistance Research Commission—being moved through the Legislature. Support for Bill 60 is recommended by the Toronto Medical Officer of Health (MOH) in her October 2019 Report to the Toronto Board of Health (BOH).

I am disappointed that the government gave no cost-of-living raise to social assistance in 2019. This is harsh, when the cost of nutritious food (defined by Public Health Units) has increased by 7.6% over the past year. The buying power of Ontario's social assistance has been continuously dropping since the drastic cut of 21.6% in 1995 by a previous PC Government. The Chart (on reverse side) makes it clear that this cut has had a long-lasting effect on people trying to survive on social assistance.

Annual *Nutritious Food Basket (NFB)* reports from Ontario's Public Health Units show that social assistance recipients cannot afford a healthy diet. In Toronto, recipients with no dependents receive only \$810/mo. from *Ontario Works (OW)*, including supplements. The 2019 *NFB* Report shows that an average bachelor apartment costs \$1,089/mo. and a *NFB* costs \$307.13/mo., leaving recipients \$571.13 short of being able to access a nutritious diet, aside from other necessities. Research shows low incomes are associated with higher costs to communities for health care, policing, and incarceration.

We are also concerned that the government is planning to change the present *definition of disability* to make it more restrictive. People with disabilities deserve our consideration, as they have limited access to well-paying jobs. We are discouraging them further by giving them a benefit that does not consider inflation.

I am asking your government to give an annual cost of living raise to social assistance--there was **none** in 2019, for the first time in 16 years; and to reconsider your plans to shrink the Ont. Disability Support Program. Thank you for your attention to these requests.

Name: PLEASE PRINT _____

Address: _____

Street number & name

City & Postal Code

Ontario Works and ODSP Rates, Adjusted for Inflation -- 1993 to 2017

1993=100

Note: Fall 2016 OW increase reflects \$25 increase in the minimum single benefit (3.67%) not the 1.5% general increase)

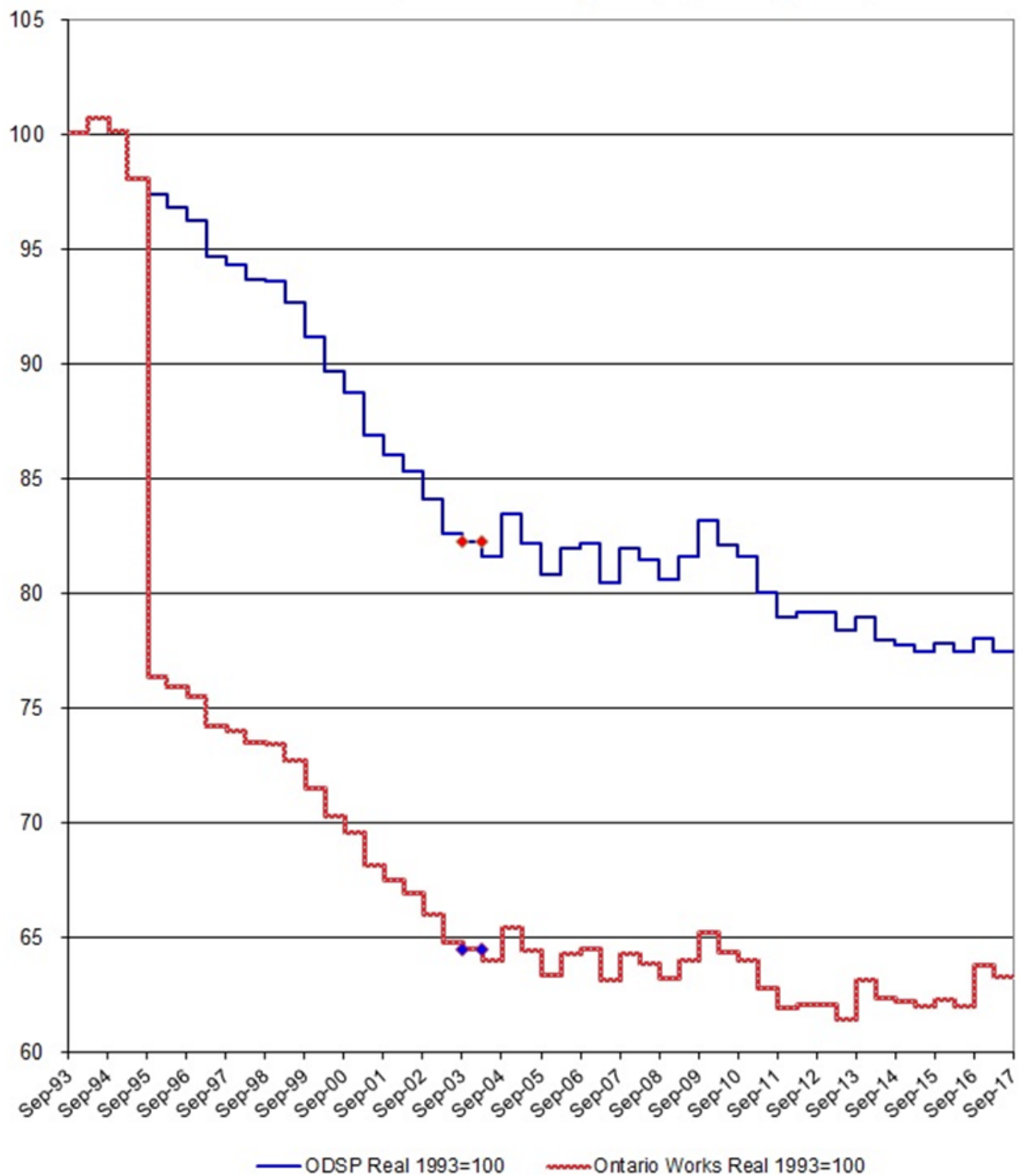


Chart by Hugh McKenzie, Research Associate, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives