



Fairlawn Avenue United Church

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“But let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” Amos 5/24

Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario
2 Bloor St W., Ste. 400
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 3E2

August 30, 2011

Attention: Hon Frances Lankin PC and Dr Munir A. Sheikh

Dear Ms. Lankin and Dr. Sheikh:

I am writing on behalf of the Social Justice Team at Fairlawn Avenue United Church to provide input for your Commission.

For us, social justice is an integral part of our faith, as central as prayer and worship. Through every century we have spoken for those whose voices are muted. This submission is consistent with our faith traditions and our hope for a just future for all the citizens of our society.

As background, I should let you know that our church as a whole is highly supportive of the work that you are doing. As a direct result of amalgamation with St. James Bond United Church and the resulting sale of church property, Fairlawn Avenue United Church contributed \$1.5 million to the construction of 40 Oaks, a project of the Christian Resource Centre (CRC) in Regent Park. This \$20 million project, scheduled for completion in December of this year, will contain 87 units of deeply affordable housing and a Community Hub. Several members of our Fairlawn congregation serve on the CRC board and volunteer in other capacities in the Centre.

In addition, Fairlawn passed the following resolution at our Annual General Meeting in March of 2010...”the congregation urges the Ontario Government to ensure that the Social Assistance Review, announced in December of 2009, is completed within 18 months of that date and that its recommendations are acted upon in a timely manner.”

And we will present a motion for a resolution at Fairlawn’s Semi-Annual Meeting this September in support of the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement.

We would like to make three points with you as forcefully as we can:

1) Fix Social Assistance Rates

You know the numbers. They have been out of whack since they were dropped by 22% in 1995. In addition, they have not been increased from even that low level to keep pace with the cost of living. The current rate of \$612 for a single adult is a travesty. This is about 40% of the Poverty Line (LIM). Some members of our church work with those involved in the Drop-In Centre at CRC, many of whom receive OW and ODSP and we see their struggles. There is no way anyone can live on this amount in Toronto. Those who have filled out the Do the Math program will know this. Rent alone can chew up the entire amount. That is why so many depend on food banks and drop-ins and other “band aid” solutions. This is not good.

We need to fix this. The Nordic countries have. They have poverty rates of 6-7% while Ontario's is still running at 13%. Closer to home Newfoundland has made great progress lately. The rate for a single mother with one child lifts them both out of poverty. In 2009, for a lone parent with one child, Newfoundland provided \$2,218 more in basic assistance and benefits than did Ontario.

Ontario should lead the way for the rest of the country. The Commission needs to lead the way for Ontario by making a bold recommendation on this in its June 2012 Report.

At a minimum, we ask that you recommend the government end “deep poverty” by getting the rates up to 80% of the LIM Poverty Line Measure (with a built in adjustment for inflation) and make the “clawbacks” on payments that happen when people start to earn money much less of a disincentive.

I'm sure you will hear many stories of hardship in the submissions you receive. I want to share one from the book *Persistent Poverty!* that illustrates what we think are backward and unfair policies that keep people down instead of lifting them out of poverty.

Gladys, according to the book, is a single mother of three who had escaped an abusive relationship, applied for Ontario Works and received subsidized housing as a result. The book relates that she was unable to work full time as her youngest was in school half-days and she could not afford child care. “Gladys found a part-time job that would bring in an extra \$700 per month. She was surprised to learn that Ontario Works would deduct 50% of her earned wages from her next month's social assistance cheque.” Page 27. Gladys calculated that she would actually lose money each month paying for child care and transportation. Clearly this doesn't work!

2) Get started now by implementing the \$100 Healthy Food Supplement immediately.

It is a small amount to be sure, but it is a step in the right direction and sends the right message.

3) Send a message that the minimum wage needs to go up

We know that you consider this outside your mandate, but we think that it is worth noting somewhere in your report. Some of the people we meet at CRC have told us that even if

they worked full time at a minimum wage job they would still end up below the poverty line. This should be changed. The government did a good job raising the minimum wage by three increments of 75 cents over three years to bring it to its current level of \$10.25 in 2010. There should be another set of three annual increases of 75 cents beginning in 2012 to bring it to \$12.50 per hour in 2014. And the minimum wage should be indexed to the rate of inflation thereafter. This would encourage people to find employment, get off the social assistance system and in fact, spend those extra earnings, which of course would benefit the economy.

How do we pay for all this?

Our recommendations will cost the taxpayers money. We are already running a deficit in this province and increasing that deficit just puts a tax on future taxpayers. Barring the possibility of finding other savings, we realize that we as taxpayers need to pay for it now. We think it is worth it. A society with less poverty is a better society for all. This is well documented in *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson. We on the Social Justice Team at Fairlawn at least are prepared to pay our part. For example, if the 2010 provincial personal tax reduction from 6.05% to 5.05% was rolled back, this could save an estimated \$1.3B in revenue per year. This would more than pay for the Healthy Food Supplement (estimated at \$700million/yr at current rolls).

We are willing to put our money where our mouth is. We believe a majority of Ontarians would feel the same when they understand the poverty issue and its consequences for their own lives.

Finally, a word about the timing of your report and a request for you.

As you know, there is an election in Ontario this October. There is no better time to raise these issues with all candidates. It would be greatly helpful to groups such as ours who will be visiting candidates personally and inviting them to all-candidates' meetings at our church if there was an interim report or letter from your Commission. We could then point to this and ask the candidates... "What is your position on this? What would you do if elected?"

Thank you for the fine work you are doing and for your careful consideration of our requests.

Yours sincerely,

Original signed

Rosemary Pryde, Chair
Social Justice Team
Fairlawn Avenue United Church

¹ Persistent Poverty; Jamie Swift, Brice Balmer & Mira Dineen, 2010; publ. *Between the Lines*