

Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

Mary Marrone

Jennefer Laidley

Income Security Advocacy Centre

Who is ISAC?

- “Income Security Advocacy Centre” – since 2001
- Part of community legal clinic system
- Work at provincial level to improve system for all
- Advance the interests and rights of low-income Ontarians around income security programs and employment
- Test-case litigation, policy advocacy, community organizing, public education
- Website: www.incomesecurity.org

Who are you #1?

- What is your interest in this issue?
 - I am on OW or ODSP and/or am a low-income worker
 - I provide services to low-income people in my community
 - I'm a benefit program administrator
 - Other

Who are you #2?

- What area of the province are you in?
 - GTA
 - North
 - Southwest
 - East

What we're covering today

- Income Security: A Roadmap for Change
 - What is it?
 - Who wrote it?
 - Why is it important?
 - What does it recommend that government do?
 - How would the recommendations make things better?
 - What can you do? Opportunities for action

Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

- Report released November 2, 2017
 - Ten-year plan to transform income security system in Ontario, including social assistance
- Three working groups – Minister asked for recommendations:
 - Income Security Reform Working Group: advocates (including Mary Marrone), policy experts, lived experience, program managers, private sector
 - First Nations Income Security Reform Working Group
 - Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security

Background: System hasn't kept up

- Income security system designed for workforce of the past: long-term good-paying jobs
 - Today: low-pay, part-time, temporary jobs more common, with no benefits and little security
- Many people have long-standing barriers to work and social inclusion because of:
 - Intergenerational trauma and poverty
 - History of colonialism
 - Systemic racism
 - Mental health and addiction issues

Background: Income support in Ontario

- Social Assistance programs
 - Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program in place since 1998
 - Goal was to make programs more difficult to access and more punitive, to “encourage” people into “first available job”
 - Deliberately inadequate
 - 22% benefit rate cut for OW
 - ~8 years of rate freeze for ODSP

Background...

- Eligibility Rules
 - A lot of surveillance – caseworker needs to know everything about you
 - e.g., where you live, who you live with, if your kids are in school...
 - Rigid and punitive – sanctions, not supports
 - e.g., frequent benefit suspensions – cheques get cut off for minor infractions
- Erosion of other programs (like EI, WSIB)
 - Means more people rely on social assistance

Background...

- Programs haven't changed much since 1990's
 - Law and policy framework “softened” and tweaked through small regulation changes
 - Most significant changes in last two years:
 - Increase in asset exemptions
 - Treatment of child support
- Limited supports for low-income working people
 - GST credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit (OTB)
 - Federal Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB)

Background...

- Child benefits: The only significant change
 - For both low-wage workers and people on OW / ODSP
 - Federal and provincial benefits
 - \$7,780 per child per year for kids under 6
 - \$6,780 per child per year for kids 6-17
 - Very good for families with children but don't help growing number of single working-age adults and couples without kids
 - Using tax system to deliver creates barriers

Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

- First report in 30 years to recommend major investment and improvements to programs that affect the lives of low-income people
- Fundamentally different approach that puts people and their needs & rights at the centre of the system
- Recognizes the differential impact of poverty on disadvantaged groups
 - Indigenous peoples, racialized people, people with disabilities and other marginalized communities

Vision for Ontario's Income Security System

All individuals are treated with respect and dignity and are inspired and equipped to reach their full potential. People have equitable access to a comprehensive and accountable system of income and in-kind support that provides an adequate level of financial assistance and promotes economic and social inclusion, with particular attention to the needs and experience of Indigenous peoples.

Future State – Where we want to get to



Guiding Principles

- Human rights-based equity lens
 - Particular attention to the needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples, racialized people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations

Guiding Principles

- Adequacy
- Rights
- Reconciliation
- Access to Services
- Promoting economic and social inclusion
- Equity and fairness
- Sustainability
- Respect and dignity

Key Action Areas

1. Achieving income adequacy
2. Engage the whole income security system
3. Transforming social assistance
4. Helping those in deepest poverty
5. Responding to unique concerns & needs of First Nations and Indigenous communities

Action Area 1: Income Adequacy

- Adopt definition of income adequacy and commit to achieve it over 10 years
 - Adequacy target should be the Low-Income Measure, plus 30% for people with disabilities (extra cost of living)
 - \$21,929 / year
 - \$28,507 / year for people with disabilities
 - Create a Made-in-Ontario market basket measure to track progress on adequacy

Action Area 2: Engaging the Income Security System

- Benefits for all low-income people in Ontario
 - Core health benefits
 - Drug, dental, vision and hearing
 - Portable housing benefit
 - To address gap between affordable rent and real costs
 - Working Income Tax Benefit
 - Work with federal government to improve access and amounts

Area 2: The Income Security System

- Benefits for all low-income people in Ontario
 - Child benefits
 - Protecting and improving benefits for children
 - Access to Justice
 - Investigate alternatives to CRA and Tax Court to resolve disputes around eligibility for tax-delivered benefits

Action Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Change the laws so that OW and ODSP will
 - Recognize long-term need and multiple barriers
 - Change role of caseworkers from welfare police to case collaborators
 - Promote social and economic inclusion
 - Maintain all rights of appeal of denial of benefits

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Move to culture of trust, collaboration & problem-solving
 - Comprehensive assessment using trauma-informed lens
 - Identify people's strengths, needs & barriers as early as possible
 - Develop support plan based on person's most immediate needs (e.g., housing, escaping unsafe environment, etc.)
 - Front-line workers support individual to create plans that reflect personal goals and promote autonomy

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Supporting persons with disabilities
 - Maintain and strengthen ODSP
 - Keep current definition of disability
 - Improve access:
 - Fairer application process with supports to apply
 - Better decision-making on who qualifies as a “person with a disability”

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Assured Income for persons with disabilities:
 - Co-design a new program with persons with disabilities
 - Move away from welfare model
 - Features:
 - Income tested
 - Stacking benefits
 - Tax based definition of income
 - Flexibility to adjust in-year income changes
 - Safe to move in and out of employment

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- First Nations-based approach
 - Goals should include promoting social inclusion and community engagement
 - Holistic approach to service delivery
 - Ensure physical, spiritual, mental, emotional well-being
 - Focus on well-being of the family and community as well as the individual
 - A range of services to address real needs for training and supports – literacy, mental health referrals, life stabilization, etc.

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- New Flat Rate Structure:
 - Collapse “basic needs” and “shelter” into one rate
 - E.g., single on OW gets \$337 basic needs and \$384 shelter (maximum) = \$721
 - Everyone gets full basic rate regardless of living situation or actual rent
 - Couples get a couple rate – with “spouse” defined by family law

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Benefit of Flat Rate Structure:
 - People who are homeless, in shelters or “board and lodge” would get full flat rate
 - Currently get less than basic rate amounts so would bring those who get lowest amounts up
 - Eliminates reporting on rent, where you live, who you live with, etc. – less surveillance and intrusion in your life
 - People on OW / ODSP in social housing get more money monthly, and more rent goes to municipal housing providers = better quality housing
 - Frees caseworker to help, not police

Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

Other recommendations:

- Change definition of spouse from 3 months of living together to 3 years (align with Ontario family law)
- Keep special purpose benefits until income adequacy is reached
 - E.g., Special Diet for various medical conditions
- Allow people to keep some of other benefits – progressively higher exemptions for EI and CPP-D
- Allow people to keep RRSP's and TFSA's

Action Area 4: Helping Those in Deepest Poverty

- Immediate increases to social assistance rates:
 - OW: 10% + 7% + 5% (i.e., over three years)
 - ODSP: 5% + 5% + 5% (i.e., over three years)
 - Move to flat rate structure with first year increase
 - Eliminates lower rate categories
 - Brings everyone up

Action Area 5: First Nations and Indigenous Peoples

- Recognize right of First Nations to design and deliver their own social programs – and take steps to get there
- Provide funding for benefits and administration in amounts that recognize the needs, realities and issues of First Nations communities

Area 5: First Nations and Indigenous Peoples

- Reforms must respond to the unique history, diversity and cultures of urban Indigenous and First Nations communities across the province
- Reforms must build on the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Recommendations and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Where it leads: Outcomes

- People have greater control over their own lives
 - Are able to meet their essential needs
 - Have improved sense of personal agency, respect and dignity
 - Are empowered and equipped to better achieve personal success, however they define it
- System is easier to use, connects people to supports and services, responds to diverse and changing needs
 - Front-line staff are empowered to make a positive difference in people's lives
- Greater social and economic inclusion

What's next?

- Government is looking for feedback until January 5, 2018
 - Lots of consultations over many years but...
 - Very important opportunity to push for positive action now
 - We have created tools you can use to give feedback
 - What you like, what you think is missing, what's most urgent for government to do right now
- Government will release its own “Income Security Strategy” in early 2018
 - Need to push them to get it right

What's next?

- 2018-2019 Budget
 - Last budget before election in June
 - Will demonstrate level of government's commitment to change
 - Anyone can make submissions to Minister of Finance

What's next?

- Provincial Election
 - On or before June 7, 2018
 - All parties need to state clearly where they stand
 - What is their position on income security in Ontario?
 - What will they do to help low-income people?
 - Will they adopt the Roadmap vision and recommendations?

Resources: To give feedback on the Roadmap

- Roadmap
 - Deadline for feedback January 5, 2018
 - Use our Backgrounder and Feedback Kit:
<http://incomesecurity.org/policy-advocacy/a-roadmap-for-change-tools-you-can-use-to-have-your-voice-heard/>
 - Feedback Kit includes:
 - Where to send your feedback
 - A “feedback form” for individuals to use
 - A template letter that organizations can adapt

Resources: Budget 2018-19

- Write to Minister of Finance
 - The Honourable Charles Sousa
c/o Budget Secretariat
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1Z1
 - Email: submissions@ontario.ca
 - Fax: 416-325-0969
- Minister's Roundtables
 - Haven't yet been scheduled – information is here:
 - <https://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/consultations/prebud/>

Resources: Election 2018

- Ways to engage all parties in the discussion
 - We will provide resources in the spring

Your turn!

- Questions and Discussion!