Discretionary Benefits: Investment to Promote Health, Dignity and Social Inclusion

Short-term dollar savings must not come at the expense of long-term social costs. In Hamilton and elsewhere, we can’t afford to lose Discretionary Benefits.

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Feature Project

This past January, I began to work with a group of fellow social work students at McMaster University on a project as a part of a social justice/social movements course.

Our advocacy-based project gave us the opportunity to connect with two key mentors in the community: Tom Cooper from the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and Laura Cattari from Advocacy Hamilton.

In looking at what direction to take our project, we decided to focus on discretionary benefits offered through Ontario Works, changes to these benefits and the impact of these changes on many Hamiltonians.

Background

In 2012, as part of the austerity budget, the provincial government cut and capped funding for two critical social assistance programs: Community Start
funding, individuals will potentially lose benefits and supports, which our working group believes would have devastating long-term, negative impacts on those who depend on these benefits.

It is difficult to quantify the impact of a reduction in these benefits; however, the Community Services Department of the City of Hamilton released a report [PDF] in 2012 with a cost analysis of the current benefits and potential impacts of reduced benefit levels.

This report indicated that a "...reduced level of benefits will result in significant health consequences or other hardships to the Hamilton residents currently eligible for these services".

Focus on the present, plan for the future

The overarching purpose of our work was initially to advocate for the reinstatement of provincial funding of discretion ary benefits for Ontario Works recipients.

Through advocacy and awareness building, we hope to continue to promote the need for more sustainable, long-term funding for health benefits and shift perspectives of these benefits from being 'discretionary', to necessary social investments.

While the focus remains on advocating for the provincial government to re-commit to funding these critical benefits, the City of Hamilton must remain leaders in Ontario and continue to implement strategies to maintain service levels.

Moving Forward

After reflecting on positive outcomes that had come as a result of community organizing and advocacy around the issue of CSUMB, Tom Cooper wrote: "It will be critical in the months to come to continue to impress upon the provincial government and those vying to become Premier that cutting critical social programs will result in huge costs to individuals and society".