June 4, 2012

Mr. Bob Bratina, Mayor
City of Hamilton
71 Main St. W.
Hamilton, ON
L8P 4Y5

Dear Mr. Mayor:

Thank you for the copy of your letter of May 24, 2012 to Premier McGuinty advising him of City Council’s approved Motion regarding the 2012 Proposed Provincial Budget and Changes to Discretionary Benefits.

I share the concerns of Hamilton City Council and agree that the provincial budget proposal to download the costs of discretionary benefits for Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program and Low Income Program recipients should be reversed. Our critic for Municipal Affairs raised this issue to the Premier in Question Period on Friday May 31st and I have enclosed a copy of the Hansard for your further information.

The Premier declined to answer the question and referred it to Minister of Community and Social Services. The response is less than satisfactory and provides no help nor accepts any responsibility for the significant financial burden this budget proposal places on municipalities throughout Ontario.

Sincerely,

Andrea Horwath, MPP
Hamilton Centre

c.c. Members of Council
SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Cindy Forster: My question is to the Premier. The community start-up and maintenance benefit provides emergency financial support to help families on social assistance to avoid homelessness. Your government cancelled this benefit in the recent budget. During Niagara Week discussions this week, we learned that this cancellation will in fact increase homelessness and it will increase the demand for homelessness and housing services. We already knew that in the Niagara region they are severely underfunded by this government with respect to meeting their current needs. Why is the government making cuts that will increase homelessness in Niagara and failing to give them enough money to deal with the people that need it?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: To the Minister of Community and Social Services.

Hon. John Milloy: I appreciate the question. I also appreciated the opportunity to meet with representatives from the region of Niagara during the week that they were here and to have a very good discussion about many of the innovative activities and actions that they're taking to reduce poverty and in fact to address the issue of homelessness.

The honourable member may be aware that we are in fact moving forward with the first phase of consolidation of a number of housing programs, most under my ministry, that are actually being transferred to MMAH as part of a long-term affordable housing strategy. It will give communities the opportunity to address issues of homelessness and those that are at risk of homelessness by giving them the flexibility to work outside the rules. As part of that, we are in the process of winding up the community start-up and maintenance benefit and transferring a portion of that money over as part of this new program.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): Supplementary.

Ms. Cindy Forster: Back to the Premier: In the recent budget, the government also put a $10 cap on the so-called discretionary benefits for social assistance recipients. These benefits help people with funerals, hearing aids, prosthetics, assistive devices, glasses, dentures, wheelchair batteries. The city of Hamilton has been forced to step forward to protect these benefits by investing 1.8 million of local taxpayer dollars to meet the needs of this program, and a $4-million cost for 2013. Why is the government cutting essential supports for people on social assistance and leaving our municipalities, which are cash-strapped already, with an impossible task of trying to meet the needs of these people?
Hon. John Milloy: There were some tough choices that we had to make in this budget, but the fact of the matter is, no party has a monopoly when it comes to compassion for those who are poor or those who are facing homelessness in this province.

I am proud of our record when it comes to poverty reduction. I've said in the House before that, during the recent election campaign, I went out for a debate on poverty, and it took me four tries to find the three sentences that the NDP had buried in their platform when it came to poverty.

The fact of the matter is, I am proud of the investments we have made in terms of affordable housing—the hundreds of millions of dollars. We have built more affordable housing than any other government. I correct myself, Mr. Speaker: the billions we've put into affordable housing.

I am proud of the efforts we have made in terms of the Ontario child benefit—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): The member from Hamilton East–Stoney Creek, come to order.

Hon. John Milloy: —in terms of the increases to social assistance, OW and ODSP—

The Speaker (Hon. Dave Levac): The Attorney General, come to order.

Hon. John Milloy: —to initiatives like full-day learning, creating the Healthy Smiles Ontario program and raising the minimum wage, and we are right now anxiously awaiting one of the most comprehensive reviews of social assistance in the history of this province.