Dear Madams and Sirs,

RE: The Social Assistance Rate Determination Act

We are writing to you today to ask for your support for an "evidence-based" system to determine social assistance rates under the Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Programs. Although rates have been increased by 2% in the most recent provincial budget, current social assistance rates remain arbitrary numbers - with no relation to the actual costs of goods in the various communities across Ontario. This untenable situation results in many individuals and families being unable to afford the high cost of rent and utilities. Families are accessing emergency food services in numbers not seen since the great depression.

Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program are vital - many individuals and families in our communities will always need to access them - whether for a short time or for longer periods. It is crucial that those who require assistance are able to subsist. The alternative is that community members fall behind on their 'bare bones' budget every month, resulting in problems such as hunger, poor health, and rampant economic evictions. This current situation portends dire consequences for the future of our communities as many children are currently growing up in households living on below subsistence levels of income due to inadequate and arbitrary social assistance rates.

This issue was a central recommendation of the 1988 Transitions Report of the Social Assistance Review Committee, the last comprehensive review of Ontario's social assistance system. We're sure you will agree that this has become an emergency situation for our communities, requiring immediate action.

We at Hamilton's Community Legal Clinics have been heartened by the support expressed from our local Members of Provincial Parliament with regard to current initiatives to reduce poverty in our community. With that in mind, we have drafted a piece of legislation that would set up an expert panel to determine social assistance rates on an annual basis. We would request your support for this draft legislation, and we would ask each of you to consider introducing it as a bill in the legislature, whether as a private member's bill, or preferably as a government bill.

We would be very pleased to meet with you to discuss this important issue at your convenience. Please contact the undersigned at (905) 545-0442, or foyec@lao.on.ca.
Regards,

Craig Foye
Staff Lawyer, McQuesten Legal & Community Services

c.c. Rt. Hon. Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario; John Tory, Leader of the Opposition; Howard Hampton, Leader of the NDP; Hon Madeleine Meilleur, Minister of Community and Social Services; Deborah Matthews, MPP, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community and Social Services; Julia Munro, MPP, 'PC Critic, Community and Social Services'; Michael Prue, MPP, 'NDP Critic, Community and Social Services'
TED MCMEEKIN MPP TABLES BILL TO ESTABLISH ONTARIO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES BOARD

Waterdown – Today Ted McMeekin, MPP Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Aldershot presented a Private Members Bill at the Legislative Assembly.

This Bill, entitled the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Act 2007 will enable the establishment of an expert Provincial Board whose responsibility will be to report on the annual cost of living for persons on social assistance and those on disability support.

This Bill is all about fairness.” Said Ted McMeekin, MPP, “In order to give our most vulnerable the opportunity to succeed, they need fair access to resources.”

“We at Hamilton’s community legal clinics are delighted that Ted McMeekin has taken the bold step of introducing this vital legislation” noted Craig Foye, a staff lawyer at McQuesten Legal and Community Services in Hamilton. Last month, Foye, challenged local MPPs to present legislation to create an expert panel to address the inequities individuals and families on social assistance face in the province.

Ontarians who rely on Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support live far below poverty levels. Rising costs of housing and living expenses make it prohibitive for persons on social assistance to live with dignity. This Bill, if passed, will recommend annual adjustments to assistance rates.

“This process ought not to be a partisan exercise. The proposed Expert Panel would determine legitimate needs and make recommendations based on those needs on an annual basis.” Added McMeekin. “I believe there to be great value in this type of annual review and I heartily support this move to greater equity.”

For further information, please contact
Ted McMeekin, MPP  905-690-6552
An Act to establish the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board

Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario, enacts as follows:

Definitions

1. In this Act,

“benefit unit” means a person and all of his or her dependants on behalf of whom the person receives or applies for social assistance; (“groupe de prestataires”)

“Board” means the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board established under section 2; (“Commission”)

“Minister” means the Minister of Community and Social Services; (“ministre”)

“social assistance” means,

(a) income support under the Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997,
and

(b) basic financial assistance under the Ontario Works Act, 1997. (“aide sociale”)

Board established

2. A Board to be known in English as the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board and in French as Commission ontarienne des taux d’aide sociale is hereby established.

Composition of Board

Appointment

3. (1) The Board shall be composed of at least six and not more than nine members appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

Qualifications

(2) The members shall be persons who have, in the opinion of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, expertise in poverty research and current research regarding the costs of living in Ontario communities.

Same

(3) In addition to the qualifications set out in subsection (2),
(a) at least two of the members shall be persons who have, in the opinion of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, expertise regarding the costs of living for disabled persons in Ontario communities; and

(b) at least two of the members shall be persons who have received social assistance at some time within the 10-year period before being appointed or are receiving social assistance at the time of their appointment.

**Term**

(4) A member shall be appointed for a term of two, three or five years.

**Chair and vice-chair**

(5) The Lieutenant Governor in Council shall designate one of the members as chair and may designate one or more other members as vice-chair.

**Remuneration and expenses**

4. The members of the Board who are not members of the public service of Ontario may be paid the remuneration fixed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council and the reasonable expenses incurred in the course of their duties under this Act.

**Powers of Board**

5. (1) Except as limited by this Act, the Board has all the powers that are necessary or expedient for carrying out its duties under this Act.

**Experts**

(2) The Board may retain experts as it considers necessary from time to time.

**Annual report**

6. (1) The Board shall provide an annual report in accordance with this Act to the Minister on or before December 31 in every year.

**Duties**

(2) The Board shall perform the duties that are assigned to it by or under this Act.

**Meetings**

(3) The Board shall meet at least six times annually for the purpose of preparing the annual report.

**Additional reports**

(4) In addition to the report described in subsection (1), the Board shall provide additional reports and information about adequate standards of living to the Minister on request.

**Contents of annual report**

**Regions**

7. (1) The annual report shall include a list of defined regions identified by the Board on the basis of different costs of living in different parts of the Province.
Regional rates

(2) The annual report shall include recommended social assistance rates and processes for providing social assistance for each region identified under subsection (1), including consideration of,

(a) monthly basic needs rates at a set amount that will enable benefit units to obtain,
   (i) nutritious food baskets,
   (ii) basic telephone service,
   (iii) basic transportation,
   (iv) personal needs items, including clothing, personal hygiene products and household cleaning supplies,
   (v) items and services relating to the educational and recreational needs of any children,
   (vi) any necessary modifications to a rental unit in order to accommodate any disability,
   (vii) additional expenses that may be incurred by persons with disabilities in order for them to participate fully in society, including expenses relating to education, over the counter medical goods, entertainment and clothing, and
   (viii) other basic goods and services to fulfil needs specified by the Board as basic;

(b) maximum monthly shelter allowance rates, including reference to,
   (i) Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation research on local rents,
   (ii) any other research that the Board considers relevant regarding local rents and shelter expenses, including utilities, heating costs, furnace or hot water tank rentals, property taxes and fire insurance, and
   (iii) separate recommendations regarding housing that is modified for disabled persons;

(c) the level of benefits to be provided to benefit units under the Ontario Works Act, 1997;

(d) the level of benefits to be provided to benefit units under the Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997;

(e) other statutory benefits that are actually received by benefit units, including the Ontario Child Benefit;

(f) the fact that many recipients of social assistance under the Ontario Works Act, 1997 are, for extended periods of time, unable to supplement their income through employment; and
(g) the fact that many recipients of social assistance under the *Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997* are, due to the long-term nature of many disabilities, unable to supplement their income through employment.

**Same**

(3) The Board shall consider the rates set under the *Ontario Works Act, 1997* and the *Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997* and may recommend changes to those rates.

**Variation in rates**

(4) The regional rates recommended in subsection (2) shall be uniform within each region but may differ between regions.

**Minister’s report**

8. (1) On or before March 31 in every year, the Minister shall publish a report responding to the Board’s recommendations in the annual report and shall set out a timeline for dealing with the recommendations.

**Tabling**

(2) The Minister shall submit any reports received from the Board to the Lieutenant Governor in Council and shall then lay them before the Assembly if it is in session or, if not, at the next session.

**Annual report made public**

(3) The Minister shall make the annual report available to the public within 90 days of receiving the report.

**Commencement**

9. (1) Subject to subsection (2), this Act comes into force on the day it receives Royal Assent.

(2) Sections 1 to 8 come into force six months after the day this Act receives Royal Assent.

**Short title**

10. The short title of this Act is the *Ontario Social Assistance Rates Act, 2007*.

**EXPLANATORY NOTE**

The Bill establishes the Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board, which has the function of providing specific recommendations annually regarding social assistance rates under the *Ontario Works Act, 1997* and the *Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997*.