

ISWG Poverty Watch

What is the Income Security Working Group?

Since forming in 2002, the Income Security Working Group (ISWG) has been working to draw together diverse groups and individuals in the community with an interest in eliminating poverty.

Community volunteers with a long history of anti-poverty work in Hamilton lead the ISWG. Wey Robinson, chair of the ISWG, says the organization is about collaboration. The ISWG wants to help existing and new anti-poverty groups to "collaborate in pursuing economic justice, without which we cannot have a truly healthy, caring and democratic community."

The ISWG was formed upon the recognition that the community response to poverty in Hamilton is fragmented and requires coordination.

"A lot of good work goes on in Hamilton", says Peter Hutton, one of the founding members and past chair of the ISWG. "We have lacked the resources and the framework to make sure that this experience and knowledge is shared in this community and beyond. I got involved in the ISWG as it promises the opportunity to

bridge some of those gaps and build a stronger social justice network in Hamilton."

In March 2003 the ISWG sponsored a forum which led to a number of groups coming together to form the Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits (CAWDB). That group has operated independently to raise the issue of the level of assistance and treatment of people on assistance locally. The CAWDB is also active with provincial coalitions under the banner of a campaign called "Ontario Needs A Raise", seeking to raise minimum wage levels.

Flowing out of discussions in the ISWG, some individuals and groups, saw a need to call much greater attention to the problems of poverty at Hamilton City Hall. Six major groups made jointly organized presentations in September 2003, on issues such as poverty in general, the minimum wage, problems in Ontario Works administration, and the unfairness of the National Child Benefit Supplement claw back. These presentations led to the establishment of the OW/OWDSP operational group
(See "ISWG Receives Funding" on page 2)

Stop the Clawback group calling for City to return money

The Stop the Clawback working group has been lobbying the City of Hamilton to change the way it is spending more than \$2.5 million that has been clawed back from the poorest families in our community.

The National Child Benefit was introduced by the federal government in 1998 to reduce child poverty, promote labour force attachment, and reduce overlap of government services and benefits. It consists



of the Canada Child Tax Benefit, which is received by 82% of Canadian families, and the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS), an additional benefit for families with incomes below \$35,000. The NCBS is phased out as family incomes increase: families with

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We Need You!

- ♦ The Income Security Working Group seeks to draw together diverse groups and individuals in the community with an interest in eliminating poverty.
- ♦ Please contact Deirdre Pike, Development Coordinator of the ISWG of Hamilton, at 905-522-1148, ext. 302, or at dpike@sprc.hamilton.on.ca, to find out how you can become involved.
- ♦ You are welcome to attend the ISWG Steering Committee open meetings on the 4th Tuesday of each month. Please join us for any of our fall meetings, Tuesdays, Sept. 27, Oct. 25, and Nov. 27, from 2—4 p.m., Urban Core Community Health Centre. In case of any changes to the meeting location, please call contact info above to confirm.

ISWG receives funding from the Hamilton Community Foundation

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and the social policy group. Members of the ISWG now work with city staff and liaise with provincial representatives to move toward improvements in the social assistance systems.

Hiring of Development Coordinator

The ISWG to this point has been primarily supported by volunteers. However, by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC), Urban Core Community Health Centre, the Housing Help Centre, and the Legal Aid Clinics of Hamilton, the ISWG received funding from the Hamilton Community Founda-

tion and its "Tackling Poverty Together" fund. A Development Coordinator was subsequently hired to work on community organization and mobilization, public education/research, and policy development and analysis.



ISWG Development Coordinator, Deirdre Pike.

Deirdre Pike, a Social Planner with the SPRC since 2001, brings a history of community development, research experience and solid analysis to this position.

Collaboration between the ISWG and the CAWDB have already resulted in increased participation and political voice of people living in low income. This staff support will allow for increased information and opportunities for that participation to take place.

For more information contact:

Deirdre: 905-522-1148, ext. 302, dpike@sprc.hamilton.on.ca

Wey: 905-525-4953, weyr@hwc.org

"Hands off!"

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incomes below \$22,615 receive the maximum, and the benefit is phased out up to \$35,000, where the NCBS is zero. The National Child Benefit is the only policy tool that is exclusively intended to address child poverty in Canada.

The Province of Ontario considers the NCBS "unearned income" for people who are on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Plan. The family's social assistance is reduced by the amount of the NCBS every month – eliminating much needed help for the poorest families in our community. The money that is clawed back is used

to fund a wide range of programs that are intended to help the most vulnerable people in our community.

The City of Hamilton receives 20% of the clawback funds, and over the last 7 years, have been funding a number of valuable programs and services with the money. The City is currently considering a switch to a system that returns the money more directly to the people it was taken from.

The Stop the Clawback Working Group recognizes that programs are an important support for people in the community. But we also recognize that continuing to claw back the NCBS is creating extreme hardship for families

in our community and increasing their risk of homelessness, poor health, and social exclusion.

The decision on the City's use of the clawback funds will likely be made at the City Council meeting in August.

To get involved with this local effort or for more information, contact Jeff Wingard at the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, jwingard@sprc.hamilton.on.ca, or 905-522-1148 x311.

Human Rights Committee focuses on advocacy efforts

One of the Committees of the Income Security Working Group is the Human Rights Committee. The Human Rights Committee believes that it is important for our local community to understand that income security is a human right.

The Committee takes as one of its starting points the international commitments made by Canada in the

International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights which says Canada "recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for [oneself] and [one's] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

The Human Rights Committee of the Income Security Working Group had

its first meeting in December of 2004, and the Committee has continued to meet on a bi-monthly basis. The Committee will focus its advocacy efforts at the municipal level, with an emphasis on educating the community and local government on these issues. For more information, contact Craig Foye, 905-545-0442, or foyec@lao.on.ca.

Social Assistance Recipients Can Get Involved!

The Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits, (The Campaign) the first major project of the ISWG will continue to meet during the summer on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month.

They are always looking for new members and in particular, people who currently or have in the past, lived in poverty. Your experience can be shared and add strength to

the continuing effort to raise the rates and the respect given to anyone living on the social assistance system.

Two social events are planned for July. Other discussions in August and September will centre on seeking change at the provincial level. This will include lobbying for the changes suggested in the report of MPP Deb Mathews in the social assistance system.

The Campaign is also supporting the provincial campaign called "Walk, Wheel, Ride for Dignity".

The Campaign is always interested in meeting with other groups who could provide an educational event for its members. For information on the campaign, you can contact them by phone at 546-8755 or at cawdb@sympatico.ca

Walk, Wheel, Ride for Dignity Coming in September

When provincial politicians return to Queen's Park in September, many voters from all parts of the community will be there to give them a message - Raise the Rates Now! Make Poverty History in Ontario!

This event which will involve a number of symbolic events in the last week of September, culminates with a call to as many people as possible to make their way to Queen's Park to tell Dalton McGuinty that 3 per cent is not enough. Neither is the slow rate of change in the minimum wage nor the breaking of promises to build housing and end the scandal of the claw back of the National Child Benefit Supplement from Ontario's

poorest families.

Groups are already organizing in London, Owen Sound, Hamilton, Toronto, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Guelph, Cobourg and Peterborough to make this a major focus of education and lobbying on these issues.



Hamilton plans to include a symbolic march to raise awareness in Hamilton during that week, and if support can be arranged a

To offer your ideas and volunteer support, come to a meeting of the Campaign for Adequate Welfare or contact Peter Hutton at 905 628-3168 or huttonp@web.ca Organizations willing to endorse, publicize or help finance this event are also needed.

group may carry that message on through a walk, wheel or ride from Hamilton to Toronto. Buses will also be arranged to take people to Toronto on the 29th.

Poverty Facts

- ◆ According to Statistics Canada, almost 20% or 95,370 of Hamilton residents are living on incomes below the poverty line. This is enough people to fill Copps Coliseum five times.
- ◆ One in four – 25% - of children under the age of 12 in Hamilton live in poverty.
- ◆ From 1990 to 2000 the wealthiest 40% of Hamilton's population experienced an increase in their average incomes, while the poorest 60% of Hamiltonians experienced an overall decrease in theirs.
- ◆ In 2004 a single wage earner would have to \$12.68 per hour in order to rent a one-bedroom apartment, for a two-bedroom apartment, the rate jumps to \$15.36.
- ◆ In the short-term poverty means having to make tough decisions like paying the rent or buying food. In the long-term, poverty means greater risk of health problems, disability and even death compared to those living above the poverty line.



New Working Group

Rising energy costs and the impact that generation has on our environment are a concern for everyone. Low income members of our community bear a disproportionate share of the burden both financially and in their health impacts from pollution.

That's why a number of ISWG member organizations are exploring the idea of a new working group on Low Income Energy Issues. Such a group would work with other groups in the province through a coalition called the Low Income Energy network. It would also work locally with the Solutions for Housing Action Committee.

There are many serious issues on the table already including a vital services bylaw in Hamilton, the use of profits from our local utility, rising electricity rates and the threat of sub metering in large apartment buildings.

For information on this potential working group, contact peter Hutton at 905-628-3168 or Hutton@web.ca



Summer Surfing and Reading

Some books and websites to check out while you're trying to beat the heat this summer...

[Lives in the Balance - Ontario's Social Audit.](#) Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, Pandora Press, 2004.

[Homelessness: The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis.](#) Jack Layton, Penguin Books, 2000.

[Our Neighbours' Voices - Will We Listen?](#) Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, (www.isarc.ca) James Lorimer & Company, Ltd., 1997.

**Free Internet Access -
Hamilton Central Public Library
Call 905-546-3200, ext. 3298**

In December, Deb Matthews, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Community and Social Services released her long-awaited report on social assistance with several recommendations for improving the system in ways that actually work for low-income people. Check it out and the response by the Income Security Advocacy Centre at www.incomesecurity.org.

Other websites:

- Ontario Coalition for Social Justice www.ocsj.ca
- National Anti-Poverty Organization [ww.napo-onap.ca](http://www.napo-onap.ca)
- Centre for Social Justice www.socialjustice.org

Meetings with The City

Over this summer, the first eighteen months of activity of the Social Justice Policy Group and the OW/ODSP Operations committee will be evaluated by the individuals who have been involved.

One of the issues will be whether these groups should become more formally attached to the ISWG. As described in the article giving the history of the ISWG, these processes have evolved out of the presentations made in September 2003 to City Council

So far, issues such as transportation for social assistance recipients, residential care homes, treatment of recipients by staff, the Jobs Now program, the national Child Benefit Reinvestment Strategy in Hamilton, coordinated access and rent bank housing issues, are just some of the topics that have been discussed. OW and ODSP recipients had the opportunity to ask their questions and express their

views directly to senior staff and politicians. It has been an interesting learning experience for both sides.

Whether the process continues will be decided by the evaluation. One of the things that will help the individuals and groups who have participated so far will be a sense that others in the community are interested in supporting the process through distributing the information we learn, bringing forth issues that relate to social policy determined and implemented by the city, or in future sharing the load of attending these meetings (approximately five meetings for each committee per year).

To contact the social justice policy group, call Sally Palmer at 519-647-3027, or email at SalEPalmer226@aol.com.

To contact the OW/ODSP Coordinating committee call Cindy Sue McCormack at 905-522-1148 x313 or email cs McCormack@sprc.hamilton.on.ca