



Income Security Working Group
of Hamilton

Poverty Watch

The Income Security Working Group of Hamilton
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Poverty group questions city salaries

By **CATCH—Citizens at City Hall**

The number of city employees making over \$100,000 nearly tripled between 2001 and 2003 according to research by the Income Security Working Group. Bob Wood told councillors [January 9] that the \$100,000 club went from 37 in 2001, to 64 in 2002 and 101 in 2003.

The group also calculated the average increases of ten randomly selected employees who stayed with the city through this three year period. "Those ten employees had total earnings of \$1,307,891 in 2001. By 2003 their salaries totalled \$1,494,681," noted Wood. "This is an increase of 14.2% or 7.1% per annum."

Wood stressed that the group recognized the staff have considerable responsibility and probably work long hours, but questioned the effect of such pay hikes on

the city budget. He reminded councillors that one in five Hamiltonians live below the poverty line and pointed out that "the average annual dollar increase for seven of the ten individuals exceeded the total amount a single individual on Ontario Works would receive in one year."

Picking up on the city's recent adoption of triple bottom line accounting, Wood suggested the concept also be applied to the budget. The approach requires all decisions be evaluated to make sure they improve the social and economic and environmental goals of the city.

Wood noted past emphasis on the cost efficiency of Ontario Works but said this analysis "doesn't take into account the poor level of service those in the community on Ontario Works receive."

Next meeting of the ISWG Municipal Budget Committee is Thurs., Mar. 2, 10:00 a.m. - noon, Housing Help Centre.

More Dark Days in Ontario Thanks to McGuinty

By **Diana Ahmed, Physician, North Hamilton Community Health Centre**

November 4th 2005 was a dark day for socially conscious people in Ontario.

It was the day that the Liberal McGuinty government decided to amend and thereby virtually cancel a social program that allowed people on disability and social assistance to access supplemental funding for special nutritional needs.

Known as the "Special Diet Benefit", this program had been a part of social assistance since the 1970s and had allowed for people to receive up to \$250 in supplemental income if a medical professional (doctor, nurse or dietitian) determined that the patient had a medical condition requiring a special diet.

As a family physician working in Hamilton's downtown urban core, many

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We Can't Stop Poverty Without 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, ISWG Development Coordinator, at 905-522-1148, ext. 302, or at dpike@sprc.hamilton.on.ca, to find out how you can become involved.
- ♦ The next general meeting of the ISWG is Wednesday, April 5, 2-4 p.m., location to be determined.
- ♦ Bus tickets are provided for all ISWG meetings.

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ISWG Project Partners:

- Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton
- Housing Help Centre
- Hamilton Community Legal Clinics
- Urban Core Community Health Centre

Local Health Providers Organize to Fight Poverty

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of my patients qualified for the Special Diet. Time after time I heard my patients tell stories of having to visit the food bank as their monthly cheques ran out and they had no money left for food once the rent and the bills were paid.

“Nutritional tips seemed a luxury for the middle classes.”

Counseling about prevention of heart disease and controlling diabetes felt useless as patients told me they were forced to eat a diet of refined carbohydrates, canned meat and whatever else they could afford. Cooking with olive oil? Buying omega-three-fortified—eggs and dairy? Organic fruit and vegetables? These “nutritional tips” seemed a luxury for the middle classes.

Special Invitation!

If you are a physician, nurse, dietician, or other health care provider with an interest in poverty and health issues, please come to the inaugural meeting of the Hamilton Health Providers Against Poverty.

If you are not a health provider, take this invitation to your own doctor, nurse or dietitian so they can become part of the solution.

**The inaugural meeting of the Hamilton Health Providers Against Poverty
Wednesday, March 22,
5:30 – 7:30 p.m.
North Hamilton Community Health Centre
554 John Street North**

Call Deirdre Pike, 905-522-1148, ext. 302, for more information. In particular, please call if you are interested in this important initiative but can't make the date and time.

Even Canada's food guide did not seem a realizable goal for many of my patients on social assistance. What was most upsetting was to hear how often this was happening in families with children.

While the long-term solution is obviously a raise in social assistance rates (one that is in keeping with the increased cost of living and not a joke such as the 3% the Liberals enacted in 2005) the Special Diet Supplement was a small measure that I could take to help my patients improve their health in the short-term.

All of that changed on November 4th and thousands of patients across Ontario are now waiting in dread as the new amendments are enforced. Not only will the revised Special Diet form severely limit the access to the \$250 supplement (you practically have to be dying and have your bowels removed to qualify for the full amount) but all persons currently receiving the funds now will be reviewed to assess whether they “truly” qualify for it. So much for preventative health care, at least for low-income patients.

As a medical professional, I am insulted by the lack of consultation the government used in making changes to the forms. They are grossly inadequate and inappropriate in addressing the common illnesses and funding required to address them. For example, a person on diabetes will now receive \$40 a month to improve their disease...enough to buy an apple or two a day?

There are also no mental health conditions listed on the new schedule, a major gap in my opinion. I am also upset that I am no longer

allowed to use my discretion in deciding who qualifies for the extra funding. Instead, I am required to tick off from a list of boxes, the names of the diseases my patient has (a gross violation of patient privacy!) and let the Liberal government decide how many extra pennies a day that person qualifies for.

So where do we go from here?

Since much of the action before November 4th had been in Toronto, much of the response has come from there too. A group of concerned physicians, nurses and anti-poverty activists have come together to form “Health Providers Against Poverty” (HPAP). So far they have been looking at various strategies (legal, medical, media-related) to highlight the impact of the changes and the ultimate solution: the need to raise social assistance rates.

Furthermore, Dr. Gary Bloch, a physician at St. Michael's hospital has launched a privacy complaint to the Ontario privacy commissioner over the information required in the new Special Diet Application.

It looks like this will not be an easy fight but it is definitely a worthy one!



The Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits has a Special Diet Subcommittee that meets regularly. Contact Wey Robinson, 525-4953, for more information.



THE WAY I SEE IT...
WORK, WAGES, AND POVERTY
 By Don Jaffray, Executive Director,
 Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton

Too many in Hamilton think that having a job is the solution to poverty. Sadly, this is not always the case. Good jobs that pay adequately can be a solution to reducing poverty. But too often members of our community are working at jobs that pay wages too low to lift them or their families out of poverty.

Nearly one in four workers in Canada are considered low-paid, earning less than two thirds of the national median hourly wage. Those workers are earning less than \$10 an hour. This has been the case for far too long.

An international comparison reveals that Canada is second only to the U.S. as a low-wage country among industrialized nations. Low wages are endemic to women in the labour force. Studies indicate that one in three women is low-paid compared to one in five men. This combined

with other economic and social factors has led to disproportionate levels of poverty among women and female lone parent families in particular. We know too that visible minority members of our community are also disproportionately over-represented among low wage workers.

What needs to be done? Campaign 2000, a national advocacy movement to reduce child poverty, considers this one policy issue with an obvious first step. They have long recommended improved income security and jobs with good wages and decent working conditions to support families.

In Ontario we are making progress on low wage work. In February of this year the minimum wage was increased to \$7.75 per hour a 4% increase over the previous rate. Another year from now the minimum wage in Ontario is scheduled to be

increased again to \$8.00 per hour, a further 3% increase. At this year's rate a full time worker working 40 hours per week all year would earn \$16,120 before taxes. This would still leave a single person living below the line. This rate of annual income is even less adequate for the needs of families with children. Still more needs to be done.

Campaign 2000 recommends that we increase our minimum wage targets to \$10 an hour for full time, full year workers, then index minimum wages to the annual rate of inflation. Even then, wages aren't the only issue to consider.

The solutions to reducing poverty are varied and complex. Addressing wage and work issues are obviously not the appropriate strategy for everyone living in poverty. But they are a part of the process now firmly underway to reconstruct our social development system.

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Life is Tough for Tenants in Hamilton
 By Madhavi Reddy, Coordinator, Hamilton Tenant Helpline

In the 1980's a popular movie theme song asked emphatically, "Who you gonna call?" (Trivia buffs will know the movie and song "Ghostbusters".)

If you're a tenant in Hamilton, the answer to that question now is, the Hamilton Tenant Helpline.

Launched in October 2005, the Hamilton Tenant Helpline is a telephone-based eviction prevention service. The project is part of the Solutions for Housing Action Committee's "Hamilton Tenant Education Project". Project partners include the Housing Help

Centre, Hamilton's Community Legal Clinics, the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and of course, tenants.

The rental housing market in Hamilton is marked by high rents, some landlords refusing to repair units, soaring heat and hydro costs, and often homelessness becomes a very real threat for tenants. Recognizing this reality, the Helpline was established to act as an access or entry point into a complicated system. Organizers of the project recognized that being a tenant in Hamilton is difficult

and often confusing. They also recognized that tenants remain largely unaware of their rights and of the services that are available to assist them. Many tenancy issues can be remedied when tenants have the right information.

When tenants call the Helpline they can expect to get information about their situation and to get referrals to community agencies that can be of further assistance. To date, close to 500 calls have been received. Tenants have been calling the Helpline with questions about eviction (both legal and

TENANTS GET HELP THEY NEED

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illegal), maintenance, harassment, parking and leases. Tenants are referred to the Helpline by many different services: their OW or ODSP worker, Hamilton Police Services, a variety of city departments and politicians' offices. The Helpline has also had public service announcements and outreach materials around the community that have resulted in tenants calling the line.

An example of a typical call from a tenant is that they have received an eviction notice for rent arrears. Helpline staff will begin this call by clarifying what notice the tenant has received. Staff will then proceed to explain the legal process for eviction. Helpline staff have, on many occasions, explained this process to tenants and referred them to the appropriate community agency to help them.

Another typical call from tenants concerns maintenance and repairs. Tenants often call in and explain that their landlords will not make repairs no matter how many times they are asked. Helpline staff will explain to the tenant the procedure for taking their landlords to the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal to get repairs made. Some repair issues such as heat require more immediate atten-

tion than the Tribunal. In these cases, tenants are referred to the appropriate city department in addition to the Tribunal for help. Other typical maintenance issues include: pests, mould, leaky ceilings, holes in walls and damage to common areas. Helpline staff is also starting to see an increase in the number of calls relating to safety in housing complexes.

The Hamilton Tenant Helpline recognizes that agency staff, teachers, tenants' associations and community groups are in an excellent position to champion tenant rights. As such, the Helpline is also a place where anyone interested in tenant education can call to book a tenant education presentation.

Topics of presentations include: tenants' rights, tenants' associations, discrimination in housing, what to expect at the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal, getting repairs made, dealing with eviction, finding housing and signing a lease.

Helpline staff will work with you to develop a tailor-made tenant education presentation that is suitable to the needs of your group. Staff from Hamilton's Community Legal Clinics and Housing Help Centre staff will conduct workshops. Presentations can be booked by calling

the Helpline.

Tenants who need information about their rights should call the Hamilton Tenant Helpline at 905-526-9119. Our hours are Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Tenants can also look at the Hamilton Tenant Education Project's website at www.hamiltontenant.ca. The website includes information about making complaints to city departments, starting a tenants' association and links to helpful resources in the city. Some resources are available in a variety of languages.



WHAT'S COMING UP?

Happy Anniversary CAWDB!

The Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits will celebrate their 3rd anniversary on Wed., Mar. 22, 1–3 p.m., at First Pilgrim United Church, 200 Main St. E. Everyone is welcome!

Ecumenical Event: The 6th Annual Social Justice Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, April 14, 2:00 p.m., starting at Copps Colliseum, corner of Bay and York. Poverty is the theme this year of this prayerful, justice-oriented, outdoor event. If you would like more information, please call Deirdre Pike, 905-522-1148, ext. 302.

The next "Poverty Watch" will come out in May. The deadline for articles is April 30. Please forward your input to Deirdre Pike, dpike@sprc.hamilton.on.ca.