

**2011 ONTARIO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REVIEW
RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES CONSULTATIONS REPORT
by
COLOUR OF POVERTY – COLOUR OF CHANGE**

September, 2011

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

About COP-COC

Colour of Poverty/Colour of Change (COP-COC) is a province wide campaign made up of individuals and organizations working to build community-based capacity to address the growing racialization of poverty and the resulting increased levels of social exclusion and marginalization of racialized communities – both First Peoples and peoples of colour – in Ontario. The Campaign is working to build concrete strategies, tools, initiatives and community-based capacity through which individuals and NGO's (especially those reflective of the affected racialized communities) can begin to develop coherent shared action plans, including creating effective coordinated strategies for collaborating with mainstream policy analysts and institutions, anti-poverty advocacy groups, governments, funders and the media so as to best work together to address and redress this disturbing and growing structural or systemic ethno-racial inequality.

As is well documented the gap between rich and poor in Ontario (and Canada) is widening generally, but what is much less well understood is that the impact of this growing gulf is much more profoundly felt by racialized group members. Members of racialized communities (persons of non-European ancestries or heritages) experience ongoing, disproportionate levels of poverty. While it is possible for anyone to experience low income and reduced opportunities, individual and systemic racism plays a large role in creating such problems.

Racialized groups are also more likely to suffer the inevitable consequences of living in poverty: they have higher levels of under-housing and homelessness; racialized communities are over-policed, First Peoples and men and women of colour are over-represented in jails and prisons; due to racialized systemic inequality some experience consistently poorer educational outcomes and those with professional qualifications are underemployed; they are over-represented in low-paying, unstable, and low-status jobs in which their rights as workers are often poorly or totally unprotected; and they face health status inequities and disparities arising from circumstances such as chronic stress, unsafe working conditions, polluted or environmentally degraded neighbourhoods or inadequate food and poor nutrition.

There are many links between First Peoples struggles and those of other racialized groups. However in acknowledgement of all of our roles as Treaty Peoples and respect for First Peoples' right to self-determination and sovereignty, COP-COC recognizes that First Peoples claims to justice are distinct and require an additional and different set of strategies and policy responses due to their unique and specific historical relationship with Canada.

For these reasons, COP-COC has for the last several years been pushing for solutions that would address the underlying systemic and structural causes of poverty as experienced by racialized communities (First Peoples and peoples of colour) in Ontario, while working in solidarity with First Peoples.

Social Assistance Review as a Critical Component of a Poverty Reduction Strategy

COP-COC commends the Ontario Government for establishing the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario (the Commission) to carry out a full review of Ontario's social assistance system (the Review).

COP-COC is also pleased to see that one of the objectives of the Review is to recommend ways to improve people's ability to find and keep jobs, while guaranteeing security for people who cannot work. COP-COC members believe that income security, with adequate social assistance rates and a functional system that does not impose undue hardships on recipients, is a critical part of an integrated economic security strategy for low income Ontarians. This is particularly the case for racialized Ontarians who are over-represented among the poor - at rates that are two to three, and up to six or seven times that of Ontarians of European, Caucasian or white background or heritage.

COP-COC has called for an integrated economic security strategy that includes a process of transition from income support towards employment and income generation where possible, and we believe that the social assistance system should facilitate that process in a non-punitive manner.

The system should also reflect the understanding that the move from assistance to employment and income generation is not an event but a process that occurs over time and requires consciously addressing issues of equitable access to employment which requires a commitment to racial justice. All of these principles, we believe, should be integrated into the current Review and at the core of its recommendations.

Gathering Input from Racialized Communities

COP-COC sees the Review as an opportunity to improve access to income security for members of racialized groups – both Canadian born and immigrant communities, as well as other low-income Ontarians, and we hope to achieve this by ensuring that the particular experience of racialized and immigrant communities are being captured in the Review.

Racialized communities and immigrant communities do not access social assistance the same way as do individuals from the rest of society.

Due to social stigma and barriers in accessing the system, many members of racialized and immigrant communities are very reluctant to apply for social assistance even when they are qualified to do so. They believe that being on social assistance is a shameful thing. Many would rather work in jobs that pay less than minimum wage than be on social assistance.

If they are immigrants, there is the added pressure, both from their own families and communities, and from the larger society, to succeed economically or to be seen as being economically independent. For many members of racialized communities and immigrants, being on social assistance amounts to admitting being a “failure”, thus experiencing the related shame and stigma even though the poverty they experience is often the product of systemic social and economic inequities.

On the other hand, many immigrants and racialized communities members end up on social assistance because of systemic barriers they face in accessing well paying jobs. Immigrant and racialized women, and those with disabilities, in particular, given the cumulative effect of the multiple marginality, face even greater challenges in accessing employment.

By ensuring the participation of members of these communities in the Review, though we focused our efforts on communities of colour given that the Commission very wisely and appropriately undertook to engage with First Peoples communities directly, not only does COP-COC hope to help remove the social stigma unfairly attached to social assistance recipients, we also seek to help highlight the particular and unique challenges faced by low income members of racialized and immigrant communities.

To facilitate the participation by social assistance recipients from the various racialized communities (largely voices of peoples of colour) in the review, COP-COC – in partnership with its member organizations - undertook a series of activities with a view to gathering input from members of these diverse communities, especially those who have either accessed the social assistance system or have worked with individuals who do rely – or have relied – on social assistance.

To start, COP-COC developed a questionnaire to gather input from social assistance recipients. The questionnaire reflects the questions raised by the Commission, while allowing recipients to tell their stories in their own way through an open ended question that starts off the survey asking recipients to talk about their experiences being on social assistance.

Certain COP-COC member organizations also conducted a series of focus groups with social assistance recipients from different racialized communities and community based organizations working with people who are on social assistance. Among other things,

COP-COC member organizations hosted meetings with women's organizations, legal clinics, and ethno-racially specific community groups.

In these community meetings, participants were encouraged to approach the questions of the Review from the perspectives of the barriers that immigrants and racialized groups face, including those of the women and people with disabilities from those communities, in accessing the needed services and supports, so as to come up with recommendations that would address their specific concerns.

The collective views of the individual social assistance recipients and organizational representatives form the basis of this COP-COC report and its recommendations, and are summarized below.

WHAT WE HEARD

Experience with OW and ODSP case workers

Many recipients and agency representatives report difficult, unhelpful or even adversarial interactions with case workers. Insensitivity and attitudinal problems on the part of the caseworkers coupled with – in some case - the recipients' language barriers have led some recipients feeling belittled, stigmatized, disrespected and mistrusted. Some case workers also fail to inform clients of programs and entitlements they need, or provide wrong advice that lead to difficulties for the clients.

'Communications by workers is an issue. There's already a lot of stigma and then the workers make them feel they should not be there, and even tell them to go back home.'

'They may come from countries not trusting the government. The workers make them feel like a child. There is cultural insensitivity... Workers deal with so many clients they don't know who they are. Caseworkers need sensitivity training. We hear a lot of clients saying caseworkers don't understand them.'

'They behave like police. In other jurisdictions in the world workers are recipient's advocates; here they are policing the recipient.'

Some recipients seldom see their worker. Others complain that their caseworkers do not return their calls in a timely fashion, or that their caseworker only responds only if the call comes from an advocate acting on their behalf.

Recipients are also required to switch to a new caseworker every two years (as a fraud prevention measure) yet that is often when the worker and the recipient finally understand each other.

Barriers to employment

By and large, the biggest challenges most recipients from racialized and immigrant communities identify are the difficulties in finding jobs that pay adequate wages to support, at minimum, their own and their families' basic needs. Recipients either do not know about the employment support that is available or do not believe that the support provided would lead to secure employment.

Focus group participants identified a number of barriers in accessing and maintaining employment.

For immigrants, the lack of recognition of international credentials and experiences is a major concern. Even when recipients are willing to work in the most junior position in their field they are still not given the chance because they lack "Canadian experience".

Yet for racialized community members who received their education in Canada, finding employment in their trained field has also proven to be difficult.

"Networking is more important in finding a job now. It is 'who you know' that matters, not 'what you know'. Employers do not hire employees based on their working ability."

Yet without the job opportunities and experiences, it is difficult for members of racialized communities and immigrants to build their own network.

As one respondent to the COP-COC survey wrote:

"The expectation is [that] I do all of the work in adjusting my resume and cover-letters to suit jobs which are posted on the internet. Thus far, though I...have followed the instructions, I have not received even a courtesy acknowledgement that my resume and cover-letter has [been] received. Upon further enquiry of the potential employer, I have been told that the interview process has been completed. I cannot help but believe that jobs are created and given to friends and relatives of employers....**There is 'systemic' racism and nepotism being practiced and there is no attempt by government to stop this practice.**"

Some recipients reported experiencing discrimination in skill training programs from the teachers who were supposed to be helping them.

Lack of childcare support is a major road-block for women who wish to undertake language or skills training that might lead to employment and also for those who wish to work.

People with criminal records have also found it extra hard to get a job as it takes a long time to secure a pardon.

Other challenges to finding and keeping employment include high transportation costs, and stigmatization from employers who do not want to hire people on social assistance. In the case of refugees or others with less than full status, their social insurance number – which begins with a “9” – is itself a barrier to employment. There is also little on-the-job support as well as weak incentives for employers to hire people on social assistance.

Still others mention there are simply not enough jobs and that many of the current jobs available pay minimum wage, which is not sufficient to sustain a living.

Some recipients stress the need for more flexible working arrangements to meet the challenges and demands made of them by ODSP case workers.

For those who do manage to find jobs, all too often it is through temporary job agencies for low waged jobs that are in many ways demeaning and exploitative.

In sum as one participant said:

‘The law currently says that it is the people’s responsibility to find a way to get off the system. It is not about building the person up. We need to re-focus the purpose by focusing on addressing the barriers individuals face and whatever crisis they are in.’

Disincentives to work:

The loss of drugs benefits, unreasonable income reporting rules and claw-backs are given as major reasons that discourage OW and ODSP clients from seeking or retaining employment.

‘Dollar for dollar gross deduction for EI benefits and CPP disability benefits is a total disincentive to work.’

‘Someone cannot become alright in 2 weeks after they are off welfare. They are vulnerable for a longer period. Threshold amounts should be increased so that people can keep the drug benefits.’

The lack of transportation support also discourages job finding because people do not have money to even travel for interviews. Others need support to buy proper clothing to attend interviews.

Barriers Facing Racialized Communities Members with Disabilities

People with disabilities who are racialized already face barriers because of racism. But they face additional difficulties in finding jobs. When they do eventually find work, they have to give it up because of the rules regarding ODSP eligibility.

On the other hand, even though racialized communities members have long been over-pathologized due to a lack of culturally appropriate and relevant care in the system, it is often difficult for people with mental health issues to get on ODSP as they are deemed not to be “disabled”. Applicants need a doctor to “certify” that they qualify for ODSP, which is that much more difficult for people who do not use the Western medicine model or find the Western allopathic model unhelpful in addressing their needs.

Notwithstanding the above, many people with mental health issues are able to get on OW but are then expected to do job search or attend ESL classes, for instance, which may not be appropriate in each of their cases. However, fearful of losing benefits, the recipients will try to comply even though it may prove to be extremely difficult.

While the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) mandates the removal of physical barriers, it does not effectively address or remove barriers to employment by requiring employers to hire people with disabilities.

Drug and Medical Support

The drug card provided to recipients also does not cover all medical expenses, particularly Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), allopathic medicine and other so-called complementary or alternative non-western medicines; recipients have to pay for certain medications and treatments on their own (e.g. certain alternative medicine and treatments are not covered).

Rules and requirements:

There are confusing and complex rules, requirements, eligibility criteria, and exemptions. Case workers themselves do not always understand all the rules and exemptions, fail to communicate them adequately or apply them inconsistently. For example, OW requirements to find work are not sensitive to the fact that seeking regular work in a labour market environment that is rampantly prejudiced and discriminatory is onerous if not futile for some, let alone understanding those whose contribution to community and family through volunteer/unpaid caring work may be the more appropriate and stable pathway.

The “permanently unemployable” and the 60-64 categories that have been removed when the system switched from Family Benefits to ODSP, seem to under-appreciate the near impossibility of finding work for people in that age group, especially if they are immigrants with linguistic barriers.

‘Eligibility requirements need to consider each individuals’ circumstances and recognize some people are not employable rather than bouncing them from OW to ODSP to appeal process (when they are rejected for ODSP)... what about the newcomer woman in her early 60s, who never worked, has no English language, is not disabled but has health issues ? ‘

Asset limits are too low and therefore force people to completely deplete their resources before they can turn to OW/ODSP. This makes it more difficult for individuals to get out of dependence on social assistance. Newcomers often have higher costs to cover, such as furniture and house-ware, therefore current low asset limits applied to new immigrants with savings is doubly undermining of their life chances and thus inappropriate.

Rules for sponsors are unfair and compound problems for immigrant families. The requirement that would-be sponsors repay any social assistance received in the past (despite their economic progress) penalizes immigrant families and compounds their challenges to getting ahead. For example, many immigrant families wish to sponsor parents to provide needed childcare in order to better focus on their careers. This rule amounts to a fine or a penalty for any immigrant that has relied on social assistance for any period of time in the past.

Benefits rates are too low

There is consensus that social assistance rates simply do not reflect the true cost of living. Inadequate rates force OW and ODSP recipients into substandard housing, poor diets and thus add stressors that compromise their ability to improve their situation or pursue viable and meaningful employment.

‘Increasingly, a lot of problems are occurring for recipients because the money is not enough. Recipients do not have enough money to sustain monthly expenses. Not even enough money to buy food. Recipients have to be in rooming houses or other precarious housing.’

Many recipients are on waiting lists for subsidized housing for years as a result of the shortage of affordable housing. Some caseworkers suggest cheap private market housing to recipients but the living conditions are often deplorable and not suitable for children.

There is also a lack of affordable child care services. Some single parents and even two parent households who are on social assistance are thus forced to leave their children at home alone while they work.

Being poor also means recipients have to incur extra expenses such as bank service charge for account balance of less than \$1,000.00.

The Basic needs allowance is too low to allow recipients to afford a healthy and nutritious diet. The impact is particularly significant in communities and neighbourhoods where healthy and nutritious food options are either not readily available nor are affordable. There is agreement that many recipients rely on the Special Diet allowance to meet the basic need of a healthy nutritious diet because the Basic needs allowance is leaving people hungry and poorly-fed. There is also agreement that poor nutrition not only contributes to the deterioration of health in the long term, but also affects day-to-day activities such as going to work every day.

Evidence-based policies

In general, there is agreement that careful data-collection is important for understanding the changing needs of the population, although caution has been raised about the ways data would be used and for what purpose.

‘We should be pro-data collection. That’s when we can make services better and better equipped to deal with patterns and issues that are visible in the system for racialized and other disadvantaged communities.’

‘It is critical to collect data about people’s racial background, time of stay in Canada, their qualifications etc. Make sure it is used in the right way, not make people stigmatised.’

RECOMMENDATIONS

COP-COC has compiled a list of suggestions from the recipients and various service providers to improve the overall effectiveness and fairness of the system. The following highlights the key recommendations.

Accessing Social Assistance

1. Regular mandated training for OW and ODSP workers on cultural sensitivity and to keep workers informed and updated on existing and new programs and rules. Implement anti-racism/anti-oppression training for all case workers to help them better understand and deal with clients from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences (including abused women and refugees).
2. Impose a duty on OW and ODSP workers to actively counsel and assist recipients by providing information in plain and linguistically appropriate language that will assist recipients, and by informing recipients about the benefits that they may be eligible to receive.
3. Provide professional interpretation and translation services where there is sufficient demand, rather than rely on volunteer interpreters/translators to meet language needs. Forms and documents (including the form for rights and responsibilities) should be available in different languages.
4. Hire more case workers to lower their workload and enable them to provide more responsive, efficient and considerate service to clients. Review the requirement to change case workers every two years, as it takes time to understand clients’ unique situations and needs, particularly for refugees and immigrants.

5. Increase asset limits to qualify for social assistance. A separate (higher) rate for newcomers should be considered to take into account the additional costs of household setup and settlement.
6. Revise ODSP criteria to make it easier for people with mental health issues to qualify.
7. Expand the eligibility verification process for ODSP to recognize experiences and expertise of professionals other than medical doctors. For instance, allow community based agencies that work with people with mental health issues (in addition to physicians) to provide proof of eligibility for ODSP applicants.

Employment Support

8. Extend support to cover transportation, clothing expenses and childcare costs for those employed or undergoing language/skills training while still on OW and ODSP and to encourage the pursuit of language/skills training programs for new immigrants.
9. Hire more job developers to liaise and mediate between employers and clients to help mould and shape jobs to the needs of both, and to support advance training on the job as part of a long-term employment strategy.
10. Extend support for volunteer work beyond 6 months for OW and ODSP clients to gain valuable work related experience and life-skills that can lead to viable employment.
11. Implement a staggered or gradual reduction in social assistance that is tied to employment income in ways that do not punish job-holders and give people time and the ability to rebuild their personal resources for long-term economic sustainability.
12. Simplify income reporting procedures and requirements, for example require reporting only if income change is above a certain level, or report income earned over 6 months (rather than monthly).
13. Instead of focusing on job training, provide recipients with job opportunities in order for them to gain actual workplace experience. Support should be given to employers to create co-op placements that would provide recipients with real work experience that could lead to more permanent employment at lowered risk to the employer.
14. Create an online platform that will help recipients find appropriate jobs (including jobs in other provinces) as well as prior skill and learning relevant volunteer placements more easily.
15. Provide a range of supports and opportunities based on the recipients' particular situations so as to provide stability for the clients. This may include, in the case of people with mental health issues, individualized counselling support.

Employment Equity

16. Reintroduce mandatory provincial employment equity legislation to ensure that employers have transparent and open hiring processes which are based on merit, and not based on subjective or any other factors unrelated to the job requirements.

Access to Extended Health and Drug Plans

17. Drugs, dental and eye coverage should be decoupled from social assistance and made available to all low-income individuals/families, and it should be extended to include ethno-culturally and otherwise appropriate complementary and alternative medicine and treatment.
18. The province should join the majority of provinces across the country and end the three month waiting period for newcomers to the province for eligibility for OHIP coverage.
19. Alternatively, rules related to suspension of drugs benefits needs to be made more clear and implemented in a humane and flexible way by case workers. For employed ODSP and OW clients, a transition period should be implemented to allow them sufficient time to build up resources and capacities through their employment before losing benefits.
20. Increase the basic needs allowance, sufficient to afford a healthy and nutritious diet, indexed to the rate of food inflation and linked to regional costs of healthy and nutritious food. A healthy diet allowance should be made available to all low-income persons.
21. The Special Diet Allowance fulfills an important role for people with medical conditions, such as providing the necessary funds to cover additional costs associated with the therapeutic dietary treatment of certain medical conditions, and should be continued.
22. The Special Diet Allowance should be indexed to the rate of food inflation. It should include the conditions already identified by the Special Diet Experts Review Panel; and should include a mechanism to include new and emerging conditions identified by medical professionals drawn from the diversity of medical practitioners recognized in Ontario.

Social Assistance Rates

23. The determination of social assistance rates should take into consideration a nutritional food basket (see recommendations 20-22), actual shelter cost (market rent), transportation, clothing and childcare expenses that reflect true costs in

different cities/regions. These should be reviewed and adjusted for inflation on a regular basis.

Sponsorship Rules

24. The requirement to repay any social assistance received in the past for those who wish to sponsor relatives should be removed.
25. There should be no categorical denial of social assistance to sponsored immigrants as a group. Every case should be decided on its own merits.

Collection of Disaggregated Data

26. Social services and any other related Ministry or governmental body should and need collect ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data (as in fact called for in the government's own Poverty Reduction Act) with the usual safeguards to protect confidentiality and privacy and allow for the analysis of that data by independent arms-length bodies to inform specific policy objectives.

Long Term Solutions

27. Success of the system should be measured - in disaggregated forms - by rates of exit from social assistance as well as long-term exits from poverty. A holistic approach should consider whether people on social assistance are contributing to society in other ways (volunteer work, contribution to their families' well-being, etc.) that go beyond paid work or labour market participation.
28. Social assistance reform as we envision it above should be at the very heart of the overall Poverty Reduction Strategy and as such the system should be linked with other support systems and policies including equitable access to employment, affordable housing, good health and mental health, accessible childcare, etc. in order to best develop a coordinated approach across the board. All the various ministries responsible must not work in silos, but rather must work in a collaborative and coherent way to improve the lives of all Ontarians.



Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change

1701 – 180 Dundas St. W., Toronto, Ontario M5G 1Z8

Ph – 416-971-9676 Fax – 416-971-6780

E-mail - colourofpoverty@gmail.com Web-site - www.colourofpoverty.ca

Facebook – Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change Twitter – colourofpoverty

YouTube Channel – colourofpoverty