

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition's
Religious Leaders Forum
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Presentation by Sarah Blackstock, Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC)

The Five W's of Social Assistance Review (Why, What, Who, Where and When)

Thanks

Thank you so much for inviting me today to participate in this important – and very timely gathering. It is a privilege to be amongst such committed, passionate advocates.

Introduction

I am really excited to be talking about the Social Assistance Review.

For years, we have been gathering to share ideas and strategize about how we can achieve not just social assistance reform, but also related, broader reform that will achieve the social justice we desire, to which we are entitled.

For years, we have been articulating the change we need and describing the path which will take us in the right direction.

And for years, we have gotten nowhere.

Today, I would argue, we are somewhere different. We are not anywhere close to where we need to be, but we have landed, I think, at the head of the trail.

Today we have a Poverty Reduction Strategy – a flawed one to be sure, but a useful one.

Earlier this week, the Standing Committee on Social Policy met to review Bill 152, the Poverty Reduction Act, clause by clause.

And, after hearing from scores of well coordinated anti-poverty activists, they amended the bill in important ways that will mean we have a stronger tool with which to demand that successive governments take the work of poverty reduction seriously.

We also have, at long, long last, a promise of a desperately-needed Social Assistance Review.

And so the political landscape is different than the one we have been working in over the last decade.

I think there is reason for hope – and dare I say it, optimism.

And I, for one, have had very little optimism regarding Social Assistance reform for a long time.

So I am optimistic – although, cautiously so!

SA Review – don't know much

Now, all of that said, we still don't know much about the Social Assistance Review the government has in mind – despite our efforts.

In many ways this is very frustrating.

But, the vagueness and lack of commitment is also useful to us because it means we can push for the Social Assistance Review we want and need.

What I would like to do this afternoon is quickly walk through the five Ws of the SA Review – why, what, who, where and when – which I hope will be useful in thinking about the role of ISARC in this important review.

WHY do we need a SA Review?

1. Inhumane, unjust

Premier McGuinty knows why.

As he put it a few weeks ago, the SA system “stomps people into the ground.”

It does indeed.

I ask you to conjure up that image of a person being stomped into the ground.

What strikes me about that image is the violence, the loss of power, the loss of dignity and the near impossibility of getting back up.

Social assistance stomps people into the ground by forcing them to live in wretched poverty, by endlessly punishing people with cruel rules and constant surveillance, by blaming people for their own poverty, by denying access to any real training, education

or support and by forcing people to jump through hoop after hoop for no other reason than to deny dignity, power, confidence and hope.

The current SA system is, in short, an inhumane and unjust system marked by blame, surveillance and deprivation. This is one reason WHY we need the SA Review.

2. Unhelpful, punishing

A second reason WHY we need the SA review is that the current SA system provides no real assistance.

Currently workers act like auditors.

Clients are not regarded as people deserving of respect and assistance, but rather as files that need to be carefully audited, managed and removed from the system ASAP.

Access to real training is virtually nil.

And support, well that is virtually, although not entirely, non-existent.

3. Inconsistent with the goal of PRS and the spirit of the PRS

A third reason WHY we need the SA review is that the current SA system is inconsistent with the goal of poverty reduction – it creates and perpetuates poverty.

The current SA system is also inconsistent with the spirit of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which however problematic, focuses on opportunity. The current SA system offers none; in fact it denies opportunity.

4. The people

And while we are talking about WHY we need the SA Review, we should talk about the 750 000 people who rely on SA. And we should talk about the tens of thousands of Ontarians who are losing their jobs and are going to be relying on SA.

These Ontarians are entitled to a SA system that provides real assistance in a dignified manner.

These Ontarians are entitled to a SA system that is designed to work and that is evidence-based.

They are entitled to a social assistance system that has policies and programs that acknowledge, for example, that the racialized and gendered aspects of poverty.

WHAT do we need from the SA Review?

1. No tinkering

Firstly, we need a real review that is broad in scope and in mandate.

The SA system is rotten to the core.

Tinkering with the system will not result in the SA reform we need, precisely because the current SA system is designed to provide the fewest possible people access benefits for the shortest possible period of time.

It is designed to ensure those who do receive benefits take the shortest route to the first available job – no matter how inappropriate or insecure it might be.

The current SA system is not designed to provide real assistance. It is not designed to provide real opportunity. It is not designed to reduce poverty.

Tinkering with this system will not get us the social assistance system we need.

What we need is a review with a BROAD SCOPE.

A scope that is broad enough to allow us to grapple with issues of adequacy, benefit architecture, training & support and dignity.

And we need a review that is bold and creative, that doesn't shy away from visionary thinking and unusual processes.

WHO should participate in this review?

Obviously, the expertise of low-income people is critical to reviewing the social assistance system.

We also need progressive policy wonks, advocates and allies.

We might also want to think about bringing in unlikely suspects who might offer wonderfully fresh thinking about transforming this very complex and very important system.

Currently, the government is terrified of this review.

SA rolls are growing, SA remains an unpopular, stigmatized program, the change that is required is complicated...there are few short-term political gains, which matters a lot when an election is not so far off.

We have to find way to get government excited about the SA review not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is an opportunity to be innovative and a leading jurisdiction in this area.

WHERE should this review be housed?

Social assistance is – or rather should be - as much as about education and training, as it is about the provision of benefits. It should be about childcare, healthcare and decent jobs.

For all of these reasons, the social assistance review cannot belong to a single ministry.

The SA review should be an interministerial effort.

WHEN

Now → get on with it!

The difficult economic times must bolster and embolden our movements as the need for a strong SA system become greater.

Some will say the difficult economic times require us to dampen our expectations. But we must not be dissuaded

Not only is there now hope, where not to long ago, there was none, but there is also will and momentum – amongst our political leaders, to a degree, but also amongst activists and movements.

Some will say that the few political victories we have had in the last couple of years should satisfy us. But we must not be satisfied.

Our determination must be bolstered and our demands must be emboldened by the government acknowledgement that poverty isn't inevitable, that the solution to poverty is good public policy.

SO WHAT? We move from the Ws, to the YOU!

-let your MPP, Minister Meilleur, and the Premier know that this SA Review matters.

-let them know that if they are serious about poverty reduction the SA Review has to be broad and visionary; that tinkering with the endless “stupid rules” is not sufficient.

-In your communities, write and talk about the importance of this review.

-And please, do this now. Decisions are being made.

-If we don't get this review right from the beginning, we will lose this very important opportunity.

-I want to return to what Premier McGuinty said, "social assistance stomps people into the ground."

-As I said earlier, those words invoke powerful, violent images for me – ones that I think are consistent with the SA system we have.

-But what really determines that violent image of people being stomped is what the bystanders do.

-We are a society. We should act like one.

-Having a strong, optimistic, humane social assistance system is critical to our society.

-We are a society. We should act like one.