

Joint Teleconference: Income Security in Ontario – What can we do about it?

Hosted by Ontario Campaign 2000 and CCPA Ontario, September 20, 2018

On September 20, 2018, Ontario Campaign 2000 and CCPA Ontario brought together individuals and organizations across Ontario concerned about coming reforms to social assistance programs and rollbacks to hard fought gains to the rights of workers across the province. We also heard updates from leaders in basic income, childcare, housing, and issues affecting immigrants and racialized people.

We were happy to receive calls from across Ontario, but with just fifty spots available on the teleconference, we were not able to include everyone who wished to join. To make the discussion of political context, tools, and strategies more widely available, a summary of the teleconference is provided below.

For anyone looking for a quick reference to the actions that were discussed, a list is provided here:

Actions

Income security

- Sign ISAC's [open letter to Min. MacLeod](#)
- Use [ISAC's action kit](#) and informational backgrounders

Workers' rights and wages

- Attend [planned events from \\$15 and Fairness](#)
- [Email your MPP](#)

Housing

- Sign ACTO's Right to Housing [letter to Min. Duclos](#)

Childcare

- Use AECEO's Week of Action [campaign toolkit](#)

Other News and Resources

- [TO Housing Pledge](#)
- [Living Proof](#), [Humans of Basic Income](#), [class action lawsuit](#), [call for federal funding](#)
- [Every Child Counts](#)
- [Min. of Education memo](#) on Maximum for Profit Threshold

Teleconference Summary

Anita Khanna ([Family Service Toronto, Campaign 2000](#)) began with an Indigenous land acknowledgement, provided introductions and acknowledged participants from across the province. She laid out the goals of the teleconference, namely to help everyone learn about or gain access to tools, resources, and strategies that individuals and organizations can use to support people in poverty. Anita noted the key issues to be discussed:

- Income security;
- Workers' rights and wages;
- Housing;
- Basic income;
- Immigrants and refugees; and
- Childcare.

Trish Hennessy ([CCPA Ontario](#)) set the context, highlighting the need to take action. She didn't sugar coat our current circumstances, observing that "things are going to get worse before they get worse." Everything we fought for, all the gains we made in recent years is all on the table now, so expect chaos in the non-profit sector. Trish warned us to brace for a dark fiscal report that can provide cover—this has since been released via the [line-by-line report](#).¹ Despite this, Trish urged everyone to remember that there is strength in clarity and in numbers. This is what the teleconference is about.

Income Security

Social Assistance

Jennefer Laidley ([Income Security Advocacy Centre](#)) discussed the current social assistance system and its rule-bound nature and income inadequacy that both enforce poverty. She noted that [the Income Security Roadmap](#) had recommended a sweeping transformation of the system, having been built off years of advocacy. While sweeping changes had not been introduced by the previous government, some positive steps had been taken that are now on "pause" while the government undertakes a 100-day review of the system. Government announced this review on July 31 along with the cancellation of the basic income pilot and the halving of social assistance rate increases.

It is unclear at this time if the 100-day review, to be completed by November 8, will result in a new program or direction *toward* a new program, but what is clear is that there will be no public consultation or outreach. ISAC has developed Five Principles for an Effective and Compassionate Social Assistance System to help frame their action moving forward:

¹ For a quick read on this, see a Twitter thread from Sheila Block (Senior Economist, CCPA) [here](#), or see a more in-depth breakdown from Trish [here](#). Both note the ideological nature of the report, again as predicted by Trish during the teleconference.

1. Income Adequacy
2. Economic and Social Inclusion
3. Access and Dignity
4. Reconciliation with Indigenous People
5. Human Rights, Equity, and Fairness

These principles align with the Roadmap, as well as statements from Minister MacLeod that have stressed the importance of being “compassionate” and the need to stabilize people in need and to support them to succeed.

ISAC’s [full action kit](#) includes the five principles; informational backgrounders; tips on organizing, contacting media, and meeting with public officials; and an [open letter to Minister MacLeod](#) (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services). You can also get a brief overview of actions to take, including links to the above, on their [website](#).

From the Q&A that followed, callers discussed both lobbying efforts and grassroots action. It was noted that Minister MacLeod has spoken of consultation on this issue, and that she has shared stories of her community experience, including her food drives for a local food bank. There could be some leverage here in pushing for greater consultation or working through organizations that have access, like the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA). However, the track record and approach to consultation thus far was also observed, with a push to get our message out, inform people/members/networks, hold meetings and town halls, meet with MPP’s, etc. For ideas and concrete steps here, see ISAC’s action kit above.

Workers’ Rights and Wages

Deena Ladd ([Workers Action Centre, \\$15 and Fairness](#) Campaign) presented a context of precarious employment and stagnant wages, and pointed to the relatively small—but valued—victories² in reforms to the Employment Standards and Labour Relations Acts and the minimum wage increases introduced through Bill 148. Deena noted that corporate lobby groups are working hard not only to stop the minimum wage increase to \$15 (as would currently be effective January 1, 2019), but to gain a full repeal of Bill 148. Meanwhile, support among voters remains strong—Deena reminded callers that two-thirds supported a \$15 minimum wage, and that this support can be leveraged to target specific ridings to keep minimum wage and workers’ rights on the political agenda and prevent rollbacks of legislation.

The \$15 and Fairness Campaign has continued their action beyond the victories achieved last November as workers strive to maintain momentum and to get ahead of any potential rollback to rights or wages. For example, a large demonstration on June 16 was held, indicating a continued interest among those directly affected by this issue. Similarly, a day of action on September 15 marked 15 weeks before the next minimum wage increase, and was met with 23 actions across 16 cities throughout Ontario. Many more actions across the province are planned in [the days ahead](#) - the October 15th Day of Action is coming up with over 45 events planned. Deena’s overarching message here was clear: we

² For a detailed background, see \$15 and Fairness’ November update here.

can't wait for someone else to take the lead; we need to take action now, to talk to people and connect with residents and workers on these issues. Anyone can [sign up](#) to join the movement, and even a few hours can have a huge impact. Alternatively (or additionally), take the two minutes needed to [email your MPP](#).

Deena expects changes to labour laws to be announced within the coming weeks. This is a critical time, she urged. As though to emphasize this, government has spoken of putting the minimum wage increase to \$15/hour on “pause” as of this writing.

[Updates](#)

[Housing](#)

Helen Luu ([Advocacy Centre of Tenants of Ontario](#)) discussed the urgency in protecting rent control and in pushing for more affordable housing. While Premier Ford said he would not remove rent control, there is some fear that the maximum could be increased, leaving tenants more vulnerable to cost swings and less stable in what is often an already unaffordable living situation. Helen brought up examples of housing policy at every level of government, including the definition of affordable in Toronto,³ rent control and inclusionary zoning at the provincial level, and the [National Housing Strategy](#) at the federal level. ACTO launched the [Toronto housing pledge](#), and also created a [form letter to Minister Duclos](#) (Ministry of Families, Children, and Social Development) urging the federal government to legally recognize housing as a human right.

[Basic Income](#)

Tom Cooper ([Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction](#)) discussed the cancellation of the basic income pilot, and how participants had been planning for a full three years of basic income since the Progressive Conservatives had promised to keep the pilot in place after the election. Minister MacLeod recently announced the pilot would wind up in March 2019, and Tom noted that public pressure played a crucial role in extending the ‘runway.’ With the provincial government refusing to evaluate the research project, [Living Proof](#) and [Humans of Basic Income](#) have taken responsibility to document the experiences of pilot participants enrolled in what is the most robust basic income experiment currently underway anywhere in the world. Ongoing action also includes a legal challenge from Lindsay lawyer Mike Perry, who has started [a class action lawsuit](#) arguing breach of contract, and a [call from four mayors](#) for the federal government to take over the funding of the pilot.

³ A mayoral candidates’ debate included a discussion on market rates and affordability, and what that means for tenants.

Immigrants and Refugees

Victoria Wan ([Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic](#)) underscored the need for a differential and intersectional understanding of the impact of policies on immigrant and refugee communities. She noted how poverty reduction strategies often fail to explore the racialization of poverty, and how a racial equity lens should be used in the development of strategies, policies, and programs aimed at reducing poverty. There is also an ongoing need for disaggregated data to measure the effects of poverty and impacts of policies on a diverse population. Victoria discussed a newly-released report, [Every Child Counts](#), urging policy reform to provide benefits to all children in Canada regardless of the status of their parents.

Childcare

Alana Powell ([Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario](#)) provided information on the upcoming Provincial Week of Action to be held from October 14-21. AECEO has teamed up with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care to create an [Action Toolkit](#) for the week surrounding ECE Appreciation Day (October 16). AECEO was also inspired by Humans of Basic Income to highlight educators' stories through Humans of ECE which can be found in their [campaign tool kit](#). As part of the Professional Pay and Decent Work campaign, the AECEO and OCBCC are [pushing back](#) against the Province's decision to remove the For Profit Maximum Threshold, which carries the risk of an increased privatization of the ECE sector. They are also mobilizing local Decent Work Teams to protect the wins prior to the 2018 election and protect against potential future cuts in the early years' sector.

Concluding Thoughts

Trish wrapped up the call by reminding everyone of the urgency to act now. These are tough times, and will only get more difficult, but that means that it is time to bond together. We need to continue to find ways to connect with each other and to fight for positive change for everyone who is touched by poverty.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the joint teleconference. We are looking forward to continuing to see and hear from you.

Appendix: Full URLs of Links from the Summary

Government news on line-by-line review: <https://news.ontario.ca/tbs/en/2018/09/ontarios-government-for-the-people-restoring-trust-and-accountability-with-release-of-the-line-by-li.html>

Income Security Roadmap: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/income-security-roadmap-change>

ISAC's full action kit: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/social-assistance-reform/100-Days-Take-Action-Before-November-8-Full-Action-Kit.pdf>

ISAC's open letter to Min. MacLeod:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSegpJSrhWZ0CE8919Xv0qSAaAPMGB48AfbFQnByml_sjShRRA/viewform

ISAC's action kit: <http://incomesecurity.org/policy-advocacy/100-days-take-action-before-november-8/>

\$15 and Fairness events:

https://www.15andfairness.org/events?utm_campaign=onwide_09_19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=decentworknow

\$15 and Fairness sign-up: https://www.15andfairness.org/sign_up

\$15 and Fairness email your MPP: https://www.15andfairness.org/email_your_mpp

National Housing Strategy: <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/>

TO Housing Pledge: <https://tohousingpledge.ca/>

Right to Housing: <https://www.acto.ca/campaign/right-to-housing-in-law/>

Living Proof: <https://www.facebook.com/LivingProofHamilton/>

Humans of Basic Income: <https://www.jessiegolem.com/humans-of-basic-income/>

Basic income legal action: <https://hamiltonpoverty.ca/preview/2018/08/29/legal-action-commences-to-protect-basic-income-participants/>

Basic income call for federal funding: <https://hamiltonpoverty.ca/preview/2018/09/05/four-pilot-city-mayors-ask-feds-to-step-in-save-basic-income-project/>

Every Child Counts: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/child-benefits/Every-Child-Counts-Canada-Child-Benefit-for-All-September-2018.pdf>

AECEO/OCCBC action toolkit:

https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/aeceo/pages/2149/attachments/original/1537384406/Action_Toolkit.pdf?1537384406

AECEO's campaign toolkit: http://www.aeceo.ca/campaign_tool_kit

AECEO/OCCBC memo to Min. of Education:

http://www.aeceo.ca/response_to_ministry_of_education_memo