

### **Poverty Hurts Children and Families – All Ontario Children Deserve Strong Beginnings**

Today on National Child Day, Ontario Campaign 2000 renews the call for ending child and family poverty to be a top priority for the Ontario government. There is no time to spare because the impact of poverty on children is the greatest, affecting both their physical and mental health. Although there was a slight 1.6% drop in the child poverty rate from 2015 to 2016, one in five children (544,710) under the age of 18 still lives in poverty in Ontario – this is unacceptable. With the recent changes announced by the Ontario government concerning social assistance, labour law rollbacks, and closing of the Ontario Child Advocate office, it is a difficult time for children and families who live in or are on the brink of poverty.

One in seven Ontario families with children lives in poverty. Many low income families face difficulty in stretching the income they receive and must decide whether to spend it on housing, childcare, transportation, or food. Social assistance rates have remained low in Ontario for the past two decades – in 1997, Ontario Works rates were cut by 21.6% and the Ontario Disability Support (ODSP) rates were frozen. By 2005, social assistance rates began to rise but did not keep up with inflation over the next decade. In 2007, thanks to the introduction of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB), welfare income for families with children rose and received another bump in 2015 because of the Canada Child Benefit. The OCB is an important benefit and Ontario Campaign 2000 recommends that the government increase the rate by \$100 per child in 2019. An increase can help low income families afford necessities but also buy things their children love, including healthy snacks and toys or enrol them in extracurricular activities.

Another important issue for low income families is finding employment that pays fair wages and enables them to thrive. The Ontario government's proposed labour legislation removes many of the desperately needed reforms passed in 2017. Families can no longer look forward to \$15/hr minimum wage on January 1, 2019; equal pay for equal work; 10 days of personal emergency leave days (2 days of which were to be paid); fair scheduling; or easier ability to join a union. These provisions were a step towards helping low income families escape poverty. A higher minimum wage would have provided better purchasing power for families and less stress for parents juggling between decisions where children always pay the price – they are the ones who miss out on school field trips and extracurricular activities. Fair scheduling meant parents would have dependable work schedules and not have to scramble last minute to find childcare because they were suddenly called in to work. Equal pay for equal work meant part-time and contract workers would receive the same hourly pay as full-time workers who did the same job. The new changes bring low income families back to square one where they must contend with low wages and precarious work. Once again, the lives of children in poverty are at stake – chronic illness, stress and anxiety are hard on young bodies.

The closing of the office of the Ontario Child Advocate (OCA) is another cause of alarm for many across the province who are concerned about the well-being of children and their rights. The OCA was more than an investigative body – the office gave a voice to marginalized youth, particularly Indigenous youth and those within the child welfare system by listening to their solutions for gaps and problems. Children in care are vulnerable and child advocates uphold their rights and voices. Ontario has joined Prince Edward Island and the North West Territories as being the only provinces and territory without a child advocate office.

Ontario Campaign 2000 urges the government to reconsider their recent decisions on social assistance, labour legislation, and closing of the OCA office. All families deserve a strong beginning and this is only possible if there is a strong and durable social safety net in place ready to catch them if they fall and ensure they can get back on their feet.

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