

## Province-wide Teleconference - Income Security and Workers' Rights in Ontario: What Next?

*Hosted by Ontario Campaign 2000, January 16, 2019*

On January 16, 2019, Ontario Campaign 2000 brought together individuals and organizations across Ontario to discuss recent changes to social assistance and workers' protections — and discuss next steps for advocacy. Jennefer Laidley (Income Security Advocacy Centre) and Pam Frache (Workers' Action Centre) presented. Time was dedicated to participants' questions and key messages concerning the proposed and legislated changes. Below, we have provided the summary of the teleconference with speakers' remarks, comments from attendees and a list of additional resources.

### Teleconference Summary

**Fatima Altaf** ([Family Service Toronto](#), [Ontario Campaign 2000](#)) began with a land acknowledgement, provided introductions, and recognized participants from across the province. She laid out the goals of the teleconference which were to inform, engage, and support each other to act. Fatima mentioned that this was also an opportunity for Ontario Campaign 2000 to learn how they could be a resource and means of support to individuals and organizations in their work to support people living in poverty across Ontario.

### Income Security

**Jennefer Laidley** ([ISAC](#)) discussed four important takeaway points from Minister Lisa MacLeod's announcement of proposed changes to social assistance programs on November 22, 2018:

- 1) there was no rate increase to social assistance rates;
- 2) [earned income exemptions](#) were increased to \$300 for those on OW and \$6000 per year for those on ODSP;
- 3) the [definition of disability](#) will change to align with the federal government; and
- 4) the Ontario government plans to consolidate benefits into a [health spending account](#).

The first three changes risk pushing people on social assistance further into poverty as some may not be eligible for ODSP due to episodic or less severe disabilities and higher clawback rates on earned income. The questions that arise around the health spending account are, will there be enough money for people to pay for health-related needs considering high costs? And, how accessible will the account be? Jennefer highlighted how important it is to inform people of these proposed changes. There are also many resources available on ISAC's website that clearly explain these concerns.

### Workers' Rights

**Pam Frache** ([WAC](#), [\\$15 and Fairness](#)) spoke about the recent changes to the Employment Standards Act and Labour Relations Act which undercut much of what working people had advocated for years. With previous legislation, there was relative progress towards strengthening workers' rights and ensuring equal pay for equal work. Pam noted that current practice normalizes paying people less if they are part-time, casual, or temporary workers (employment in which women and racialized workers are over-represented). Another common practice is that many factories use temp agencies to avoid health and safety regulations which is why equal pay for equal work was an important win under the previous Bill 148. \$15 and Fairness also campaigned for seven paid emergency days and received two paid sick days in Bill 148, which was important for workers.

With the introduction of Bill 47, the minimum wage will remain frozen at \$14/hr until 2020 and then be indexed to inflation. Historical trends show that from 1995 to 2015, the minimum wage was frozen for 12 out of 20 years. The emergency leave days are now further divided and none of them is paid.

Pam drew attention to the need for participants to:

- Ensure that the public learns more about what Bill 47 means for workers across Ontario.
- Highlight that Bill 66, an omnibus bill which includes provisions on the environment and pension plans, is an affront to labour and employment standards and introduces precarity into the construction industry.
- Use the months ahead to inform and engage people.

### **Conversation with Participants**

Fatima of Ontario Campaign 2000 asked the participants to think about the following two questions:

- 1. You have five minutes to speak with a friend. What would be some of the key messages you would share with them about the changes to workers' rights and social assistance?***

Comments:

- Key message for middle- and higher-income earners about social assistance:  
The risk of excluding more people from benefits means anyone who faces a sudden illness or trauma in their life will not be included under the proposed new definition of disability. The proposed changes potentially affect everyone across Ontario who might need social assistance at a vulnerable moment in their life.
- People remaining in poverty costs the province; the more money we invest in programs and services and give towards low income families, the more direct the benefit to the economy as they spend back in their own communities.

- 2. You are interested in connecting and collaborating with others. What are some ways you can involve your communities in creating awareness and engagement about the changes? And also, if you have been active within your communities in the past few months, what actions you have taken?***

Comments:

- Social Justice staff within the Anglican Diocese in Toronto are putting together materials, infographics, factsheets, toolkit and hoping to meet with MPPs in the Golden Horseshoe region.
- Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Group is focused on understanding the materials and resources available to be better informed and then sharing the information with others.
- Organize around days that centre the experience and stories of workers and people experiencing poverty: March 15: Bill 66; March 21<sup>st</sup>: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (migrant workers' rights); February 23-24 will be for provincial organizing days.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Fatima concluded the teleconference by thanking participants for their comments and key messages. She emphasized that this is a particularly difficult time for Ontarians who are living in poverty and everyone needs to work together to help drive positive change for those going through difficulties in their life and who are directly affected by these changes. Ontario Campaign 2000's hope was that the

teleconference was useful for hearing new ideas about how attendees inform, engage, and act to fight poverty within their own local communities.

## Resources

### **Income Security and Social Assistance**

#### **Backgrounders:**

- “Working while on OW: What Minister MacLeod’s changes to income exemptions would mean”: <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/working-while-on-ow-what-minister-macleods-changes-to-income-deductions-would-mean/>
- “What changing the ODSP definition of disability would mean”: <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/changing-the-odsp-definition-of-disability/>
- “Many questions, few answers, and great risk for people with disabilities” (our initial response to the Nov 22 announcement): <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/many-questions-few-answers-and-great-risk-for-people-with-disabilities/>

#### **Webinar:**

- “Changes to social assistance: What was announced, what it means, and what’s next”: <https://yourlegalrights.on.ca/webinar/changes-social-assistance-what-was-announced-what-it-means-and-what-s-next>

#### **Advocacy with MPPs:**

- How to find your Ontario MPP: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/other/How-to-find-your-Ontario-Member-of-Provincial-Parliament.docx>
- Meeting with your MPP: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/social-assistance-reform/Meeting-With-Your-MPP.docx>

#### **Other helpful resources:**

- “Myths and Realities of Social Assistance in Ontario”: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/social-assistance-general/Myths-and-Realities-of-Social-Assistance-in-Ontario-Sept-2018.docx>
- “Fast Facts: Poverty and Social Assistance”: <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/social-assistance-general/Fast-Facts-Poverty-and-Social-Assistance.pdf>

### **Workers’ Rights and \$15 and Fairness**

#### **15andFairness.org**

- <https://www.15andfairness.org/resources>

- scroll down or click fact sheets

[workersactioncentre.org](http://workersactioncentre.org)

- From home page, click on language preference

[migrantrights.ca](http://migrantrights.ca)