

Media Statement: Monday September 26, 2011

Challenge issued to all Hamilton area candidates: Tweet your support for social assistance reform!

A new report from **Hamilton's Public Health Department** is revealing that for thousands of recipients of social assistance in our City, the inability to afford nutritious food is having a huge impact on health.

The **Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction** is therefore challenging Hamilton's provincial election candidates to reform Ontario's broken social assistance system. The Roundtable is calling on all local candidates to support social assistance reform by using social media service *Twitter* to issue the following message to their followers on *Thursday, September 29th*, (one week prior to election-day):

@Hamiltonpoverty If elected, I will work to reform social assistance in Ontario #sareview #VoteOn

Twitter has become an extremely popular medium for candidates and their supporters to issue statements about policies and observations on the Ontario provincial election. Most main-line party candidates have Twitter accounts and "tweet" (or send out messages) regularly. "The Poverty Roundtable sees the rise of social media as an opportunity to engage candidates and their supporters in a conversation about poverty reduction priorities – including social assistance reform" said Poverty Roundtable Chair Howard Elliott.

Social assistance reform is a key priority for the Poverty Roundtable in its Action Plan. Earlier this year, the provincial government appointed two commissioners, Francis Lankin and Dr. Munir Sheikh to review social assistance in Ontario and develop recommendations for reform. In July, the Poverty Roundtable hosted a community dialogue with the commissioners attended by more than 200 people at the Hamilton Convention Centre. An interim report by the Commission is expected later this fall.

Ontario social assistance recipients along with community advocates have pushed to reform the system of inadequate rates that relegate recipients to deep poverty. "Inadequate rates combined with 800 complex and sometimes contradictory rules means thousands of Hamiltonians do not have the supports needed to move out of poverty" said Peter Hutton of the Roundtable's working group on social assistance reform.

Ontario Works replaced General Welfare in Ontario in 1996 and rates were cut by 22%. Social assistance rates have risen at or below inflation since 2003 and in real terms remain \$70 lower than they were in 1994 – if accounting for inflation, rates are 41% less than they were fifteen years ago.

"The current system is broken, neither serving taxpayers nor its recipients", noted Roundtable member and ODSP recipient Laura Cattari "We don't want the Social Assistance Commission's report to sit on a shelf. We hope this twitter pledge will encourage candidates to engage in a dialogue on the need for reform."

The Roundtable will issue a statement on Friday, September 30th indicating how many local candidates participated. Candidates who do not have twitter accounts may share their perspective through email, fax or other means.

Quick Facts on Social Assistance in Hamilton:

- In August 2011, nearly 62,000 children, women and men in Hamilton lived in households in receipt of either Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program.
- According to Hamilton Food Share, 75% of all food bank users receive their main source of income from Ontario social assistance benefits
- A single individual on Ontario Works receives approximately \$592 a month in social assistance benefits. Average Rent for a Bachelor Apartment in Hamilton is \$510 / A nutritious food basket for a single person according to the City's Public Health Department is \$240.78 putting recipients \$115.78 in the hole and unable to purchase other necessities such as household or personal supplies, clothing or a telephone services to conduct a 'job search'.
- The Poverty Roundtable has endorsed the work of lawyer Craig Foye of Hamilton Community Legal Clinic (www.hamiltonjustice.ca) to develop an evidence-based system for setting social assistance rates that reflects the real costs of living in Ontario communities.

The Twitter-verse

@Hamiltonpoverty is the Twitter account for the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

#sareview is a hash tag (topic grouping) for Ontario social assistance reform

#VoteON is a popular topic grouping for the 2011 Ontario election