

# Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

Mary Marrone

Jennefer Laidley

Income Security Advocacy Centre

# Who is ISAC?

- “Income Security Advocacy Centre” – since 2001
- Part of community legal clinic system
- Work at provincial level to improve system for all
- Advance the interests and rights of low-income Ontarians around income security programs and employment
- Test-case litigation, policy advocacy, community organizing, public education
- Website: [www.incomesecurity.org](http://www.incomesecurity.org)

# Who are you #1?

- What is your interest in this issue?
  - I am on OW or ODSP and/or am a low-income worker
  - I provide services to low-income people in my community
  - I'm a benefit program administrator
  - Other

# Who are you #2?

- What area of the province are you in?
  - GTA
  - North
  - Southwest
  - East

# What we're covering today

- Income Security: A Roadmap for Change
  - What is it?
  - Who wrote it?
  - Why is it important?
  - What does it recommend that government do?
  - How would the recommendations make things better?
  - What can you do? Opportunities for action

# Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

- Report released November 2, 2017
  - Ten-year plan to transform income security system in Ontario, including social assistance
- Three working groups – Minister asked for recommendations:
  - Income Security Reform Working Group: advocates (including Mary Marrone), policy experts, lived experience, program managers, private sector
  - First Nations Income Security Reform Working Group
  - Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security

# Background: System hasn't kept up

- Income security system designed for workforce of the past: long-term good-paying jobs
  - Today: low-pay, part-time, temporary jobs more common, with no benefits and little security
- Many people have long-standing barriers to work and social inclusion because of:
  - Intergenerational trauma and poverty
  - History of colonialism
  - Systemic racism
  - Mental health and addiction issues

# Background: Income support in Ontario

- Social Assistance programs
  - Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program in place since 1998
  - Goal was to make programs more difficult to access and more punitive, to “encourage” people into “first available job”
  - Deliberately inadequate
    - 22% benefit rate cut for OW
    - ~8 years of rate freeze for ODSP



# Background...

- Eligibility Rules
  - A lot of surveillance – caseworker needs to know everything about you
    - e.g., where you live, who you live with, if your kids are in school...
  - Rigid and punitive – sanctions, not supports
    - e.g., frequent benefit suspensions – cheques get cut off for minor infractions
- Erosion of other programs (like EI, WSIB)
  - Means more people rely on social assistance

# Background...

- Programs haven't changed much since 1990's
  - Law and policy framework “softened” and tweaked through small regulation changes
  - Most significant changes in last two years:
    - Increase in asset exemptions
    - Treatment of child support
- Limited supports for low-income working people
  - GST credit, Ontario Trillium Benefit (OTB)
  - Federal Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB)

# Background...

- Child benefits: The only significant change
  - For both low-wage workers and people on OW / ODSP
  - Federal and provincial benefits
    - \$7,780 per child per year for kids under 6
    - \$6,780 per child per year for kids 6-17
  - Very good for families with children but don't help growing number of single working-age adults and couples without kids
  - Using tax system to deliver creates barriers

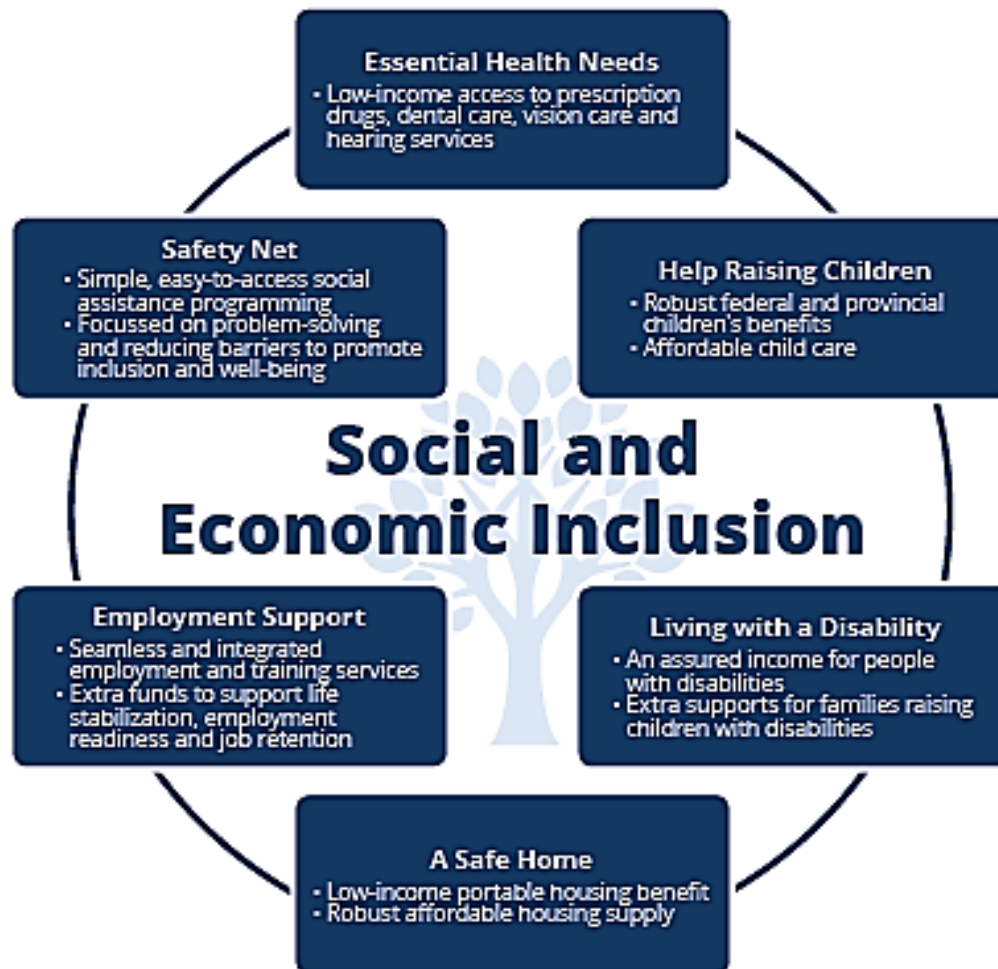
# Income Security: A Roadmap for Change

- First report in 30 years to recommend major investment and improvements to programs that affect the lives of low-income people
- Fundamentally different approach that puts people and their needs & rights at the centre of the system
- Recognizes the differential impact of poverty on disadvantaged groups
  - Indigenous peoples, racialized people, people with disabilities and other marginalized communities

# Vision for Ontario's Income Security System

*All individuals are treated with respect and dignity and are inspired and equipped to reach their full potential. People have equitable access to a comprehensive and accountable system of income and in-kind support that provides an adequate level of financial assistance and promotes economic and social inclusion, with particular attention to the needs and experience of Indigenous peoples.*

# Future State – Where we want to get to



# Guiding Principles

- Human rights-based equity lens
  - Particular attention to the needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples, racialized people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations

# Guiding Principles

- Adequacy
- Rights
- Reconciliation
- Access to Services
- Promoting economic and social inclusion
- Equity and fairness
- Sustainability
- Respect and dignity



# Key Action Areas

1. Achieving income adequacy
2. Engage the whole income security system
3. Transforming social assistance
4. Helping those in deepest poverty
5. Responding to unique concerns & needs of First Nations and Indigenous communities

# Action Area 1: Income Adequacy

- Adopt definition of income adequacy and commit to achieve it over 10 years
  - Adequacy target should be the Low-Income Measure, plus 30% for people with disabilities (extra cost of living)
    - \$21,929 / year
    - \$28,507 / year for people with disabilities
  - Create a Made-in-Ontario market basket measure to track progress on adequacy

# Action Area 2: Engaging the Income Security System

- Benefits for all low-income people in Ontario
  - Core health benefits
    - Drug, dental, vision and hearing
  - Portable housing benefit
    - To address gap between affordable rent and real costs
  - Working Income Tax Benefit
    - Work with federal government to improve access and amounts

# Area 2: The Income Security System

- Benefits for all low-income people in Ontario
  - Child benefits
    - Protecting and improving benefits for children
  - Access to Justice
    - Investigate alternatives to CRA and Tax Court to resolve disputes around eligibility for tax-delivered benefits

# Action Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Change the laws so that OW and ODSP will
  - Recognize long-term need and multiple barriers
  - Change role of caseworkers from welfare police to case collaborators
  - Promote social and economic inclusion
  - Maintain all rights of appeal of denial of benefits

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Move to culture of trust, collaboration & problem-solving
  - Comprehensive assessment using trauma-informed lens
    - Identify people's strengths, needs & barriers as early as possible
  - Develop support plan based on person's most immediate needs (e.g., housing, escaping unsafe environment, etc.)
  - Front-line workers support individual to create plans that reflect personal goals and promote autonomy

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Supporting persons with disabilities
  - Maintain and strengthen ODSP
  - Keep current definition of disability
  - Improve access:
    - Fairer application process with supports to apply
    - Better decision-making on who qualifies as a “person with a disability”

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Assured Income for persons with disabilities:
  - Co-design a new program with persons with disabilities
  - Move away from welfare model
  - Features:
    - Income tested
    - Stacking benefits
    - Tax based definition of income
    - Flexibility to adjust in-year income changes
    - Safe to move in and out of employment



# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- First Nations-based approach
  - Goals should include promoting social inclusion and community engagement
  - Holistic approach to service delivery
    - Ensure physical, spiritual, mental, emotional well-being
    - Focus on well-being of the family and community as well as the individual
    - A range of services to address real needs for training and supports – literacy, mental health referrals, life stabilization, etc.

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- New Flat Rate Structure:
  - Collapse “basic needs” and “shelter” into one rate
    - E.g., single on OW gets \$337 basic needs and \$384 shelter (maximum) = \$721
  - Everyone gets full basic rate regardless of living situation or actual rent
    - Couples get a couple rate – with “spouse” defined by family law

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

- Benefit of Flat Rate Structure:
  - People who are homeless, in institutions, shelters, or “board and lodge” would get full flat rate
    - Currently get less than basic rate amounts so would bring those who get lowest amounts up
    - Eliminates reporting on rent, where you live, who you live with, etc. – less surveillance and intrusion in your life
    - People on OW / ODSP in social housing get more money monthly, and more rent goes to municipal housing providers = better quality housing
    - Frees caseworker to help, not police

# Area 3: Transforming Social Assistance

## Other recommendations:

- Change definition of spouse from 3 months of living together to 3 years (align with Ontario family law)
- Keep special purpose benefits until income adequacy is reached
  - E.g., Special Diet for various medical conditions
- Allow people to keep some of other benefits – progressively higher exemptions for EI and CPP-D
- Allow people to keep RRSP's and TFSA's

# Action Area 4: Helping Those in Deepest Poverty

- Immediate increases to social assistance rates:
  - OW: 10% + 7% + 5% (i.e., over three years)
  - ODSP: 5% + 5% + 5% (i.e., over three years)
  - Move to flat rate structure with first year increase
    - Eliminates lower rate categories
    - Brings everyone up

# Action Area 5: First Nations and Indigenous Peoples

- Recognize right of First Nations to design and deliver their own social programs – and take steps to get there
- Provide funding for benefits and administration in amounts that recognize the needs, realities and issues of First Nations communities

## Area 5: First Nations and Indigenous Peoples

- Reforms must respond to the unique history, diversity and cultures of urban Indigenous and First Nations communities across the province
- Reforms must build on the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Recommendations and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

# Where it leads: Outcomes

- People have greater control over their own lives
  - Are able to meet their essential needs
  - Have improved sense of personal agency, respect and dignity
  - Are empowered and equipped to better achieve personal success, however they define it
- System is easier to use, connects people to supports and services, responds to diverse and changing needs
  - Front-line staff are empowered to make a positive difference in people's lives
- Greater social and economic inclusion



# What's next?

- Government is looking for feedback until January 5, 2018
  - Lots of consultations over many years but...
  - Very important opportunity to push for positive action now
  - We have created tools you can use to give feedback
    - What you like, what you think is missing, what's most urgent for government to do right now
- Government will release its own “Income Security Strategy” in early 2018
  - Need to push them to get it right

# What's next?

- 2017-2018 Budget
  - Last budget before election in June
  - Will demonstrate level of government's commitment to change
  - Anyone can make submissions to Minister of Finance

# What's next?

- Provincial Election
  - On or before June 7, 2018
  - All parties need to state clearly where they stand
  - What is their position on income security in Ontario?
  - What will they do to help low-income people?
  - Will they adopt the Roadmap vision and recommendations?

# Resources

- Roadmap: Tools you can use to have your voice heard
  - Backgrounder and Feedback Kit: <http://incomesecurity.org/policy-advocacy/a-roadmap-for-change-tools-you-can-use-to-have-your-voice-heard/>
  - Deadline for feedback: January 5, 2018
- Budget 2018: Write to Minister of Finance
  - The Honourable Charles Sousa  
c/o Budget Secretariat  
95 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, ON M7A 1Z1
  - Email: [submissions@ontario.ca](mailto:submissions@ontario.ca)
  - Fax: 416-325-0969
- Election 2018
  - We will provide resources in the spring

# Your turn!

- Questions?