

Shifting fight for child benefit

Any new program to help kids should include families on welfare, activists say

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For Scarlett Seguin, an extra \$122 a month would mean buying groceries for her 20-month-old son and not using a food bank.

It would mean using coin-operated machines to wash his clothes instead of the kitchen sink. And it would mean being able to afford books and toys at Goodwill or the Sally Ann.

"New things are out of the question when you are on welfare," says the 23-year-old Toronto single mom, who plans to finish high school in the fall and train to become a child and youth worker.

She's hoping that if Finance Minister Greg Sorbara introduces an Ontario child benefit in his budget this month that families on welfare will get it.

And she hopes it's worth at least \$122 – the portion of Ottawa's national child benefit supplement the province has been clawing back from families on welfare since the previous Mike Harris government. The money – an estimated \$300 million annually – has been used to help low-income working families.

Seguin's son Jahvonte is among about 200,000 Ontario children affected by the provincial clawback.

"Keeping up with finances is very hard," says Seguin, whose monthly welfare cheque amounts to just \$322 after paying rent. "I have to decide between buying food and diapers. It's driving me to the point where I don't know what to do."

Anti-poverty activists have been pushing Dalton McGuinty's Liberals to keep their 2003 election promise to end the clawback so that kids whose parents are on social assistance are treated the same as those in low-income working families.

But with Sorbara expected to introduce a new child benefit instead, activists have been forced to shift gears and are now fighting to ensure that children like Jahvonte don't get left out again.

"Our bottom line is that children on social assistance get this benefit too and that all low-income families are better off at the end of the day," says Laurel Rothman, of the Family Service Association of Toronto.

In a January letter to McGuinty, more than a dozen social justice groups and individuals threw their support behind the concept as a way to improve the lives of low-income families.

They did it understanding the benefit would effectively end the clawback for welfare families. While the benefit may be phased in, they expect a "substantial" down payment this year. "A new (benefit) which de-links income support for children from the social assistance system in Ontario and, over time, provides the same child-related benefits to every family depending only on income, would be a crucial step towards structural reform of income security," they wrote.

It wasn't on anyone's radar last October when Liberal MPP Deb Matthews floated the idea of an Ontario child benefit during a meeting of academics and social activists in the 24th floor boardroom of BCE Place.

The group, struggling with how to put poverty reduction on the provincial agenda, was startled by Matthews' suggestion. But the parliamentary secretary to Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur was clear: It was time to put philosophical differences aside. At stake was potentially the first significant provincial effort to help vulnerable Ontarians in 15 years.

For some at the meeting, like **Sarah Blackstock of the Income Security Advocacy Centre**, the goalposts had suddenly shifted.

She had spent the last three years leading the spirited "Hands Off" campaign to end the provincial clawback and wasn't about to abandon the need for equity.

The benefit would have to put the clawback money back in the pockets of welfare families, Blackstock, Rothman and others argued. And it would have to be the cornerstone of a broader poverty reduction strategy that tackled minimum wage, health and dental benefits, child care and affordable housing.

Others, like Michael Oliphant of Daily Bread Food Bank and Michael Mendelson of the Caledon Institute for Social Policy focused on using the benefit to trigger reform, moving welfare from a punitive needs-based system to one based on income.

Meanwhile, social policy experts like John Stapleton, a former welfare bureaucrat, were anxious to fix design flaws in Ontario's existing system.

Low-income working families with children under 7 are already eligible to receive a provincial child care supplement of about \$90 per month. So folding that supplement into a new benefit to go to children up to age 18 would be an improvement, Stapleton says.

It would also put Ontario on equal footing with other provinces that have restructured welfare and added child benefits, such as Quebec, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

These were just some of positions debated during two subsequent meetings at the Family Services Association offices on Church St. and in numerous emails that ultimately led to a consensus agreement among the disparate voices in late December. "Everyone compromised," says one participant. "Now we're waiting to see what the province does."

Blackstock, for one, is cautiously optimistic.

"I just hope it marks a shift at Queen's Park among all parties and among the public where we no longer stigmatize and demonize the poor," she says. "If a child's parent is unable to work, he should not be condemned to a life of poverty."