

## **Value of monthly child benefit cheque questioned**

**By Sean Chase**  
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Renfrew County's social services committee is calling on the province to continue funding back-to-school and winter clothing allowances, both slated to be axed in favour of the new monthly Ontario Child Benefit.

Starting in July, eligible low-income families will receive a monthly cheque of up to \$50 per child. It will replace the current Back-to-School allowance of \$134 per child, paid out in August, and the Winter Clothing allowance of \$111, which comes in November.

While the province contends the money will be spread out over the year, some committee members felt this will create real hardship for families counting on these allowances to provide for their children. "There's going to be increased demands on our food banks and on our other services," said Deep River mayor Ann Aikens, chairwoman of the social services committee.

Annual payment of the Ontario Child Benefit will result in \$600 per child spread out over 12 months. With the introduction of monthly payments, social assistance benefits are being restructured, explained the county's Ontario Works manager Cheryl Leigh. The seasonal Back-to-School and Winter Clothing allowances will be removed from Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support program and rolled into the new initiative. Recipients are being told to put money aside so they can adjust to the loss of these allowances.

There will some changes to the upper tier's responsibilities, she added.

"While social assistance benefits are cost-shared 80/20 between the province and municipalities, the Ontario Child Benefit will be fully funded by the province and municipalities will not be required to cost-share this benefit," said Ms. Leigh. "As a result of social assistance restructuring, overall social assistance expenditures for municipalities will decline."

The county is projected \$60,000 for the 2008 budget calendar year. With the introduction of the Ontario Child Benefit, the National Child Benefit Supplement, a federal/provincial initiative, will no longer be deducted from chargeable income. Those savings will result in \$84,000 coming back to the county for investment in programs that help prevent and reduce child poverty.

The committee deliberated what to do with both amounts.

Greater Madawaska mayor Peter Emon suggested using the \$60,000 as emergency assistance to families that will be adversely affected by the loss of these seasonal allowances. However, McNab/Braeside mayor Mary Campbell said that might send the wrong message.

"There's this expectation that we are the safety net and we have to be careful," she said.

The committee agreed with Renfrew County warden Janice Visneskie that the county will discontinue supporting the program if the province does. They elected to allocate the \$84,000 as a one-time payment to the Canadian Poverty Action Network for its backpack program.

The committee voted to forward a resolution to county council from the Income Security Advocacy Centre.

The resolution calls for Deb Matthews, the minister of Child and Youth Services and Madeleine Meilleur, minister of Community and Social Services, to restore the allowances.

To be eligible for the Ontario Child Benefit, families must ensure they've filed their income tax return and have their children (under age 18) registered with the Canada Child Tax Benefit.

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