

Benefits Reform Action Group

To all MLAs
Nova Scotia Legislature

December 12, 2016

Dear sir, madam,

Several members of the Benefits Reform Action Group (BRAG) recently had the opportunity to attend Round 2 of the ESIA Stakeholder engagement sessions hosted by the Department of Community Services on the Transformation of the Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) Program. BRAG is coalition of people who receive income assistance and advocates for ESIA recipients.

We appreciated the opportunity to attend this meeting. We do have serious concerns about the general direction the Department appears to be taking the ESIA program. We are writing this letter and addressing it to all MLAs, to expand on our concerns. We are asking you to bring these concerns to the Minister of Community Services, the Standing Committee on Community Services and the ESIA Transformation Team.

Our concerns are as follows:

We believe that the ESIA Transformation meeting did not address the issue of inadequate ESIA rates of assistance. It is our understanding that no new funding will be made available to increase the basic, shelter or special needs allowances received monthly by ESIA recipients. This decision fails to address the important fact that current ESIA rates are completely insufficient. We believe that no Departmental transformation will be successful unless this very basic fact is addressed.

We are also troubled that the proposed streamlining and rationalization efforts are structured around a model that segments ESIA recipients according to their distance from the labour market, e.g. their ability to be employed.

This lens is too narrow and regressive which will lead to success being measured solely on the basis of people finding employment. We propose that the Department consider a model that is primarily based on the individual needs of recipients, e.g. their physical environment, educational needs, health requirements as they move toward independence and health.

Finally, we fear that the Department's siloed approach to transformation ignores other government departments that income assistance recipients frequently have dealings with. In

particular we are thinking of the departments of Health and Wellness, Justice, Labour and Advanced Education, and Education and Early Childhood Development.

When we raised these issues at both the Halifax and Dartmouth sessions, we did not feel that we were being heard.

We hope that the Department of Community Services will involve advocacy groups such as BRAG in a more meaningful way as the transformation project unfolds.

Sincerely,

Kendall Worth
Chair Benefits Reform Action Group
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