

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 14, 2017

ANTI-POVERTY ACTIVISTS DEMAND JOINT AND TRANSPARENT COLLABORATION ON FUTURE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REDESIGN IN NOVA SCOTIA

Community representatives across Nova Scotia's anti-poverty and social justice networks are calling on the provincial government to engage in a collaborative redesign of the Employment Support and Income Assistance program. This call to action comes on the heels of almost three years of redesign of the program by the government that has left people on income assistance without an increase.

Community advocates and first voice people are not satisfied with the way the government has handled community engagement with the redesign of the program, thus far – which has mostly been done without *meaningful* collaboration with community members.

“We know that that the Department of Community has spent lots of money on consultant fees in this process,” says Elizabeth Goodridge, anti-poverty activist. “The community is not satisfied with the process to date. We have been left out and we want to be active partners in the positive redesign of this program.”

The community insists that social assistance rates be immediately increased in the 2018/19 budget regardless of further consultation. “No matter what poverty measure you use, no household in Nova Scotia receives enough income support to meet their essential needs,” says Christine Saulnier, Nova Scotia Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. “The only true way to begin to address systematic oppression and uphold human rights within the social assistance program is to immediately increase the amount of financial support provided with planned incremental investments for everyone to eventually have adequate support.”

Community representatives call on the government to engage in a meaningful collaboration process. This means ensuring that the people receiving Income Assistance and their allies work effectively in partnership with the Department of Community Services to achieve common goals and outcomes for the benefit of people in Nova Scotia. This process should:

1. Conduct a 6-month formal consultation, with a working group comprised of jointly identified service providers and first voice individuals and their advocates prior to any further ESIA program changes.
2. Develop a clear path to current and future community collaboration to the ESIA program and services.

3. Work with people with first-hand experience as recipients of social assistance and their advocates and allies from the earliest possible stage to design social assistance programs and services, policies and legislative framework. This should be for the current reform process as well as any other change to legislation or policy in future, both internal and external.
4. Remove barriers that may prevent individuals and organizations contributing to collaboration (travel costs, childcare, stipend for first-voice people, food etc).
5. Give early notice of forthcoming consultations, providing materials in advance and in an accessible format, allowing enough time for organizations to include their service users, and employees in preparing responses.
6. Develop an effective and transparent design and development of the ESIA program and services using a lens inclusive of human rights, social determinants of health, gender and rural communities.
7. Using consultation, change the legislative framework for provincial social assistance in a way that sets the foundation for a culture of trust, collaboration and problem solving. Develop and introduce new legislation to govern the provincial social assistance program.
8. Ensure procedural fairness is included in all aspects of the social assistance program through adequate policies, procedures, practices and a timely appeal mechanism. This should include the establishment of a research body- an academic, institution/other, must be established to review the existing appeal process and develop recommendations for new mechanisms that support fair, transparent and efficient access to benefits and appeal processes. This should include the option of an appeals body that is independent of the Department of Community Services to protect against the withholding of services and supports that the program it is mandated to provide.
9. Provide a transparent report on the implementation and associated outcomes and indicators, to be updated annually and made publicly available by the Province.
 - a. Establish an annual, publicly available report that will outline progress on this Agenda for Reform's recommendations, including progress against outcomes
 - b. Establish a third-party body who will review and comment on the annual progress report and provide their comments to the Cabinet.
 - c. Require that both the annual report and the third-party comments be tabled in the Legislature.

The undersigned call on the Nova Scotia government to reform the social assistance system by significantly increasing assistance rates and embarking on a more meaningful and collaborative process of social assistance reform. Social assistance reform must eradicate the systemic discrimination and collective punishment embedded in the *Employment Support and Income*

Assistance program. This Agenda is to ensure that people who receive income support under the *Employment Support and Income Assistance* program are treated with dignity and respect and their human rights to non-discrimination, an adequate standard of living, and social security are protected and valued within the social assistance system.

SIGNATORIES

Women's Centres Connect (representing nine centres across Nova Scotia)

Nova Scotia College of Social Workers

Northend Community Health Centre

Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers

Imove/Uniacke Center for Community Development

Sisters of St. Martha, Antigonish

Dartmouth Family Centre/Dartmouth North Community Food Centre

The Stepping Stone Association

Schizophrenia Society of Nova Scotia

Dalhousie Legal Aid Service

Benefit Reform Action Group

Community Advocates Network

Vince Calderhead, Halifax Human Rights Lawyer

Jackie Torrens, Documentarian, My Week on Welfare

Michelle Mallette, Community Organizer and Anti-Poverty Activist

Bill Carr, Actor, Writer, Speaker and Co-Founder of Arc -The Atlantic Restorative Company

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-NS

For further information contact

Fiona Traynor @ (902) 209-6574
Dalhousie Legal Aid Service

Fiona.traynor@dal.ca

Megan MacBride @ (902) 441-9401
North End Community Health Centre

mmacbride@nehc.com

