Income Security Advocacy (ISAC) Submission Summary to the Social Assistance Review Commission

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The focus of this submission is what the ISAC sees as key policy issues for social assistance within Ontario. It examines why the Ontario Works (OW) program cannot reach successful poverty reduction and its strict financial eligibility criteria. This paper specifically analyzes the issues that single mothers, newcomers, and members of racialized groups are faced with. OW has failed to provide effective income support for those who are in need. They have also failed to aid and integrate people into the labour market. There is a fear that the lack of help will create a spiraling effect of more Canadians who will require assistance from OW. There is argument that the reason for low asset levels is because Ontario Works is considered a "last resort" program, which people turn to when they have no other financial options. The ISAC disagrees with the use of the term "last resort", as it alludes to the fact that applicants must be impoverished in order to qualify for these programs. They argue that OW should follow a more rational policy based approach. The ISAC sees social assistance programs as a way to aid those in need, providing help in long-term income support or securing a position in the labour market.

**1. Analysis of Current OW Program**

A "workfare" program whereby one should take on some form of work in order to be able to receive their benefits. The most significant feature of OW states that employment-related activities are used as a rewards system, recipients earning their benefit cheques. Under the "work-first" system, employment assistance may or may not be provided, and as such, recipients complain about the ineffectiveness of the programs. OW treats people as being "job-ready", putting the most vulnerable recipients at the highest risk of sanction for non-participation, condemned to extended poverty. In response to some of the newly established models for OW, benefit rates were cut as a way to purposefully make benefits inadequate, making social assistance a less attractive choice for Ontarians.

The rules and qualifications of Ontario Works recipients is arguably intrusive and impose a high degree of surveillance on beneficiaries. The ISAC focuses on the affects of these rules for single mothers, newcomers and racialized communities in particular. Many receive very little benefit that is not enough to meet their survival needs.

**2. Vision for a New Program support Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy**

They argue that there is a need for a policy with adequate and stable benefits. The ISAC believes the government holds the responsibility of protecting vulnerable workers from the labour market. They suggest strengthened regulations in the labour market through improvements to minimum wage and providing social programs for ease to those who are impacted by low-waged work. They feel that service and support should be made available to a wide range of Ontarians who are in need of education and training opportunities.

The goal of the ISAC vision is to set people back on the right track to labour market integration through:

 - employment training & education programs

 - a quality assurance process

 - services assessing each recipient's needs/barriers of employment
 - together with a social worker, develop plan for success

 - providing programs & services such as:
 - childcare and transportation

 - volunteer placements & internships for experiential learning (specifically for newcomers)