

**Awareness of Low Income Voices
Disabilities and Human Rights
People's Action Group
Alliance Against Poverty**

May 5, 2020

Dear Sir or Madam:

We are groups of people from Waterloo Region who have much in common; people who are experiencing life while living with low incomes, people living with disabilities, and people with a passion to improve our society's overall wellbeing. Our groups consist of people on pensions, people on assistance and people working in low paying and/or short term jobs and their friends and supporters.

As with most people, the discussions at our last meetings have been about the effect of Covid-19 on our own lives and the lives of the people living in our community.

We are happy to see much needed supports for workers and businesses, but we notice little support for those on OW, ODSP and seniors on pensions. We are aware that things keep changing, and some of us are having a great deal of difficulty knowing what we will get in the way of help and what we could access if we knew how. If we in our small groups are having this difficulty, many more in our community will as well!

We need to make a shift in how we value seniors and persons with disabilities, especially in long term care facilities. We see disregard for human rights of persons with disabilities in general, and we have to make a huge shift how we value human life, and respect their contributions to our society and culture.

We are troubled that the support for those on assistance is one time only, not renewable if the shutdown lasts longer. If you are on social assistance your worker has to approve the benefit through you showing you have increased expenses due to the pandemic. Every worker seems to be using different criteria and not all workers are allowing this for their clients. More importantly, not all clients know to ask for it. Particularly if they are self-isolating without internet or TV.

People who are homeless have even fewer options to be informed about supports they could be eligible for as they do not always have cell phones and now have less ability to connect to the internet, their workers, and even the social groups that usually support them. Drop-ins and meal programs, malls and public spaces where they could connect before are closed to them.

If people are willing to accept social assistance, they are only able to get \$343.00 for basic needs a month in a normal environment. The extra \$100 dollars could allow them one night in a motel, or a few extra meals if they can find a takeout restaurant. But many don't even know they can ask for it! Why is this not an automatic benefit during Covid? And, why is it a onetime benefit not tied to the duration of the closures?

For people living in supportive housing, the outside supports that they are used to coming in to help them have been curtailed. Tenants with addiction and mental health problems are having to use

telephone support rather than face to face. Safe injection supplies are hard to get. Hamper programs and community meal programs are delivered in fewer locations. House cleaning and some physical supports such as personal hygiene assistance have been further curtailed, and in many instances stopped all together, because of precautions and perceptions of personal safety. Smoking and pets at home are a coping mechanism for many persons with disabilities but a reason for many housekeepers to refuse coming into units. Medical conditions are being dealt with over the phone and when a visit to a health care provider is absolutely needed, transportation is very difficult to secure or ensure when needed.

Some of the emergency benefits made available during pandemic will be used to obtain necessities and create some safety and predictability with food and supplies .Low-income people are applying for the funds for this reason. However, they may accumulate debt if after the pandemic they are asked to give the money back. This repayment should not be acceptable. The most vulnerable and at-risk people reaching out for the same safety and security as the rest of the population should not be further burdened by being penalized for accepting money that was offered and needed. There should be no required repayment nor a claw back of other funding these people rely on.

Also, persons with disabilities who were working part time and receiving ODSP need a break and CERB should not be treated as income during the pandemic, resulting in 50% claw back from social assistance. The most vulnerable need more to sustain their capacity and safety during a time of crisis and to recuperate after the crisis. We cannot leave those living in poverty even further behind as we help the rest of the community recover from the financial devastation of this virus.

We created the following list of items that would be an additional cost to individuals

- Food – some items not available, some have increased costs (both legitimate increases and price gouging), stores limit amounts which can be difficult for large families. Not enough locations with community meals, food hamper programs are fewer. Adults and children eat more while staying in house when there is nothing else to do.
- Prescription Drugs – dispensing fees are now paid month monthly. Pharmacists need to fill more prescriptions causing longer wait times and more visits to get medications.
- Extra cleaning and sanitizing supplies – Hand sanitizers, masks, and gloves are all things most of us do not keep on hand and are not often available now. We are all cleaning our houses more often too and wanting to use the best cleaners. Those are some of the prices that have been increased drastically.
- Extra laundry to maintain cleanliness means extra detergent and more costs, especially when you need to use coin operated machines.
- Personal hygiene products that would have been free like soap, shampoo, and feminine hygiene products are not available and it means higher costs at the store.
- Can and bottle returns are a limited source of income as there are only a few return locations and there are very long lineups. This is particularly hard for people on foot and those with mobility issues even more. Many supplemented their income in this way.
- Having to shop more often – People who have no car can only buy as much as they can carry. They cannot stock up, even if it was affordable. Limits to one family member in stores further limits the amount you can get in a single trip.

- People have to go through hoops and hurdles to reach their case workers, justify their needs, and find a way to receive any additional support.

For people with disabilities:

- Glasses, hearing aids, dental, foot-care etc. are not covered through discretionary benefits and the one-time COVID funding is inadequate to support persons needing aids and devices.
- Increased mental health risk for those disabled, as access to information and keeping social relationships is more challenging, especially for those with reduced sight, hearing and speech capacity.
- Persons with disabilities are further marginalized by not having personal assistants accompany them to triage or hospitals. People with disabilities are less likely to go to hospitals if exhibiting symptoms

To address these inequalities we would like to see:

- A recognition of the increased burden placed on low income and disabled people during this pandemic and increasing supports and funding.
- An immediate increase in pensions to meet the level of CERB.
- The Covid benefit for those on social assistance become automatic and monthly until all restrictions have been lifted.
- A renewed focus on improving outcomes for people living in poverty through a basic income for all where individuals will not have to deal with bureaucratic service delivery, and increased stress and anxiety during any crisis.
- Specific direction given to service providers on how to support people living with mental and physical disabilities maintain a healthy lifestyle while living as independently as possible.
- We recognize that some vulnerable people have support from friends and family, but many more do not. There has to be a way to make navigating through all the systems set up by governments and support agencies easier for people who cannot reach out to others for assistance.

This pandemic has been hard on all of us, but those living in poverty are more impacted and are feeling more frightened than ever that we are being forgotten by society as a whole.

Thank you for your anticipated consideration,

Cathie Stewart Savage

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On behalf of:

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