

Address to Waterloo Region Budget Meeting December 5, 2012

Good Evening and thank you for this opportunity to address the budget committee.

I am Cathie Stewart Savage from First United Out of the Cold, and tonight I am speaking to you on behalf of Poverty Free Kitchener Waterloo. We are a group of people who represent programs, agencies, and individuals who want to come together for discussion, planning and action towards ending poverty in our cities.

We know that that is a high aim, but we believe that, with enough will and effort on the part of all orders of Government, and the involvement of the citizens, this could and should happen.

If there had not been the announcement of proposed cuts to the Community Start Up and Maintenance Benefits and the Ontario Works Discretionary Benefits, we would likely still have been coming to you to advocate for an increase in supports, because we are seeing an increase in the needs in our community.

As it stands, these cuts have become the focus of much of our discussions. You have the reports that show the impact of cuts in these areas of Social Service. We are here to ask you to make decisions that will have the least impact on people receiving Social Assistance, and that is to maintain the status quo. We would also ask that you make a formal request of the Ontario Government to delay any cuts until there is a firm new structure in place to address the growing needs of the social safety net.

We fully acknowledge that funding for social services and poverty reduction should not be coming mainly from the property tax base, but from income taxes which is by far the more reasonable tax base.

In these times of economic uncertainty, going backwards in our support for those in need should be the last thing on our minds!

I spoke to this committee on November 21 of the impact that we are seeing at Out of the Cold as volunteers and from a program point of view. Now I would like to say something about the people we are seeing this year.

For two years prior to the opening of Supportive Housing of Waterloo we used a second room at our church for a few of the guests. This was to deal with some of the crowding issues we were seeing. With the opening of SHOW, we saw an initial drop in numbers and so closed that room, and, for various reasons have kept it closed in spite of the new increases in numbers. The first night of our program this year, I had at least five guests come in and ask if they could go to that room. That means that those five people, and who knows how many more, were housed for the last two seasons and are now finding themselves back on the streets.

We do not only provide a place for those who are homeless. We also provide meals for people who need it. This year we are also seeing an increase in those we are feeding. First United keeps a stock of canned goods that we hand out on occasion. We have already, in

our first month given away about half of what we did all last year.

Last year we had an individual who stayed with us until they could save enough money for a bed. This person had a place to stay, but not enough furniture to make it a home. How many more will there be like that if we cut these funds?

With less funding available for individuals the impact on programs and agencies within the community are going to be much greater. How do we as agencies and support groups not get discouraged when there is no place else to refer our people in need to? We seem to be moving from a place of few options to a place of even less options.

A poem by John Palmer expresses the frustration and angst that many of us feel.

Heal the Pain

This is a country where grown men cry
When they're sick and alone and just can't get by
And the tears that they shed don't wash nothing away
And they feel like a burden and it grows everyday
Till to pain and to anguish many succumb
And they'll do it by jumping or with pills or a gun
But some keep on living it's they're duty they know
To hang on for others, Not to let the pain show
In a country where health care seems a major concern
They'll spend thousands to save you but it's hard to discern
The logic of letting someone starve till they're ill
When they hold back the funds that could save you until

In a hospital bed you most surely end up and then let you drink from compassions sweet cup

We commend you for what you have done for our community and ask you to continue do your part as a leader among municipalities in Ontario by maintaining the status quo for both the Community Start Up and Maintenance Benefits and the Ontario Works Discretionary Benefits and by making a formal appeal to the Province to delay any cuts until there is a firm new structure in place to address the growing needs of the social safety net.

Thank you for your time.