



## **Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries 2015 Ontario Budget Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Good Afternoon Minister Sousa,

My name is Alex Johnstone and I am a Social Planner at the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries.

We are a community-based nonprofit organization that is committed to building and strengthening our community through social research, facilitating multi-sector collaborations, fostering innovation, and promoting social change.

As an important regional voice that encompasses both urban and rural communities, we are pleased to have this opportunity to present our recommendations to you as part of the Ontario government's 2015 pre-budget consultations.

### **Context**

At this time, nearly 1 million Canadians hold two or more jobs – struggling to keep their heads above water; 2 million workers are in temporary jobs – the highest on record; 1.3 million Canadians are looking for work; and in the past decade, we have lost over 550,000 manufacturing jobs.<sup>i</sup>

Everyone is one is at risk to poverty and homelessness. As a social planning organization, we have had the opportunity to speak with US Steel Workers who lost their jobs and lost everything – their life's savings and their marriages. We know business professionals who due to an illness were forced into early retirement and consequently financial ruin. Our community partners inform us about students who couch surf. We know hard working moms, who after a divorce, accepted donations of food and back to school supplies while looking shame faced down at the floor saying, "there's probably someone else that needs this more."

In today's economic environment, we are all one illness, divorce or company acquisition away from poverty and homelessness.

The road ahead is bumpy: dropping oil prices, expected hikes in interest rates, slowed exports and slowed consumer spending will weaken the economy, while low energy prices and a weak Loonie should stimulate investment and tourism.<sup>ii</sup>

With this turbulent forecast, Ontarians will need their government to introduce proactive measures to ensure Ontarians can successfully navigate the terrain.

Following the theme of the 41<sup>st</sup> Throne Speech, Building Ontario Up, this submission highlights a number of strategies to build security and opportunities for all Ontarians.<sup>iii</sup>

## **Strategies To Build Security**

### **1) Poverty Reduction Strategy**

In 2014, we were pleased to see the reintroduction of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. We strongly recommend that the Government of Ontario develop a set of measurable indicators and timelines that are reported on annually.

### **2) Affordable Housing**

Ending homelessness starts with the premise that homelessness must and can be eradicated rather than managed. Medicine Hat, Alberta launched a 5 Year Plan To End Homelessness and is on track to announce its success later this year.<sup>iv</sup> Likewise, Finland is showing great success through their highly targeted Program To Reduce Long Term Homelessness launched originally in 2008.<sup>v</sup>

We recommend that the Government of Ontario adopt the notion that homelessness can and must be eradicated and work with municipalities, service providers and service users to develop a made in Ontario 5 year plan to end homelessness.

### **3) Increased Ontario Works Rate**

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario identified that Ontario Works rates have not kept up with inflation.

We recommend the Government of Ontario immediately increase the social assistance rate of a single adult by \$100 a month, as per the recommendation of The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario.<sup>vi</sup>

### **4) Restore the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit**

The funding cut to the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit has created huge disparities across Ontario between have and have-not communities, as some municipalities attempted to absorb the costs while others cut services. The funding cuts have created great hardship on Ontario's most vulnerable

individuals such as those who need medical assistive devices and women in need of first and last month's rent in order to leave abusive relationships.

We recommend the Government of Ontario reverse the 50% funding cut made to the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit.

## **Strategies To Build Opportunities**

### **1) Investment in Good Jobs**

While external economic forces have drained Canada of many good paying jobs, the Government of Ontario has the opportunity to be part of the solution. We recommend that the government become a living wage employer,<sup>vii</sup> work with Municipal Solutions to ensure Provincial and Municipal procurement policies not only set contractor qualifications but enforce them, set fair wage conditions when awarding government grants; and that the Government of Ontario strike a task force to consider strategies the Government can take to discourage precarious employment.

### **2) Invest In Infrastructure**

With low interest rates and many Ontarians looking for work including 17.1% of Ontario's youth,<sup>viii</sup> we recommend that the Government of Ontario stimulate the economy and create good paying jobs by investing in badly needed infrastructure.

### **3) Invest In A Provincial Child Care Strategy**

With the advent of Quebec's \$9/day child care strategy, many Ontario families are hopeful that their government can also offer them a provincial child care strategy.<sup>ix</sup> Research shows that every dollar Quebec invested in child care results in an economic output of \$1.05 for the province and 44-cents for Ottawa. The program pays for itself.<sup>x</sup>

We recommend that the Government of Ontario develop a provincial child care strategy modeled off of Quebec.

### **4) Invest In Universal Drug Coverage**

We were encouraged by the Health Minister Eric Hoskins' comments last month calling for a national pharmacare program.<sup>xi</sup> Of utmost concern, many Ontarians either skip prescribed dosages or are unable to fill prescriptions due to limited finances. Introducing a provincial pharmacare program would achieve greater economies of scale, reduce the cost of drugs and enable savings to be passed onto the public. Therefore, We recommend the Government of Ontario establish universal drug coverage program for all low income individuals.

On behalf of the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries, I want to thank you for your time. We hope that our recommendations will help to craft a future for Ontario that truly dares to imagine prosperity for all.

If you have any questions at this time, I would be happy to answer them.

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## References

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