

April 13, 2016

VIA EMAIL: gmurray.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org

Hon. Glen R. Murray
Minister of the Environment and Climate Change
318-120 Carlton Street
Toronto, ON M5A 4K2

Dear Minister Murray,

Re: Requesting your support for an evidence-based approach to social assistance

The HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO), the only legal clinic in Canada devoted exclusively to people with HIV, was established in 1995 to provide a safe and expert place for legal services for the HIV community. To respond to the realities of living with HIV, HALCO practices a broad range of law, including social assistance, tenancy, immigration, privacy, employment, and human rights, and engages in public legal education, law reform, and community development initiatives. Since its inception, HALCO has handled over 50,000 requests for legal services, delivered hundreds of workshops, presented numerous briefs to various government committees, and intervened in matters at courts including the Supreme Court of Canada and Court of Appeal for Ontario.

We write today to urge you to support evidence-based social assistance rates. Ontario's staggeringly low rates leave more than 900,000 people in this province under-housed, hungry and prone to illness. The fact is that the rates simply do not cover the costs of rent, food and other basic necessities.

Paul Miller, MPP from Hamilton East, introduced *Bill 185, Ministry of Community and Social Services Amendment Act (Social Assistance Research Commission), 2016* (Bill 185) to establish the Social Assistance Research Commission (SARC).¹ SARC would be tasked with recommending evidence-based social assistance rates to the provincial government on an annual basis. Those recommendations would be based on an analysis of the actual costs of rent, food and other basic necessities across the province, and SARC would be required to recommend different rates for different regions based on the real costs across the province. SARC would also be tasked with providing periodic reports on other policy issues related to social assistance (e.g., precarious employment, child support, workers' safety and insurance issues).

¹ Bill 185 is modelled on a 2007 bill, introduced by the Honourable Ted McMeekin, which unfortunately lapsed due to prorogation.

Across Ontario, we regularly see people with HIV spiral deeper and deeper into poverty the longer they try to subsist on provincial social assistance programs. We see people living in precarious housing situations with little or no tenancy rights because they cannot afford to rent more stable housing. We see people staying in abusive relationships because they cannot afford their own housing. We see people falling into debt, including through exploitative pay-day loans, in order to pay for rent they cannot afford.

We also see individuals getting sicker and sicker while they struggle to live on below-subsistence provincial social assistance incomes. Many of our clients on social assistance rely on food banks to meet their basic needs. They are socially isolated as they have difficulty accessing means of social engagement without money for public transportation. Even with access to HIV treatment, the stress of poverty can compromise the immune system of someone living with the virus. This results in poor individual physical and mental health outcomes, more complex health care needs, and increased public health care spending.

Things do not have to be this way.

Bill 185 was introduced for first reading by Paul Miller this week and will go to second reading on Thursday, April 14, 2016. People across the province are asking our elected representatives to put all partisanship aside and vote for the Social Assistance Commission. We urge you to vote in favour of the creation of SARC.

We are defined by how we treat the most vulnerable members of our communities. Please help ensure that we treat our fellow Ontarians, including those living with HIV, with the dignity they deserve by supporting evidence-based social assistance rates.

Thank you very much for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario
per:



Amy Wah
Staff Lawyer