

Family falls behind trying to get ahead [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It took three years for Amany Johnson to tumble from a comfortable lifestyle married to a United Nations consultant to where she is today: a single mother of two living in poverty and clinging to society's economic edge.

In mere days, she may find herself off that edge.

With no warning, a government caseworker left her a message last week saying Johnson's subsidized daycare — one of the lifelines she is counting on until she gets back on her feet — is being taken away because she worked a few extra hours.

Johnson, forced to join the ranks of Ontario's working poor after leaving an abusive husband in 2003, now believes the harder she works to get ahead, the further she falls behind.

Each time she works extra hours as a part-time bank teller, her subsidized rent goes up. Now, her daycare subsidy will disappear by mid-December unless Durham Region social-assistance officials bend the province's rules.

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Social workers, labour experts and academics have long decried the lack of incentives in the system to help working-poor families lift themselves out of poverty. It's a system designed on giving with one hand while taking with the other, leaving impoverished families no further ahead, said income-security expert John Stapleton.

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In her new world of low wages and tight budgets, Johnson has learned to scrimp and save.

She and her two kids, Sandi, 10, and Danny, 3, sleep in the same room to save on the electrical heating bill. She stopped using the electric dryer.

She has managed to stay afloat. But Johnson says she simply can't afford \$930 for child care.

Even with earnings of \$1,200 a month, coupled with the national child benefit of \$215 a month and a small top-up from social assistance, her total monthly income rarely, if ever, rises above \$1,450 a month, or \$17,400 a year. Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off for a family of three living just outside Toronto is \$21,601.

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"If there's something we overlooked, we will certainly correct it," said Paul Cloutier, director of the region's income support division, adding more funding would help address a critical shortage of daycare spaces.

The province will soon make it easier for low-income workers to access subsidized child care, said Anne Machowski, a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: subsidy ^[3]

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