

Ontario budget leaves Ontario's poorest children behind: Editorial ^[1]

Author: Toronto Star

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EXCERPTS

Rarely has a Liberal government in Ontario tabled a less child-friendly budget than Jobs for Today and Tomorrow. The highlights of the province's 2016 financial plan – a cap-and-trade carbon-pricing scheme and free college and university tuition for lower-income students – overshadowed the absence of help for children in need.

There was no money for affordable child care. Apart from a reminder that “full-day kindergarten helps families manage their time,” the province offered no hope to low-income parents waiting for subsidized child care. In Toronto alone there are 16,802 eligible children in the queue.

Investing in child care has a double payback. It improves the life chances of low-income kids and frees their mothers to work. Without out a strong start, many disadvantaged kids don't complete high school, let alone go on to college or university.

There was no money for Ontario's 47 children's aid societies. They care for the most vulnerable children in the province. Report after report has documented serious problems in the child protection system; kids in groups being physically restrained, sedated and injured; kids being placed with abusive relatives or foster families; kids under the province's care dropping out of school, running away and ending up on the streets. Ontario's Advocate for Children and Youth, Irwin Elman, keeps sounding the alarm to no avail.

Lack of funding is not the only problem, but it limits the ability of children's aid workers to resolve family disputes, work with parents trapped in a spiral of addiction violence and come up with better alternatives than taking away their children permanently.

There was a miserable 1.5-per-cent increase in social assistance rates for Ontario's poorest families. To put that in perspective, food prices went up by 4 per cent in January. Transit fares (except for monthly Metropasses) went up by 8.3 per cent in November.

Under Ontario's new social assistance rates, which take effect next October, a single mother with a child will receive \$1,078 a month. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto is \$1,085 per month.

There was no funding to alleviate the massive backlog in the province's courts. This leaves thousands of young Ontarians, charged but not convicted, in pre-trial custody. Judges, lawyers and prison reform advocates have urged the government to speed up the trial process. But without more courtrooms, that isn't likely to happen. The logjam takes its heaviest toll on young offenders from poor families who can't come up with the bail to get out jail until their court date.

“We're not going to leave anybody behind,” Finance Minister Charles Sousa assured Ontarians as he tabled his fourth budget. Kathleen Wynne promised when she became Ontario's 25th premier in 2013 to make social justice her top priority. Treasury Board President Deb Matthews, who presented the government's latest poverty reduction strategy in 2014, said: “We are recommitting to reducing poverty among children and youth through targeted investments and supports.” There was scant evidence to back up any of that in last week's budget.

It's true that most taxpayers care more about gasoline prices than welfare rates. It's easy to skimp on benefits to children who can't vote, seldom raise their voices and don't have much bargaining power. But it is hard to square Sousa's talk about “a more compassionate Ontario” with the fact that 550,000 children in this province live in poverty.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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