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## Critiques

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### Response to Kerr, Miller, and Vioria

November 29, 1993

**Re:** Mildred Kerr, David Miller, and Brenda Vioria, "Has the Response to 'Persons in Need' Changed in Saskatchewan Since the NDP Returned to Power?" *Canadian Review of Social Policy* 31 (Spring 1993): 67-73.

Although the above-mentioned article represents a reasonably accurate summary of changes and events in the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan (SAP) program since the late 1970s, some of the information provided is misleading or in error as follows:

**Section: Introduction**

page 67: The caseload increase in Saskatoon has been approximately 13.6% — not 20%, as indicated (August '92: 10,017 cases; August '93: 11,376 cases).

**Section: SAP Under the Conservative Government 1981-1991**

page 68: The paper indicates there were 22,065 cases on SAP in 1979 before the NDP defeat. This number is inaccurate. In March '79, the actual number of cases was 21,269. The SAP caseload was never recorded at 22,065 cases during 1979.

page 69: The article indicates that the Conservatives set up a "fraud squad" unit for "maintenance enforcement". Under the Conservatives, an investigation unit known as the Special Investigations Branch was implemented to investigate fraud and abuse within the SAP Program. The unit was comprised of former police officers; however, they were not involved in maintenance enforcement.

Another group of staff, known as Family Maintenance Workers, were hired to assist with maintenance enforcement. Their primary responsibility was to assist clients to locate spouses and obtain maintenance orders. They were not investigators. Many of the Family Maintenance workers were former SAP workers who had lost their positions due to program cut backs.

page 69: The article indicates there was discrimination against 16- to 18-year-olds who "were denied assistance unless they lived at home however unhealthy the home situation."  
... (con't on p. 114)

## SOCIAL SERVICES FACT SHEET

### Saskatchewan Assistance Plan Practice and Benefit Changes

- The *Changing Directions* consultations in 1991-92 resulted in significant changes in policy and practices. To address the basic needs of families and individuals, government modestly increased Saskatchewan Assistance Plan (SAP) benefits in 1992-93 and 1993-94. The changes in 1992-93 began to address inequities and adequacy of rates and contributed to better support of disadvantaged children, families and individuals. Changes introduced in 1993-94 have been targeted to better meet the basic needs of families, particularly the working poor with children.
- 1992-93 SAP Benefit Changes - August 1, 1992
  - Basic allowance rate standardized - all adults plus the first child in a single parent family receive \$195/mo.; all other children receive \$155/mo. (\$4.5M annual increase).
  - Board and room rate standardized - all adults plus the first child in a single parent family receive \$270/mo; all other children receive \$240/mo. (\$2.2M annual increase).
  - Northern food allowance increased to \$50/mo./person for all recipients living north of the 54th parallel (\$2.7M annual increase).
  - Personal living allowance for special care home recipients increased to \$85/mo. (\$1.1M annual increase).
  - Additional allowance for disabled recipients (\$1.2M annual increase).

- 1993-94 SAP Benefit Changes
  - April 1, 1993 - monthly cap on utilities removed - now pay actual utilities (\$.7M annual increase).
  - July 1, 1993 - Further increase to children's basic allowance and board and room rates. Children now receive \$160/mo. basic allowance or \$245/mo. board and room allowance; the first child in a single parent family continues to receive either \$195/mo. basic allowance or \$270/mo. board and room allowance (\$1.1M annual increase).
  
- 1992-93 SAP Practice Changes
  - Interim assistance provided pending appeal.
  - Clients can select own advocate.
  - Single parents with children under 6 no longer forced to seek work, but encouraged to pursue work experience and upgrading programs.
  - Exemption on inheritance income equal to cash or liquid asset exemption.
  
- 1993-94 SAP Practice Changes
  - 46 additional temporary financial assistance workers hired including 16 Aboriginal workers for off-reserve social assistance cases.
  
- Family Income Plan benefits were increased by \$5 per month for each child on July 1, 1993. Maximum benefits are now \$105 per month for each of the first three children in a family, and \$95 per month for the fourth and each subsequent child in the family (\$.3M annual increase).

This statement is untrue. SAP policy, respecting assistance to youth (16-18 years of age) was developed in the mid 70s and has not been changed. Youths have always been eligible to receive assistance in their own right in the event of family breakdown.

page 69: The paper indicates that disabled recipients did not receive any cost of living increases for 10 years.

This statement is inaccurate. A number of benefit increases (i.e., basic allowance, room and board) were issued to all recipients between April '92 and August '92. For example, basic allowances were increased in April '82, October '83, and January '88. Room and board rates were increased in May '84.

### **Section: What Has Changed Under the NDP?**

page 70: The article indicates "Single mothers received \$40 to provide for the needs of one child. Those with more than one child received no additional monies for these additional children."

The statement is misleading since it does not consider the increase which occurred August 1, 1992, when the basic allowance rates were re-structured. Provision was made for the first child in a single parent family to receive a "married equivalent" adult rate, which resulted in an increase of \$40. The restructured rates also eliminated the short term benefit restriction for employable family cases (3 mos.) and the \$10 reduction for the fourth and subsequent child in a family unit.

page 71: Suggestion is made that workers can now decide "on written request" (from those recipients who know they can ask) to lower overpayment recovery rates.

Workers currently have the authority to reduce or defer overpayment recovery rates in order to alleviate hardship. There is no requirement for a written request from a recipient.

page 72: The paper indicates that Social Services received a \$52.0 M increase in the 1992-93 budget. However, "Because the Social Services Department included Legal Aid, Corrections, Young Offenders and Child Welfare, only about \$9 million . . . will go directly to poor people."

Social Services does not include Corrections since this was transferred to Justice several years ago. The actual breakdown of funding is also misleading since approximately \$32 million of the total went to the SAP program; 3.5 million to the Family Income Plan and 1.7 million to the Saskatchewan Income Plan for a total of \$37.4 million.

A fact sheet documenting Saskatchewan Assistance Plan practice and benefit changes since 1991-92 is attached.

Con Hnatiuk  
Deputy Minister  
Saskatchewan Social Services

c.c. Mildred Kerr  
David Miller  
Brenda Vioria  
Phil Walsh

## Response from Kerr, Miller, and Vioria

February 28, 1994

Our article in your Spring '93 issue<sup>1</sup> summarized the actual experiences of hundreds of Saskatchewan Assistance Plan recipients and our figures were quotations from the Saskatchewan government sources. Since the Deputy Minister under both the Conservative and NDP terms in office sent you a lengthy "corrections" letter of our article, it is important that you and your readers have our reply, especially if the Deputy Minister's letter of November 29th is printed.

It was impossible to have more than a telephone discussion with Mr. Miller and Ms. Vioria as they have left volunteer advocacy at Equal Justice for All for work search and training. It was a time of daily pressures, of Christmas emergencies, of funding crises, and family needs before I left Canada for six months leave. However, we trusted that you too are concerned why our deputy Minister attacks our accuracy, and therefore our credibility as legitimate 'parties' in *social justice* delivery of social policy in Canada. Telephone discussions with the other contributors to our submission confirmed that our position needs further debate of Mr. Hnatiuk's "corrections". We appreciate his detailed attention and that he concedes that our actual witness of policy and personal deprivation and its effects was "reasonably accurate". We reply in the same order as he did:

- (1) page 67: The "20% increase" in Saskatoon district caseload 1992-93 came from workers and administrators, when the workers were striking in protest of heavy caseloads and Equal Justice for All advocates met with the latter to discuss the allotted budget for Saskatoon and for workers. It may have been a reference to increase in employables and off reserve Indian applicants where caseload stress was heaviest. Deputy Hnatiuk's access to statistics still confirms over 1,000 in one year in a small Canadian city.
- (2) page 68: Our figure of 22,065 recipients in Saskatchewan that he corrects was taken from Commissioner D. Zarski's report for the then Minister of Social Services. She would not have made up 800 cases?
- (3) page 69: We put in quotations "fraud squad" as the poor recipients' name for the 'Special Investigations Branch' whose police tactics were very frightening and caused seizing of benefits or — guilty before proven innocent — actions especially if boyfriends were the suspected "man in the house". We used "maintenance enforcement" in error where we were intending to describe enforcement of strict eligibility requirements contrary to the protective intent of the Canada/Saskatchewan Assistance Plan that acts to give discretionary power over 'manual' guidelines.

- (4) page 69: Mr. Hnatiuk needs to question his Saskatoon district supervisors about the process and practice response to 16- to 18-year-old applicants prior to the very recent transfer of these income security applicants to the Family Services unit. We quoted directly from advocacy or appeals done with several such applicants denied, and left homeless, until we secured school guidance and/or psychiatric verification of family breakdown. If a parental letter denied that the youth was "in need", then the Department of Social Services officials denied benefits.
- (5) page 69: Mr. Hnatiuk says our claim of "no cost of living increase" for a ten-year-period in SAP benefits was "misleading" and cited some "increases" that were far below any cost of living—or actual costs poor people have for basic needs that increased every year. Also note that these "increases" were more than offset by ceiling or capped rates for utilities and rent that robbed people's slight food and clothing allowance increases (also inadequate for actual costs). His claims are like saying food banks aren't needed. Your founding editor [of CRSP/RCPS], Graham Riches and Regina Welfare Rights advocate Lorelee Manning published a SARU working paper in 1989 that thoroughly demonstrates the loss in buying power suffered by Saskatchewan welfare recipients in the Conservative years (not restored by the NDP, though some groups had benefits restored to the level of other recipients—not to actual cost of basic needs, let alone to the poverty line).<sup>2</sup>
- (6) page 70: Our statement did give credit to the NDP for increasing benefits for a single parent with one child. We queried the lack of equity for equally deprived other children. Yes, we should have acknowledged the restorations (not increase) of 'clothing' and 'household' benefits to employables and their families by the NDP, illegally withheld for about eight years in all as the Court of Appeal of Saskatchewan found in *Murray Chambers and Equal Justice for All vs. Dept. of Social Services Minister* back in 1984–1987, but not restored until 1992, therefore credit is due to the NDP now for obeying the CAP/SAP Legislation.
- (7) page 71: Again, we suggest that Mr. Hnatiuk check with his Saskatoon area supervisors whether or not clients must put a request *in writing* to their worker to get a lower overpayment recovery rate. Many workers and supervisors have instructed both clients and those of us who advocate at E.J.A. that a written not a verbal request must be made. You should also note the newest plan of Mr. Hnatiuk (Feb. 94) (on instructions from the Treasury Minister for savings in all departments—including from the poorest Saskatchewan citizens) erodes their earlier move to more justice—and allegiance to CAP intent—on overpayments and special needs items, i.e., forced advances at even higher recovery rate.

(8) page 72: Mr. Hnatiuk's breakdown of the budget increase in 1993 for Social Services was to 'correct' that proportion we said went directly to poor recipients of Saskatchewan Assistance Plan — many of whom *are* working, yet don't benefit from the Family Income Plan that targets the "working poor," who Mr. Hnatiuk cites as having benefitted. It was from Ms. McKinnon's reply at a public forum in Sutherland (suburb of Saskatoon) that our statement was taken and also from MLA Mark Koenker's office copy or transcript of the social services spending breakdown. (Ms. McKinnon was the first Social Services Minister for the new NDP.)

In response to the "Fact Sheet" the Deputy Minister supplies you with, we in turn ask you as social policy analysts whether these cited "increases" meet the requirements of the cost-shared legislations: that 'people in need' be granted adequate benefits to meet basic essential needs to 'offset the causes and effects of poverty'? By defending "the facts" and calling ours "misleading" is the Deputy Minister for both parties in power trying to prevent Canada's policy analysts, planners, and lobbyists, from believing the voice of the poor and their advocates? He too is a social worker. What is the professional ethical position held by social workers when they know that, for example a family with two adults and two children must live on up to \$1,300.00 per month, on Saskatchewan Assistance Plan benefits, below by nearly 50%, the last poverty line estimates? Defending \$50.00-\$100.00 worth of increases over 14 years of government administrations as "corrections" is what is misleading or leading away from the true deprivation of the poor and away from the 'just distribution' fight.

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c.c. Soc. Serv. Min., R. Pringle  
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Equal Justice for All membership

#### NOTES

1. Kerr, Miller, and Vilorio, "Has the Response to 'Persons in Need' Changed in Saskatchewan Since the NDP Returned to Power?" *Canadian Review of Social Policy* 31 (Spring 1993): 67-73.
2. Welfare Reform and the Canada Assistance Plan: The Breakdown of Public Welfare in Saskatchewan 1981-1989. Published by the University of Regina SARU, Regina.