

Clients and agencies wrestling with SFI cuts

Michael Hoyt

Dean, an Edmonton welfare recipient, claims that Supports of Independence, Alberta's welfare program, no longer lives up to its name. The province recently made cuts to social assistance benefits to get people off of welfare. "The program as it stands now doesn't fortify people, it traps them," he concluded.

When the recession hit Dean lost his job. He hoped that social assistance would help his family to survive until the job market improved. That hope faded when the new welfare changes went into effect on October 1.

"We were sharing the rent of our house with some friends," he explained. However, their friends moved just before the welfare cuts. Now they can afford neither to stay nor to move to cheaper accommodation.

"If we move to a cheaper place without giving one month notice our landlord will keep the damage deposit money we have now," explained Dean's wife, Stephanie. If they give 30 days notice the new landlord will want a damage deposit to hold the unit for them. "We don't qualify for money for a new damage deposit under the welfare changes, even though we would be moving to a less expensive place." The welfare changes limit money for damage deposits to a one-time pay out to recipients. They have looked, unsuccessfully, for new roommates. "It's hard to find someone you feel you can trust with two small children," noted Stephanie.

At their income support worker's suggestion, they asked the landlord for a rent reduction. "He can't do anything until the bank reduces his mortgage," said a restrained Dean, who fears that their eviction is imminent.

In the wake of cutbacks many families across Edmonton have turned to the pawnbroker for assistance. Shelly, a 24-year-old wife and mother, has pawned her family's television and cassette player to help pay for rent and food this month. "Before the cuts they gave you barely enough to get by," she said. After this month, "we're probably going to be in more debt than when we started. I'll have to pay 30% on what (the pawnbroker) gives to get our things back." Dean, who is in the same position, cautioned "we are losing everything to stay alive."

To pay for expenses no longer covered by social assistance many people have dug into their food allowance. "We eat everyday, but some days

this month it has been oatmeal for breakfast and dinner," noted Stephanie. "That's a problem because if you're undernourished you don't feel like getting up in the morning."

At Operation Friendship workers calculate that the number of meals they are serving to seniors has increased by almost 14%, to 5,700 meals per month since the welfare cuts began. Mary Ann Cunningham, drop in supervisor, said "A lot of new faces are showing up for meals. Up to a third are coming for the first time."

Eddy, an unemployed 57 year old, was waiting for his meal when he spoke. "The government is taking food right off my table to pay for the deficit," he said. Eddy's welfare cheque was cut by \$70 to \$400 per month. After rent, that leaves him with \$180 for living expenses. He would like to have a phone installed for \$46 to provide comfort and safety. "I live in a building with 20 people, all over age 55, and there are only four private phones. What happens if there is an emergency?"

Eddy feels fortunate, he expects to be called back to work in December. Cunningham noted that many seniors at the drop in are less fortunate. "They are considered employable between the ages of 55 and 65, but they have no advantage over 20-year-olds looking for jobs. It's unrealistic to think that this group will become financially independent."

At Candora, a resource center for low income families, mothers are worried about the effects of the welfare cuts on their children. "Kids are the ones who will suffer the most because of the cutbacks," observed one mother. She explained that for many families at the center food money goes toward children's school fees and supplies. "How do you explain to a child that you don't have the money for (fees and supplies), they just see that they don't have what other kids have."

Welfare covered the actual cost of school fees and supplies for each child before the changes. This amount has been reduced to \$25 per year for each child. "Our kids can't afford to attend the schools or take the classes they want because of user fees," explained the mother of a grade 12 student. A two-tiered school system, one for the poor and one for the rich, is just around the corner according to these mothers.

Mothers feel the cuts in other ways. Many mothers are feeling pressured to look for work to keep their benefits but they don't have a place to leave their children. "We are looking at daycare to provide crisis relief for these mothers," said a worker at the Bissell Centre, but that is not a long term solution.

Fred, a volunteer at the Boyle Street Co-op, is concerned that the welfare cuts push those on assistance into a labor market where they have no hope of competing. "Who is an employer going to take, a person on assistance or someone with a steady work record and maybe post-secondary

education? These people can't compete with an ALCB worker who has 10 years experience."

Many people on assistance fear that the cuts will have other negative consequences. Crime is going to increase warned a group on welfare at a drop in center in Edmonton's inner city. "There is more hooking going on now," confided Maggie, a young native woman at the Boyle Street Cooperative. She has decided not to work the street, but some of her friends are hooking to make up for cuts to their housing allowance. "Stealing has already increased," noted another. If these predictions are correct some welfare recipients may end in jail rather than becoming independent members of society.

Community workers in the inner city agree that crime is one possible offshoot of the welfare cuts. It is still too early to assess the long term effects of the cuts say both Karen Schulz, youth unit supervisor at the Boyle Street Co-op, and Scott Smillie, director of adult service at the Bissell Centre. "Prostitution appears to be up already," said Schulz, who fears that break and enters, and muggings will follow this trend. Workers at the Bissell Centre have also noticed tempers becoming shorter. "People are expressing fears about being cut off," said Smillie, "and that leads to frustrations and fights."

Smillie believes that people are finding temporary solutions to the cuts. "They are doubling up on accommodations," while others are leaving the province. He is concerned that this could drive the problem of poverty underground. This invisibility creates another difficulty for those on welfare.

"People have to speak out to make changes to the welfare system," explained Dean, but they are afraid of negative repercussions, like being labeled a troublemaker or having their case closed. "Some mothers live in fear that their children will be taken if they report that they are unable to provide for them," said a Candora mother. Others are simply resigned to the problems of living on welfare. After a while you just give up because no one is listening when you tell them what is happening to those on welfare," said Gary, who has been on assistance and looking for steady employment since the summer.

The role of advocating or speaking on behalf of those on welfare is the work of community agencies. However, the cuts have also hurt these groups. "Good staff are burning out," noted Sharon Laton, acting director of the Norwood Community Service Centre. Workers from the centre have watched helplessly as families break up under the stress of the cuts. "More appeals are being made to welfare, but the success rate has dropped," said Laton. Workers are finding that the only assistance they can offer is emergency relief in the form of food hampers, clothing, furniture, or help with a move.

"Workers are finding that there is less they can do and less they can offer to people in real need," stated Schulz. "To be effective workers must always build on positives, but with the welfare cuts it is becoming more difficult to find the positives." At Operation Friendship, Rosalie Gelderman, client service coordinator, noted that the welfare cuts will lead to more difficult times. "Everybody likes to give around Christmas. The real crunch will not come until the new year when the generosity tap is cut off."

NOTE

1. When this article was written, Michael Hoyt was a fourth-year social work student with the University of Calgary, Edmonton Campus, serving his practicum with the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

Supports for Independence (welfare)

Change Highlights

- Utility connection, moving expenses, damage deposit — ONE TIME ONLY
 - School supply allowance \$25 per year per child, down from \$50-\$175 per year for each child
 - Shelter allowance down by \$50 per month for singles and families; down by \$100 per month for childless couples
 - Standard allowance down by \$26 per month for singles; down by \$52 per month for families
 - AISH eligibility tightened — 3,000 targeted to move to SFI
 - Students on welfare are transferred over to the Student's Finance Board for loans and payouts
 - Supplementary benefits such as special diets or babysitting, are restricted or eliminated
 - No room and board allowances for clients boarding with adult relatives
 - Child recreation allowance was dropped from \$220 per year lump sum to \$108 per year in monthly installments and it's no longer specified for recreation
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