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Toronto community social service agencies call on provincial government to join hands, build communities with needed reinvestment

Over 90 agencies, 1,500 participants showcase work at Queen's Park event

TORONTO, Ont. – A decade of underfunding by the provincial and other governments has severely eroded the ability of community social service agencies to meet the needs of thousands of people in Toronto who depend on their services, said leaders from the sector at a major Queen's Park event today. Over 150 Toronto community social service agencies and labour organizations have endorsed a campaign calling on Premier Dalton McGuinty to create an accord with them to revise funding frameworks, and reverse the deep cuts made in the 1990s by the Conservative government in order to meet demand for services.

In a gathering called "Joining Hands to Build Community" on the Queen's Park lawns, over 90 agencies and upwards of 1,500 participants showcased the work of community social service agencies that provide Torontonians with daycare, home care, children and youth recreation programs, seniors services, crisis intervention, family counseling and employment/skills training. These organizations support local engagement, bringing residents together to solve problems and improve their neighbourhoods.

"These are essential programs that build our quality of life and keep our communities healthy," said Liane Regendanz, Executive Director of St. Stephen's Community House and a member of the steering committee for the campaign—a joint project of Toronto's community social service agencies, labour and community partners. "Yet a decade of underfunding and under-resourcing has left our community social service agencies unable to meet our costs—for basic necessities like heat, capital expenses and decent wages and benefits for our skilled and caring front line workers."

The provincial government accounts for 79% of all government funding to the sector. Despite a 23.11% increase in inflation from 1996 to 2006, provincial funding has not kept pace. When it comes to program funding, an analysis of 155 programs in Toronto—of which governments funded 96%—found that these programs were underfunded by 14%, on average.

The widespread underfunding has meant community social service agencies are hard-pressed to maintain their administrative structure and pay workers fair wages, according to the group's research.

"Social services funding was severely eroded during the Harris years, yet demand and expectations have continued to rise creating a 'perfect storm' facing community social service agencies," said Toronto and York Region Labour Council president John Cartwright.

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“Replacing core, stable funding with piecemeal program grants has meant that too many front line staff are now temporary or part-time. Where is our commitment to good jobs? Too often these vital services are only made possible through huge workloads, insecure employment or wages that continue to fall far behind the cost of living,” he said.

In 1995, the Ontario government unilaterally eliminated its contribution to the Community Neighbourhood and Support Services Program (CNSSP). It had provided stable, core funding to non-profit agencies to cover overhead and administrative costs and build organizational capacity. According to Regendanz, this cut dramatically affected small emerging ethno-specific and cultural communities, as well as the diverse communities they serve. Community social service agencies have struggled to meet crises arising from increased poverty and violence in Toronto communities.

Sandra Costain is a young outreach worker whose work with young women in Regent’s Park won widespread acclaim. Sadly, when another program’s funding fell through, she lost her job. “Teen pregnancy was double the city’s average and school drop-outs were high. Working with 23 women, 90% of them went on to complete high school and there were only two pregnancies in the group,” says Costain. “Because of underfunding and staff reassignments, the program no longer exists.”

The Community Social Services “Joining Hands to Build Community” campaign is calling on the McGuinty government to:

- Invest in community service infrastructure,
- Return to core, stable and fair funding,
- Commit to funding fair wages and benefits,
- Ensure funding keeps up with inflation.

Members of the steering committee include: Canadian Union of Public Employees – Ontario, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, COSTI, Family Service Association, Labour Community Services, OCASI, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, St. Christopher House, St. Stephen’s Community House, Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, Toronto Training Board, and YWCA Toronto.

For more information on the Community Social Services Campaign, please visit:
www.socialplanningtoronto.org/cssc.

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For more information, please contact:

Valerie Dugale, CUPE Communications	647-225-3685
Alissa Von Bargaen, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto	647-230-9164

Background: A “perfect storm” facing community social service agencies

Scope/funding

- In Ontario, community and social services employ 268,400 people and involve more than 620,000 volunteers contributing about 63 million hours of volunteer time in 2003.
- Funding comes from government, earned incomes (fees, etc.), and grants and donations.
- Provincial government accounts for 79% of all government funding and 54% of agencies' overall revenues.

Key funding issues

- In 1995, Ontario government unilaterally eliminated its contribution to the Community Neighbourhood and Support Services Program (CNSSP). It provided stable, core funding to non-profit agencies to cover overhead and administrative costs, and build organizational capacity.
- While inflation rates from 1996-2006 were 23.11%, provincial funding has not increased in any significant way to keep up with these rates.
- A 2004 analysis of 155 programs totalling \$36.5M (of which 96% was funded by governments) found that service programs were underfunded by 14% on average.
- Funders have increased their monitoring, reporting and evaluation requirements, but don't fund agencies to do this work.

Cumulative impact

- Most funding no longer covers core organizational costs including: rent, utilities, staff training and supervision, volunteer coordination, fundraising, financial management and reporting.
- Administrative structure of most agencies has been hollowed out; resources have been stretched to shore up programs underfunded by government.
- Large amounts of staff time are spent on fundraising and chasing short-term, project dollars.

Human resource crisis

- Staff generally account for three-quarters of community agencies' expenditures.
- Wage rates in this sector are consistently below other public and private sector employers.
- Non-profit and voluntary organizations are filling a greater proportion of their staff positions with temporary employees (31%) than Ontario employers (10.9%).
- A study of Halton community social services showed that front line and administrative workers have significantly higher levels of temporary (17.3%) and part-time (26.4%) employment; smaller organizations show higher temporary (26.4%) and part-time employment (as high as 70.6%).
- Workload (31%) and insecurity of non-permanent positions (29%) are main reasons for staff leaving their jobs.

Key recommendations

- Create an accord between the province and sector to discuss funding frameworks, policy development.
- Reform provincial funding frameworks to:
 - Invest in community service infrastructure,
 - Return to core, stable and fair funding,
 - Commit to funding fair wages and benefits,
 - Ensure funding keeps up with inflation.
- Ensure funders pay the full cost of services they need delivered in communities—not drain community services to deliver their services. This will enable other resources from fundraising to fund service innovation and address local needs.