

“Welfare/Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Rates Are Making Us Sick” A Public Forum and Conference on Poverty, Health and Fighting Austerity

**Thursday, September 8th and Friday, September 9th, 2011.
Steelworkers Hall, 25 Cecil St., Toronto.**

“Try waking up to the screaming of the next door neighbours’ house, the cold draft coming through the Toronto Community Housing windows that were supposed to be fixed a year ago, watching a cockroach climb skillfully around the rim of a tea mug. Try waking up to three hungry mouths and an empty fridge, try having a breakfast of tap water as you feed the last of the week’s groceries to the children, it’s only Thursday.” – Sabrina Gopaul (Jane Finch Action Against Poverty).

I) Summary:

The public forum and one-day conference was organized by a working group representing the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU), Health Providers Against Poverty (HPAP), Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario.

The event’s main goal were to: 1) Bring public attention to the negative impacts of increasing poverty, austerity and substandard welfare/ODSP benefit rates in Ontario on the health of socially and economically marginalized communities; 2) Agree upon some follow-up actions or strategies to address poverty, austerity and related-health impacts on poor people.

The event brought together approximately two-hundred and fifty people – primarily poor people relying on welfare/ODSP (including people with disabilities and those who rely on frontline community services such as drop-ins and health centres); hospital workers; doctors, nurses and health providers; frontline community workers; students, anti-poverty and union activists.

II) Thursday, September 8th Opening Public Forum

Featured two keynote speakers: **Sabrina Gopaul** (Community Health Worker in the Jane-Finch community and organizer with Jane-Finch Action Against Poverty) and **Angela Robertson** (Women’s College Hospital, former Executive Director of Sistering). The forum was co-facilitated by Patti Encinas (frontline hospital worker and Vice-President Region 2 OCHU) and Liisa Schofield (OCAP organizer).

The forum also featured the debut launch of a short video on “Raise the Rates and the Special Diet” co-produced by OCHU/OCAP. It featured interviews with social assistance recipients, health providers and hospital workers on the negative impacts of austerity and substandard social assistance rates on the health of poor people.

“Statistics show that in Toronto, 59% of poor families are racialized and from 1980 to 2000 poverty in racialized families rose by more than 300% even though it fell in other sectors. The employment income of women remains lower than men as women continue to earn 78 cents for every male dollar earned”. – Angela Robertson (Women’s College Hospital).

Poverty and Health: The Special Diet Video

<http://vimeo.com/30801203>

III) Friday, September 9th Conference

Opening remarks were delivered by Wendy Forrest (mental health nurse and OCAP/ONA) and physician Laura Hansen (Health Providers Against Poverty).

IV) Workshop Sessions

The following workshops were held concurrently to allow all conference participants to attend:

Workshop A: “Impact of Poverty on Health”

Facilitators: Laura Hanson, Michaela Beder (Health Providers Against Poverty) & Jess Lyons (Ontario Nurses Association).

Main points:

- Workshop began with participants sharing their reasons for attending and what they were hoping to hear/learn/get out of the day.
- Presentation on health inequity in Canada.
- Larger group discussion of personal and professional experiences related to poverty and health.
- Small group discussion of a case study that looked at relationship between poverty, inadequate social and health care services and health issues.
- Discussion of how the values of the health and social service policy/systems exacerbate health inequity.
- Discussion of ways that communities, health care and social services providers can fight back and improve health and health equity

Workshop B: “Understanding Social Assistance and the Raise the Rates Campaign”

Facilitators: Liisa Schofield & John Clarke (OCAP); Farid Chaharlangi (CUPE Local 4772 & Jane-Finch Action Against Poverty-JFAAP); & Leticia Boehn (JFAAP).

Main points:

- Understanding history of social assistance and its purpose.
- Background to social assistance cuts and erosion of rates (Harris to current day) and current poverty levels in Ontario including lack of affordable access to housing and childcare.
- History and importance of “Raise the Rates” and Special Diet Allowance campaigns: what was/is the Special Diet, what the demands of the campaign represent

- Erosion of Social Assistance and Austerity: looking at measures impacting the poor and workers in Ontario, including making links to current municipal service cuts.
- Building allies in labour, community and beyond.
- Discussion on follow up actions in workplaces, sectors and communities.

Workshop C: “Austerity measures, poverty and impacts on healthcare”

Facilitators: Doug Allan (CUPE, Healthcare Researcher); Patti Encinas (OCHU); & Ilian Burbano (CUPE Ontario organizer).

Main points:

- Doug Allan provided overview to austerity measures & cuts to healthcare and impacts.
- Discussion: how austerity measures and cuts to healthcare funding/services impacts our lives, families, communities and workplaces?
- Discussion: What are concrete actions to address these impacts that can be undertaken via: community agencies, health centres, anti-poverty groups, unions, as health providers and ‘users’ of community services?

V) Plenary/Action Plan:

Conference ended with brief report backs from workshop sessions and a discussion on the following possible action items:

Themes:

- 1) Grassroots organizing.
- 2) Education.
- 3) Resisting Austerity.
- 4) Elections.
- 5) Health.

Brainstormed ideas:

- Go to provincial election town halls, challenge parties & MPPs on poverty, health and social assistance rates.
- Work with labour movement; continue to build links & networks provincially.
- Develop better coordination through community representatives.
- Go to social/community agencies, build links and possible committees.
- Actions/events that focus on overall theme of “empowerment”.
- Food-related direct action.
- Link up with students, especially in related programs (health studies, social work, nursing etc.).
- Develop and use community radio and social media.
- More in-depth education on the economy and how it works.
- Develop media strategy; look for opportunities to use “hooks” and “stunts”.
- Cross-sector delegations to MPP offices and events.

- Calendar of Raise the Rates events provincially—clear communication.
- Building up spokespeople/community representatives (leadership development).
- Links to broader issues of poverty (housing, childcare etc.).
- Coordinated provincial direct actions/days of action.
- Use video!! Set up screenings in different areas; send speakers with video, send the video out to OCHU/CUPE locals.
- Health Providers action (a health-providers specific action).

“We are fighting together to raise social assistance rates to where people can live with health and dignity – to once and for all reverse the devastating 1995 Harris cuts and bring people up to living standards today. But also, I think as part of this – we are fighting more broadly for decent wages, for better working conditions, for benefits and pensions, for housing, for childcare, and for dignity and respect that all poor and working people deserve”— Liisa Schofield (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty).

WELFARE/ODSP RATES ARE MAKING US SICK!

A Public Forum and Conference on Poverty, Health and Fighting Austerity

The Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, Canadian Union of Public Employees – Ontario, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Ontario Nurses of Association and Health Providers Against Poverty invite you to join us on September 8th and 9th for an important and timely public forum and conference on poverty, health, austerity and how we can fight back together.



Pre-registration is requested to determine accessibility needs, childcare, space and meals. For more information or to endorse the conference, please visit our website:
<http://povertyhealth.blogspot.com>

Public Evening Forum Thursday September 8th

6-9pm - Steelworkers Hall, 25 Cecil St, Toronto
Free
Space is wheelchair lift accessible
Refreshments and on-site childcare provided

Panel Discussion featuring:

Angela Robertson (Women's College Hospital, former Executive Director of Sistering)

Sabrina Gopaul (Community Health Worker in the Jane-Finch community and organizer with Jane-Finch Action Against Poverty)

Special launch of a joint video project between OCHU and OCAP on 'Raise the Rates and the Special Diet'

One-Day Conference Friday September 9th

9am-4pm - Steelworkers Hall, 25 Cecil St, Toronto
Free
Space is wheelchair lift accessible
Lunch and on-site childcare provided

Workshops, Training and Discussions including:

Poverty and health: How does poverty in Ontario today determine illness?

Understanding social assistance, cuts to the Special Diet and support for the Raise the Rates Campaign

Austerity and health: How cuts to healthcare, social programs and the public sector are related and why they are making us sick

