

Dignity for all: rebuilding Ontario's social services

One in a series of election fact sheets from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union

Homelessness. Hunger. Children dying in provincial care. This is Ontario today.

Most Ontarians believe that all of us have the right to be treated with dignity. That's why we have social services – because the rich getting richer shouldn't mean the poor get poorer.

But since 1995, the Ontario Tories have shredded our social services and scapegoated those who depend on them. Tory attacks have hurt – and even contributed to the deaths of – people with disabilities, abused women and children, people with mental illness, young offenders, and many others outside the “mainstream” of Ontario society.

It's a shameful embarrassment. We **can** afford to treat people with dignity. Here's what the next Ontario government could do:

1. Take care of the basics

When the Tories slashed welfare rates and walked away from social housing, homelessness was the (totally predictable) result. People need food and shelter; they shouldn't have to choose between the two! Ontario needs higher social assistance rates, indexed to inflation, and a real commitment to affordable housing for all.

2. Increase funding for special education

Cuts to special education programs in our schools have greatly increased the demand for social services. Special education funding must be a top priority.

3. Direct dollars to front-line workers

Severe cutbacks have plunged most of our social services into a staffing crisis. Wages are low. Turnover is high. Workload stress is intense. Staff burnout is widespread. Understaffing is common, and many services now run with high numbers of inexperienced staff. Some employers have reduced the qualifications for key jobs because of staff shortages. Hiring specialists (e.g., psychologists) is

next to impossible in some services because wages are too low – if there's a budget to hire them at all.

Funding wage increases and other improvements for front-line workers would do a lot to stabilize the entire social services sector.

3. End privatization

The profit motive sucks dollars out of front-line social services and spends them on private profits or sky-high salaries for top managers in (so-called) non-profit agencies. “Individualized funding” (privatization at the family level) just makes families shoulder more of the cost of the services they need.

No one should gain from others' desperate need. A strong public system is the only answer.

4. Shorten waiting lists

Waiting lists for many social services are absurdly long. In developmental services, for example, it can take two years to get a child into an “infant development” program. By the time the service is available, the child is no longer an infant!

Shorter waiting lists are essential. Adequate funding and better management are the solution.

5. Improve management

Many social service agencies spend taxpayer dollars without adequate government oversight. Volunteer boards and social service managers need supervision and support to deliver the programs they're supposed to deliver.

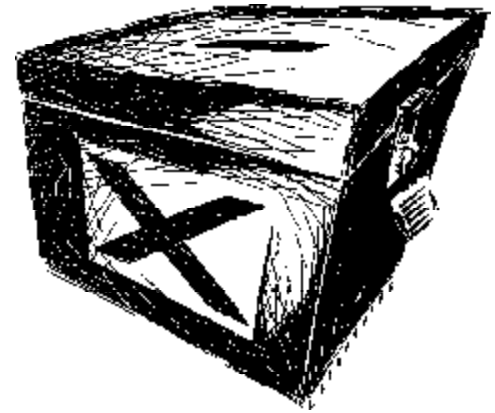
6. Create a social services *system*

Workers at Children's Aid Societies, young offender facilities, children's mental health centres, schools, and facilities for the developmentally disabled see how the work they do is interconnected. The Tories don't. An integrated social services *system* could spend money in one place to save it in another – and provide better services at the same time.

We've got to fix Ontario's social services. The ballot box is the place to do it.

Here's how you can help rebuild social services in Ontario:

1. Vote. Voter turnout in the last Ontario election was just 58.3 per cent of those eligible. Low turnouts mean voting has never been more important – and your vote has never been worth more.
2. Work to defeat your local Tory. Conservatives never intended to improve our social service system. They're not going to start now.
3. Help a candidate who cares. Call the candidate's campaign office. Offer to take a lawn or window sign. Wear a button. Volunteer to go door-to-door to talk to your neighbours. Sign up for a phone bank. Help out in the campaign office.
4. Urge all your co-workers to help oust this government – and start rebuilding social services in Ontario.



Talk to your candidates

You've got a right to ask questions of the people who want to represent you. On your doorstep, on the street, and at all-candidates meetings, ask candidates what they will do to strengthen social services. Will they:

- Restore and increase funding for special education in our schools?
- Increase funding for all social services and direct money towards keeping and attracting qualified staff?
- Stop the piecemeal privatization of social services?
- Make a commitment to shorter waiting lists for social services?
- Support a vision of a well-supervised, well-managed, integrated social services *system* that is strong enough to ensure the dignity of all Ontarians?

Take Action Now

The future of social services in Ontario for years to come will be decided on Election Day. Play a part in this election.

Together, we can make things better.



To find out how to get involved in the OPSEU campaign, check our web site at www.opseu.org.