

Some of the scams

- from SYSTEM on page 9
- A couple in their forties cashed their January welfare benefits then wintered in Florida until April.
- The male half of a couple in their mid-forties declared he was unemployed for medical reasons. His female partner said she worked only part-time. They collected benefits worth more than \$11,000 before it was discovered they bought a home in Hamilton by securing a mortgage based on two incomes. He had been working for a year under the table.
- A 44-year old man collected \$30,000 over two years while running a business with another welfare recipient. The investigation revealed he did not declare \$94,000 in income.
- A 17-year old collected more than \$3,000 after paying rent to a landlord who turned out to be his mother. She also counseled her son on how to collect welfare.
- A 51-year old man collected almost \$9,000 while living common law with his "landlord" and running a consulting business in Barrie.
- A 56-year old woman collected over \$5,000 while living with a son and sister who are also both on welfare. She assisted her son in running a limousine service.

Heard it all

• from GOODS on page 9

ating criminal intent, he and Mr. Praysner must prove the suspects understood all along that they must divulge everything. If there is insufficient proof of criminal fraud, investigators can still pursue cheaters through the General Welfare Assistance Act. People who don't declare all the facts up-front must return the overpayment owed Halton Region. If still on welfare, they have to shell out a maximum 10 per cent of their monthly entitlement. "The bottom line for us is that we want to do (our job) very quickly to get the money back," said Mr. Praysner. Mr. Waller explained that judges are now handing down short jail sentences of 30 to 90 days. One recent case saw a cheater go away for 18 months.

Peanuts in rice balls

Consumers with peanut allergies are warned not to eat sesame rice balls manufactured by Golden Happiness Frozen Foods. The products, which are sold in 750 gram and 230 gram packages, contain peanuts. That information is not declared on the label. The manufacturer is recalling the product, which is distributed in Ontario. There has been one reported case of illness. Consumers may return packages to the point of purchase. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency is monitoring the effectiveness of the recall.

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Area team uses variety of approaches to effect change, save taxpayer money

By HOWARD MOZEL

Special to The Champion

While Halton's Eligibility Review Program hasn't got the same ring to it as welfare fraud squad, this regional initiative is a tight-knit, efficient team in every sense of the word.

Headed by Joanne Bree, the group's goal is savings — any way it can achieve them. This includes getting families off the welfare roll and back to work. Failing that, the team's job is to identify compliance problems and root out the cheats and the liars:

Tracey Ferguson, for example, is responsible for pursuing all terminated cases with outstanding overpayments.

Carolyn Schoenfeldt conducts file audits on entire caseloads and individual files — usually long-term recipients — to determine policy compliance and sometimes fraud.

Income support worker Judy Green helps recipients fulfill their obligation to pursue other financial support to which they may be entitled.

Dino Days coming to Halton museum

Most kids can't get enough of dinosaurs, so they should be in for a treat beginning Thursday, Aug. 13 as 'Dino Days' hit the Halton Region Museum in Kelso Conservation Area.

Thanks to the Royal Ontario Museum, a 60-foot long Dinosaur Museumobile will be visiting through Tuesday, Aug. 18.

Walk through the sights and sounds of the huge creatures that wandered the earth 70 million years ago. On top of that, visitors can build a dinosaur from real bones at the Halton Region Museum, watch dinosaur movies and play dinosaur games.

On Saturday, Aug. 15 'Dino Days' features the Doug Barr Children's Show, featuring Mr. Barr's well-known song, 'The Dinosaur Chomp.'

Mr. Barr will perform 45 minute shows at 12:30 p.m., 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. All seats are \$5. For reservations, call 875-2200.

Kelso is off Town Line (Tremaine Road, north of Steeles Avenue).

Investigation and preparation for the prosecution of welfare fraud is the last resort, a job which falls to retired Halton Regional Police Staff Sgt. Ted Waller and 17-year social services veteran Nick Praysner.

The local team is far from alone. They are an extension of a far-flung network linked by a provincial welfare fraud control database which collates the flow of reports from across Ontario and is accessed by every welfare office. There is also the a provincial hotline, leads from caseworkers, calls from suspicious citizens and more.

Through the United Council on Welfare Fraud, inter-jurisdictional barriers continue to fall and Halton has solved cases with links as far away as Florida and Texas. After all, fraud and misrepresentation are not limited to the municipality which pays recipients and often crosses regional, provincial and international boundaries.

"There is no shortage of information," says Mr. Waller, who explained tips often come from hard-working individuals who pay taxes and are angered by abuse. "They have no problems calling us."

Sometimes, says Mr. Waller, a caseworker has nothing but their "gut feeling" — such as a client's expensive clothing or jewelry — to warn of potential problems. Upon investigation, undeclared bank accounts and businesses are often uncovered.

"We encourage people to work and be self-employed, but there is a dual responsibility," said Mr. Waller. "The client has to understand it is a two-way street."

The team easily pays for itself. In 1996 the investigation of 326 of Halton's 2,000 welfare cases resulted in the termination of 71 and estimated savings of \$706,095. That same year, 587 case file reviews, third-party reimbursements and overpayment recovery resulted in the repossession of \$755,645. Program expenses were only \$182,603 so the net savings were more than \$1.2 million.

Mr. Praysner says their focus is to change people's situations from dependency to self-sufficiency. In the meantime, it is up to clients to abide by the responsibilities that come with applying for welfare and being honest when declaring all income and assets.

"Declare everything and we'll determine what's exempt," says Mr. Praysner.

There are some cases where it yields the team no joy to catch recipients but given the number of opportunities to tell the truth, they quickly wear out their welcome by the time they reach Mr. Waller and Mr. Praysner.

"The majority of cases that arrive at us, the sympathy level has died down," said Mr. Waller.

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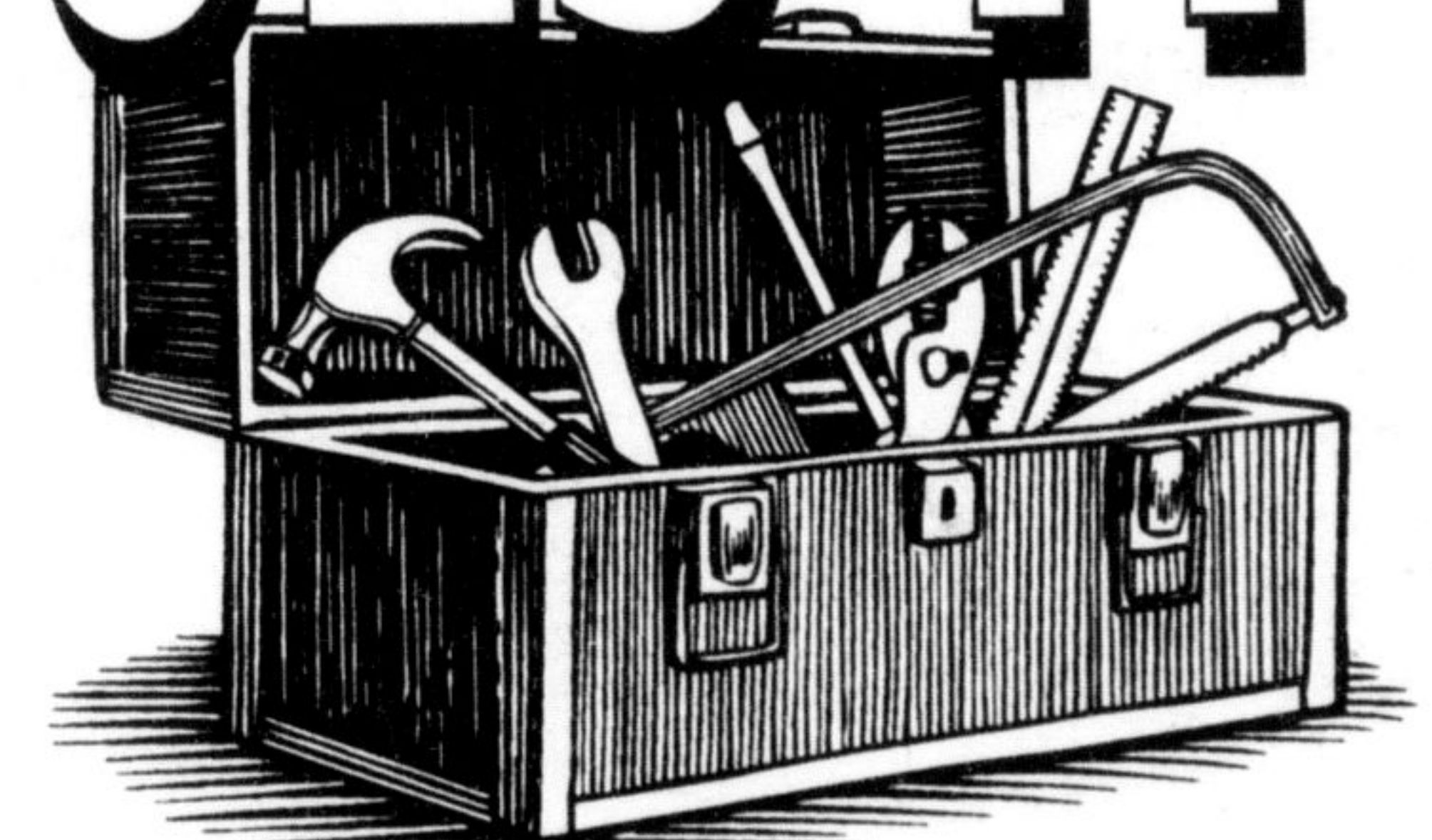
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