

# Halton put on firing squad by Workfare opponents

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

Anti-poverty activists opened fire on Ontario's social assistance legislation, but it was regional councillors who reported feeling burned.

A slew of delegates confronted Halton's health and social services committee February 22 to lobby for changes to the Ontario Works program.

But they should have done their homework on Regional efforts first, said Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

"When we hear criticism that we're not doing enough, it would behoove them to see what we are doing first and then come back and say we can do better," she said.

"Are we perfect? No. But we're good. We're damn good. And we're working to be even better."

Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale also felt deflated by the delegates.

"I really feel a little de-motivated, almost depressed," she said. "I'm sorry if you can sense a little frustration here but no one likes being judged. We on this committee feel as though we've been judged unfairly."

But that didn't stop the committee from passing a series of recommendations submitted by Oakville Councillor Kathy Graham.

She appeared as a private citizen in hopes of persuading the committee to lobby the Province on the issue.

The recommendations were approved by council Wednesday. They ask for a widespread review of social assistance rates and benefits, the definition of disability and the re-establishment of a program for the working poor. Specifically, Ms Graham suggested that the cost of prescription eyeglasses and some drugs be covered to help the working poor keep their jobs.

She also battled for a return of the national child tax benefit supplement, which is currently deducted from the monthly social assistance payouts.

Critics of the legislation were lining up to speak at both committee and council, including the president of the Oakville and District Labour Council, Willie Lambert. He soundly condemned Workfare, the controversial provincial program that puts social assistance recipients to work.

"This program is conscripted forced labour for free enterprise," he said. "We're in the infancy of the advent of fascism. This pro-

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HALTON CHAIR  
JOYCE SAVOLINE



gram is the advent of a new fascism in the new millennium."

But Mr. Lambert made no comment when told that participants toil exclusively with non-profit organizations.

Mr. Lambert also called for an increase in the minimum wage and accused councillors of not representing their less wealthy constituents.

"I'd say this council doesn't represent the people on the low end," he said. "No, not at all."

And the committee got an earful from co-chairs of the Halton Anti-poverty Coalition, Fred Stewart and Deanna Goodine.

Both gave first-person accounts of having to get by on slight social assistance cheques. Currently, single people on social assistance receive \$520 per month. A single mother of two, such as Ms Goodine, pockets \$1,100. She charged the committee with not understanding the impact of poverty.

"People on welfare are sick of being pushed around. When you receive benefits the government owns you," she said.

"Being poor is being degraded every day of your life."

But Ms Mulvale put the boots to the assumption that councillors haven't been cash-strapped.

"I was part of the Children's Aid Society. I was a foster child," she said. "I know what it's like to not have enough coal in the house for heat or food in the cupboard."

And Ms Goodine seemed stumped when asked what changes she'd like to see made.

One option is to let Workfare participants legally unionize and strike, suggested Brenda Dolling of the Halton Social Justice Coalition.

"We feel Workfare is a regressive program forcing people to work for free to receive assistance," she said.

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