

Halton won't 'top up' welfare cheques — for now

By NORMAN NELSON

Ontario municipalities are split evenly on whether welfare payments should be used to top up the wages of full-time workers at the bottom end of the pay scale.

Halton Region, which doles out about \$7.2 million in welfare payments a year (about \$5.9 million is recovered from provincial and federal governments), recently confirmed which side of the debate it's on, and that is with those that believe welfare eligibility is like being pregnant. Either you are or you aren't.

Bonnie Ewart, the region's social services commissioner, said at any one time there are about 1,100 cases requiring welfare assistance throughout the four Halton municipalities.

The average stay on welfare, she said, is between one and three months with some as long as six months.

"It's designed to be short term," she said, "pending another form of income."

There's no disagreement on four categories under which people can receive welfare — single parent, disability, old age or lack of parents for support.

The disagreement lies with the wording of one of the categories, which says a person can be considered for welfare because of an "inability to obtain regular employment."

The Region interprets this to mean that a person with full-time employment is ineligible for assistance "regardless of whether a needs test would" indicate entitlement for welfare.

Some municipalities, however, will conduct a needs test and if full-time earnings are less than a person's welfare entitlement a welfare cheque is approved to make up the difference.

For instance, the 'top up' payment for a

single man working 25 hours per week at \$5.50 per hour and paying \$350 in rent would amount to \$9 a month.

A working couple (one working at \$10 per hour and the other at \$7.50 per hour) with child care costs of \$560 a month and paying \$750 in rent would receive \$144 per month.

The province, said Ms Ewart, is leaning toward this latter approach, but until it clarifies the legislation, she recommended the Region continue with its current policy.

The financial impact on Halton, if it were to adopt the 'top up' approach, she said, is "difficult to predict."

The administrative impact, she said, would be substantial. "Regardless of whether an individual receives \$9 or \$900, the same administrative costs and time are involved in processing and maintaining the case."

Although the ministry has acknowledged that the number of welfare recipients would increase, she said they've indicated that no additional money would be forthcoming to cover increased administrative costs.

Staff raised two other concerns. It was felt the issue of self-employment needed to be addressed to prevent an otherwise successful, self-employed individual from qualifying for welfare during a slow or off month.

With the 'top up' approach, staff said "an individual who had earned and spent \$25,000 in one month could technically qualify for assistance in the following month if income was less than (the welfare) entitlement."

Concern was also raised that the "minimum wage must keep pace with economic realities to prevent the private sector from relying on social assistance to top up poor or low wages."



Photo by JOHN WARREN

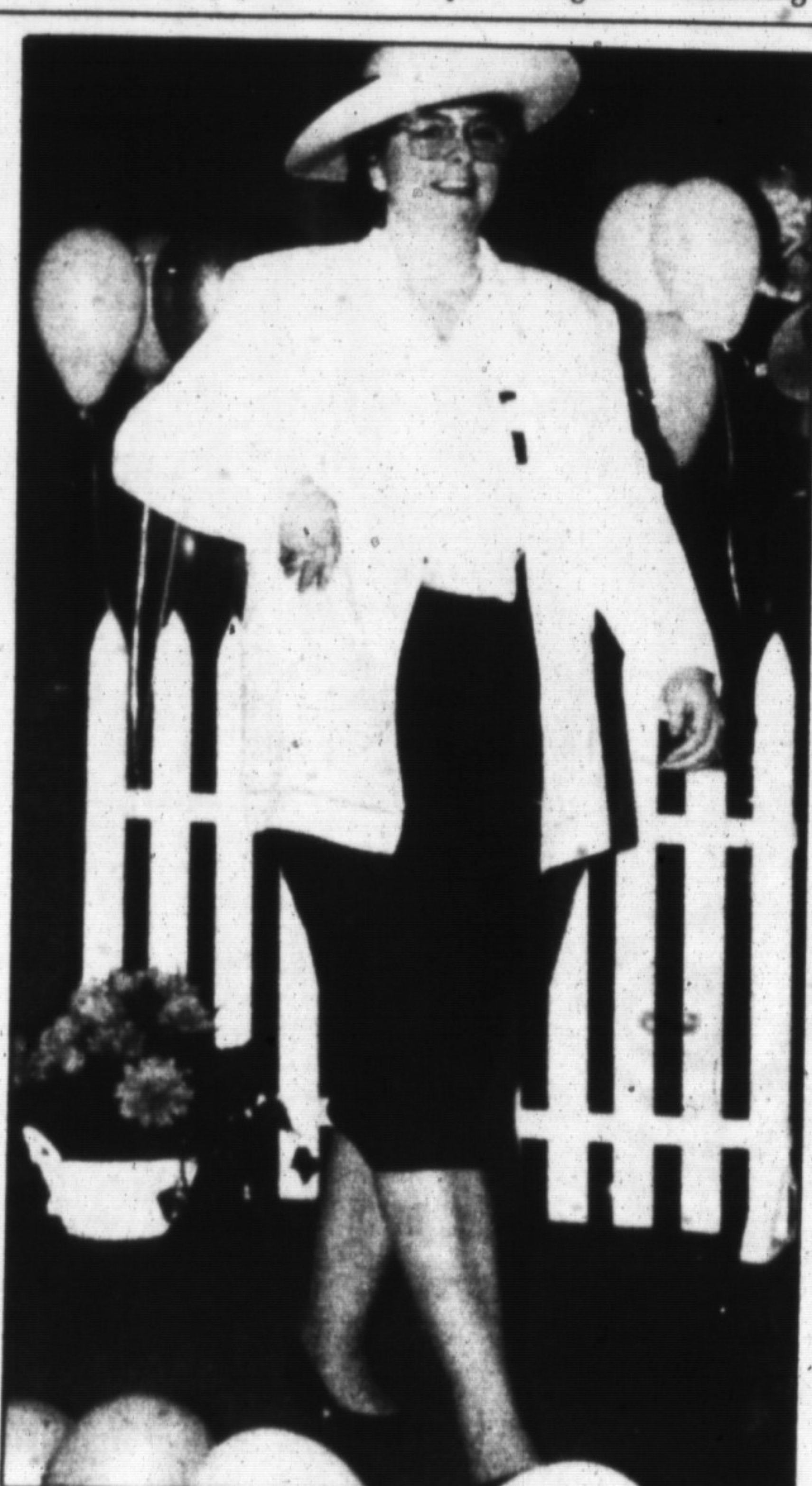


Photo by JOHN WARREN

What are people wearing this Easter?

Various things, it appears, ranging from the sublime in the case of the ladies to the ridiculous in the case of the gentleman on the right. Ah, well, all in a good cause for Tim Longo, the Easter Bunny at Halton Centennial Manor celebrations aimed at pleasing Milton kids. At left Joanne Kentner models while Pat Kentner helps out, to her amusement

It seems, at a recent fashion show at the Halton Waldorf School. In the centre photo, Diane Jarvis sports a spring outfit during the Beta Sigma Phi sorority Spring Bouquet of Fashions event at the Optimist Centre. The show was a charity fundraiser. At right, Mr. Longo gets a little help keeping up his end on Saturday.

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