

No price tag for changes in welfare system

By ROB KELLY
The Champion

Ontario's welfare system is changing, but nobody is releasing any formal estimates about how much that change will cost. However, there will be a new focus on retraining people so they can get off the welfare treadmill, provincial officials say.

Last week the provincial government released a paper called *Turning Point*, outlining three major initiatives in welfare.

Job Link is a program designed to train or retrain more than 100,000 adults so they can join the workforce.

Also, revisions to the methods of paying welfare will result in a

"streamlined" system, rather than the "complicated, two-tiered" one used at present, a provincial press release indicates. Currently, the two major welfare tracks are general assistance, which is supposed to be shorter term, and family benefits, for those viewed as unable to work long-term.

The third recently announced

strategy involves taking child care benefits out of the welfare system entirely. Children's benefits would be paid monthly on a geared-to-income basis. Under present provincial rules, if welfare recipients find work, albeit low paying, they may lose their child care benefits entirely, the provincial release indicated.

"We are going to replace welfare

with new programs that help people get training, get education and get back to work." Community and Social Services Minister Tony Silipo said last week. "For the first time since the welfare system was created in the 1950s and '60s, we are going to focus on helping people prepare for and get jobs."

Pat Daley, a spokesperson from the minister's office, said "there certainly will be an increase" in "start-up costs" associated with the new direction. But given its push toward getting people off welfare, "our hope is that over the long term, it will help, that costs will be reduced."

After the recession of the early 1980s, welfare rolls were "quite high," Ms Daley noted. "They never came down. So many people are on social assistance now. We just can't let that happen."

"Our intention is not to set up a punitive system," she added. "Most people want to work. It's more driven by incentive than penalty, through employment and a training allowance."

Philosophically sound

Asked if it's genuinely possible to fit 100,000 people a year into new training initiatives, Ms Daley replied, "we think we can." Besides working with the provincial Ministry of Education and Training to provide high school and community college placements, plans are afoot to use community halls and existing workplaces for upgrading, she added.

Janet Menard is Halton Region's director of income maintenance, responsible for administering welfare programs at the local level. The regional welfare department "would not disagree with the philosophy" behind the new provincial directions, she said.

However, it's unclear at present how the province intends to actually reform welfare delivery, Ms Menard noted. Currently Ontario pays roughly 80 cents of every welfare dollar, while regional-level governments contribute the other 20 cents through property taxes. Local governments also run the programs on a grassroots level, overseeing each welfare case.

Cut payments

Regional governments have long lobbied to have their 20 per cent contribution to welfare removed, even if it means picking up an equivalent funding responsibility elsewhere. Welfare rolls have expanded dramatically in recent years, pressuring local government finances.

As well, regional councillors tend to argue that welfare should not be funded by property taxes because providing a guaranteed income, whether through welfare or unemployment insurance, has traditionally been the responsibility of upper-level governments.

Ms Menard will be preparing a report for Halton regional council on the matter, and submitting input to the provincial government, which has requested feedback from front-line welfare providers.

Ms Daley said costs should probably be firmed up in the fall, with the legislation going to committee around Christmas. The programs are expected to be up and running in 1995.

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