

Workfare critic says

'When your money runs out, your rights run out'

By **KIM ARNOTT**
Special to *The Champion*

Workfare is downright immoral and citizens have a duty to stand up against it, according to one Halton resident.

John Gaul, a Burlington teacher, was one of about 20 people who turned out to a meeting in Burlington recently to express indignation over Halton's implementation of the provincial government workfare scheme.

"When your money runs out, your rights run out — that's the message the Ontario government is sending to me," Mr. Gaul told regional representatives who were on hand to explain the local program.

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The three regional employees were peppered with questions about how the program will work and how it will affect those on social assistance. They also faced strongly worded opposition to the philosophy of the plan.

"We have a different philosophical understanding of what the social welfare system should be," said Joey Edwardh, executive director of the Halton Social Planning Council. "And possibly a different understanding of the nature of volunteerism," she added.

Many people also questioned the ability of the workfare program to deliver real jobs to welfare recipients.

"Most of the jobs of the future are going to be relatively highly skilled," argued Mr. Gaul. "A program like this is not going to get people those skills." The information meeting was organized by the Halton Anti-Poverty Coalition, which has passed a resolution opposing the workfare program.

"(A similar program) didn't work 50 years ago — why is it going to work today?" asked coalition co-chair Donald Brown.

But workfare, or what she prefers to call community participation, is only one part of, "a fundamental redesign of social assistance," explained Janet Menard, a director with the region's social and community services department.

The new welfare structure will focus more strongly on developing employment opportunities for recipients, she said.

For the first four months on social assistance, recipients will undertake a self-directed employment search, with access to regional employment and training programs.

During that period, about 40 per cent of recipients usually leave the system, Ms Menard explained.

Following the four-month period, welfare recipients will be required to participate in a case review, which will determine if they are "job-ready" or not. Those who are ready for work will be streamed to an employment placement agency, which will be paid to find them a permanent fulltime job.

Those who are deemed to need additional training or experience before finding work will be streamed into community placements, or workfare. While Halton expects only 50 placements to be established in 1996, it hopes to have an additional 480 created by the end of next year.

Workfare will help get recipients out into the community where they can network, learn useful skills and improve their self-esteem, according to Ms Menard. "Somebody who's working has a better chance of finding a job than someone who isn't," she said.

The workfare program is designed to be cost free to participants, who will be given money to cover expenses for transportation, child care or safety equipment.

But Ms Edwardh argued the current system is obviously working successfully if 40 per cent of recipients exit within the first four months.

"Forty per cent is an astounding victory if people receive help, then leave the system," she said.

Mr. Gaul added the whole concept of redesigning the welfare system is skewed by popular misconception.

"People at the middle and upper end of the income bracket have been getting welfare for years in the form of tax cuts," he said. "What we need is a program to pry the money out of the hands of the upper classes."

"Mike Harris talks about motivation. The problem is not motivation, it's jobs," he added.

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