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Workfare targets not being met: MPP

Province plans to take back money from municipalities missing quotas

BY CHRISTOPHER DOURIS
Staff Writer

York Region's welfare payments could be clawed back next year, even though officials insist they are meeting their workfare quotas.

Community and Social Services Minister John Baird announced this week the province will claw back welfare payments to municipalities with underperforming workfare programs, starting in April.

That won't be a problem in York Region, according to social services commissioner Joann Simmons. "We're meeting our targets," she said, adding more than 800 people have left the region's welfare rolls for full-time work.

But that came as a surprise to Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP Al Palladini. "I am told York Region has not met its caseload," Palladini said.

Under Ontario Works, municipalities have to find volunteer work placements for 15 per cent of their welfare recipients, totalling 17 hours a week.

Last year, York Region had a caseload of 3,465, making its workfare target 520. As of June, it had placed 127 welfare recipients in work programs. Baird has announced a doubling of targets for the number of welfare recipients expected to get placements to 30 per cent of cases by 2002.

The province will also reward municipalities with successful programs by giving them \$1,000 for each community placement that exceeds their target. How that bonus money is spent will be the municipality's choice.

"We've scrapped the old money-for-nothing system and introduced accountability and personal responsibility into welfare," Baird said.

"The plan will help municipalities get more people off welfare by expanding the opportunities that we know help people succeed."

The workfare program presents opportunities which have not been explored in the past, Palladini said.

As economic development minister, Palladini said he hears from businesses that can't find

part-time labour, and require people for three hours a day. "The region knows where those people are," he said. "We may not hit a home run, but maybe we can hit a whole bunch of singles and score a whole bunch of runs."

Filling the part-time needs of business by giving people work experience could eventually lead to reductions in the welfare rolls.

"It's a win, win, win," Palladini said. "We're not just talking about welfare here, we're talking about employment opportunities."

Vaughan Regional Councillor Joyce Frustaglio, chairperson of the social services committee, said the region's program was slow to get off the ground, but is becoming more successful.

"I think we're doing a good job and we're going to continue to do better to meet the Harris (government's) demands," she said.

"We're in a very good position as far as our caseload and meeting our targets," Frustaglio said.

"We don't anticipate that this (the clawback) is going to have a tremendous effect on us."

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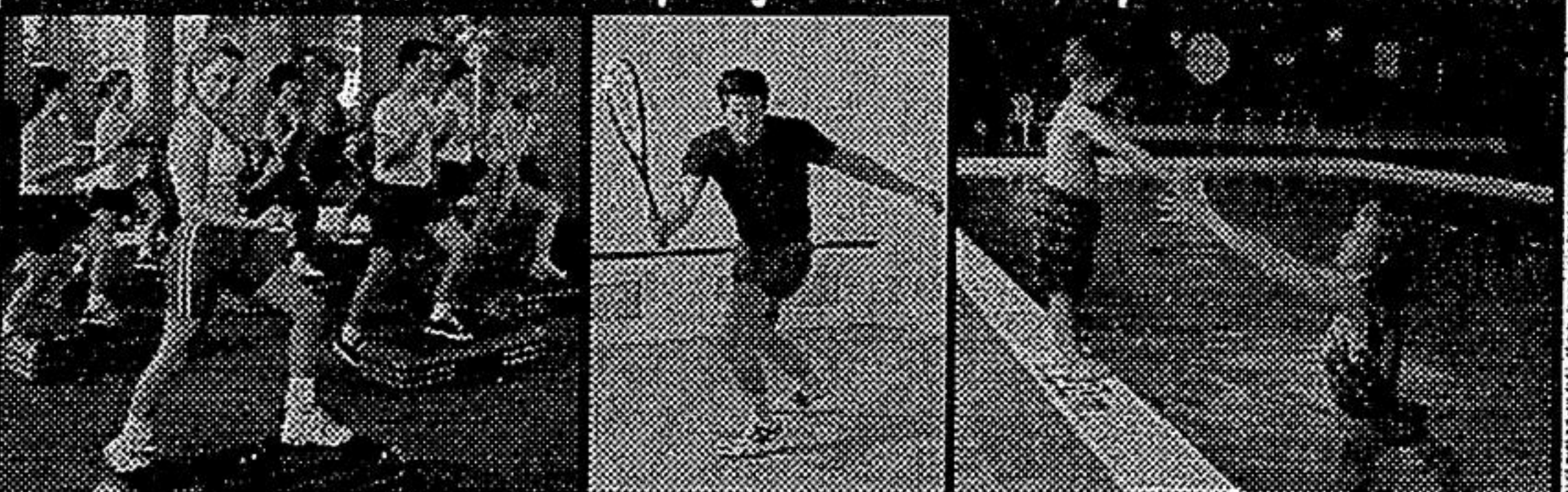
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