

Operation Groundswell gaining momentum

by Allena MacDonald

An effort to prompt the provincial government to rethink its employment support and income assistance program is gaining some momentum.

About 500 people in the local area added their names to an 'Operation Groundswell' petition which is making its way across the province.

The petition maintains that post-secondary education has become a basic need for Nova Scotians, and that the rising cost has put it out of reach for many low and middle income people.

The current Employment and Income Assistance policy denies income assistance to single parents attending university and the financial needs of single parent families vastly exceeds the maximum student loan, the petition states.

The petition calls on the Nova Scotia Legislature to make ESIA benefits available to single parent families who wish to enter a university program.

A rally for the effort was held last month at St.FXU.

Student Organizer Victoria Latchmore said the response has been strong.

"We're really happy with what happened and we hope that it will continue throughout Nova Scotia communities."

Latchmore is the Equity Officer for the St. FXU Student Union.

She said there is currently a rally being planned for Halifax.

Operation Groundswell, she adds, has been working with the Canadian Federation of Students, and has the

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- Victoria Latchmore, organizer of St. F.X. Operation Groundswell rally

support of that organization.

The campaign had its seeds two years ago.

The group maintains that the Nova Scotia government, through its policy, is discriminating against single parents attending university.

In 2000, the government introduced a policy to prohibit university students from collecting social assistance benefits.

Chapter 27 of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act states:

"A person attending a post-secondary education program of more than two years shall not receive assistance unless the person is funded to attend by the Employability Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Program."

Shaunderay Clyde was a single parent attending St. FXU had her income assistance terminated when she began university in 2002.

While her university costs were covered by federal and provincial student loan programs, student loans in Nova Scotia have a ceiling, and the loan was insufficient to cover the cost of raising dependent children.

The majority of single parents attending university with student loan assistance meet the poverty requirement of the income assistance program.

Clyde decided to appeal the Community Services decision to cut off her income assistance at the Nova Scotia Supreme Court. But the court upheld the department's decision to cut-off her social assistance benefits.

In comments to media at the time, Community Services Minister David Morse commented that there would have to be a "groundswell" of support before a policy change would take place.

The logic behind the policy, she said, is that that support for students is covered by student loans. However, Hines said the maximum student loan per year per student is about \$11,000, while tuition takes \$6560.78, leaving just \$4400 to live on for the entire year, including regular expenses and childcare and transportation.

Bursaries are not plentiful, she added and there are not enough subsidized day care spaces to cover the needs of all working, or studying, single parent families.

Another single mother, who was also a student, said she had to withdraw from her university study because she could not support her family and go to school.

She said she hopes to be able to go back someday and scoffed at suggestions from 'powers that be' that she should go get a "trade" which would require less tuition costs and shorter periods in school.

She labelled the change in policy as an attempt to limit the aspirations and potential of single parents.

"I can't be the (Canadian) Minister of Foreign Affairs with a welding degree," she said.

Jennifer Sullivan of the St. FXU Psychology Department faculty said she raised two small children on her own, while she went to university and that her income was supplemented.

She said the daycare and housing subsidies helped, but it was still tight budgeting for her and her family.

"I couldn't have fed my children without social assistance," Sullivan offered.

"The government has to realize that single parents can't be treated the same as individual students," she said.

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A coalition made up of anti-poverty groups, and womens' associations formed in an effort to create the groundswell.

That coalition, called 'Changes' prepared a brief entitled Fairness in Education for Single Parents in Nova Scotia and that was presented to Morse last March.

The brief showed that university education is not affordable for single parents under the current system. It outlines that monthly deficits would range from \$388 to \$643 per month, depending on the number of children in the household, the child care cost, and rent cost.

The Community Services department claim, that if single parents live in 'geared-to income' housing, have a child care subsidy, and access to scholarships and bursaries, they will have adequate finances to attend university.

But the coalition said that there are fewer subsidized housing units and daycare spaces than required and bursaries and scholarships are also fewer than the need, and are based on merit, need and availability.

The Coalition started a letter writing campaign last spring and held the first of three planned rallies at St. FXU last month.

The event included a number of students who are "living through the policy".

Jennifer Hines is a current student single parent at St. FXU. She said it is important to demonstrate to government that "all people have a right to a University Education."

Because of the additional support she received, Sullivan points out, she is now supporting her family well, and is paying taxes.

Katherine Reed of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre said she graduated from university and was a single parent when she attended. She said her children have benefited from her education.

Reed said single parents cannot get through university without the support of social assistance, and the figures will back that up.

"Not all single parents want to go to university but for those who do, it's appalling to bar that access to them," Reed said.

Ed Penser, a professor at St. FXU and the vice president of the Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers, said the association wrote to Minister Morse calling for a change to the policy.

The association labelled the policy "discriminatory and counterproductive."

Lucille Harper of the Antigonish Womens Resource Centre said there are a lot of people upset over the current policy.

"We're angry ... we're really angry about this..."

She said the policy creates and maintains poverty that it is "elitist, sexist and discriminatory".

Community member Colleen Cameron said the policy is a "blatant discrimination" for people to get educated.

Christy Lamour read letters from Federal Conservative Deputy Leader, and local MP Peter MacKay, and Alexa McDonough the post-secondary education critic for the federal NDP caucus.

MacKay said higher education is critical for Canada to compete on a global market while McDonough said that hearing the stories from single parents at university "pains and enrages" her and the policy "excludes and marginalizes" the poorer in society.

Canadian Federation of Students Nova Scotia representative Danielle Sampson said that the federation believes that every individual should have the opportunity to attend university and that should not be based "on the size of their wallet."

The federation, she said, which represents about 500,000 students across Canada, has sent the message to Morse, Nova Scotia MLAs and federal MPs, "that the policy is not acceptable and should be changed".

Also attending the rally were students and representatives from various other groups such as the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and the Halifax Coalition Against Poverty.

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