

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 1, 2001 the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services replaced the Family Benefits Act and the Municipal Social Assistance Act with a single tiered policy, *Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA)*. The goal of this new policy is “to help people reach a level of self-sufficiency.” To evaluate the impact of the new ESIA policy on women, three women’s centres in North Eastern Nova Scotia – the Every Woman’s Centre, Sydney, the Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre, Antigonish, and the Pictou County Women’s Centre, New Glasgow – undertook a research initiative, *Social Assistance Reform in Nova Scotia: Is It Working For Women?*

The three women’s centres were chosen because their distinctive economic and cultural characteristics reflect the diversity of rural Nova Scotia. In other words, by studying ESIA implementation in these three communities, researchers documented the impact of social policy and informed advocates and decision-makers about the impact of the new policy on women and their families. The research identifies the strengths and weaknesses in the operation of the policy and provides recommendations and conclusions relevant to all communities in Nova Scotia.

The *Social Assistance Reform in Nova Scotia: Is It Working For Women?* Project provided a mechanism for women, or excluded individuals “to be able to address the complex issues and barriers that exclude them¹.” The feminist research methodology used for the study was participatory action research. Women who face barriers and exclusion due to gender, disability, race, age and poverty shared their experiences with Project Researchers who interpreted the impact of the ESIA policy and developed recommendations. Forty-five women on social assistance from the Sydney, Antigonish/Guysborough and Pictou areas participated in the research. Ninety-five percent of the participants stayed through the completion of the project. The valuable first voice experiences shared by these women were the basis for a number of recommendations to improve content and delivery of the new policy. In addition to gathering information from the women, the researchers from each site interviewed ESIA caseworkers, employment counselors and supervisors. Administrators of ESIA from the head office of Community Services in Halifax were informed of the project and the initial impact assessment findings.

A significant achievement of the study is that it used a women-centered approach that involved the participants in critical analysis and project development to ensure that their needs were being addressed and their experiences reflected. The information gathered is an accurate reflection of the realities of the women’s lives. The recommendations reflect the women’s experiences and their analysis of the policy.

The project identified that many participants were unaware of the ESIA policy changes and that the policy was not implemented or interpreted consistently across or within the areas studied. In fact, not all ESIA caseworkers were fully familiar with the changes. Their inadequate knowledge of information regarding the policy created a barrier to women attempting to qualify for entitlements. In response to this knowledge barrier project researchers developed a number of

¹ Special Initiatives, Department of Community Services. See *Building a Framework to Support a Vision of Social and Economic Inclusion*, p.1.

fact sheets in clear, plain language, which contain information on client's rights & rates, basic needs and special needs. Information fact sheets have been distributed provincially to women's organizations for distribution to women on social assistance.

Another barrier to entitlement was the non-specific way in which the policy manual was written. Policy terms were open to interpretation by caseworkers allowing them extensive discretionary power. This subjectivity exacerbates the power differential between client and worker and facilitates the sometimes-disrespectful treatment of clients within entitlement determination processes. This fosters an environment that is demoralizing for women. Many of our participants identified that the message they receive from the policy and its delivery is that they can not be trusted and are not worthy.

The women participating in the project agreed that education is one of the main avenues to establishing economic independence. The lack of support for post-secondary education in this policy forces women into low paying employment. This strategy seems contrary to promoting "economic self-sufficiency" as outlined in the Department's policy statements and operating principles. In reality, the policy may very well create a more stressful and financially strained existence for women, especially single mothers, when the supports of the first year of paid employment no longer apply. Of considerable concern as well to the women was that women's caring work is undervalued and early childhood development is not properly funded.

The new policy has been in effect just over one year and, as is the case with many new programs, adjustments need to be made. It is the hope of the Project Researchers that the Department of Community Services will seriously consider implementing the recommendations. Without changes the policy will not reach its stated goal of "helping people reach a level of self-sufficiency."

Women are the experts on their own lives and their experiences need to be voiced when government policy affecting their daily lives is being developed. A collaborative model of program development and service delivery, which is currently the focus of the social and economic inclusion framework the Department of Community Services is seeking to build, can start with the recommendations provided with this report.

The project has been profiled throughout the province and support for the recommendations has been substantial. These recommendations if implemented will improve the policy so that it better responds to the "complex issues and barriers" women face.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

The 45 women participants and three Research Project Coordinators from the *Social Assistance Reform in Nova Scotia: Is it Working for Women?* Project developed the following eleven recommendations for the Department of Community Services.

1. That the policy be revised with a geographic diversity-lens.

The needs of people living in rural, coastal and urban communities are not the same. Applying the same policy, which acts as a framework of social support for each community, province-wide, does not respect their diversity. For example, the policy's response to employment barriers for people across the province is implemented through their Employment Support Services (ESS). These services include skills development support, office and technology support and other such services that can only be helpful in an area with employment opportunities. In a community lacking employment opportunity, the barriers are larger and require a much more complex response. Employment Support Services programs must be tailored to the needs of communities and the resources and opportunities available in those communities. Where community-based organizations offer programs that support ESS program goals working in partnership with those organizations would benefit social assistance recipients.

2. That the child care allotment provided by Community Services be increased to the actual cost of quality daycare in each region and that there be an increase in the number of portable subsidized spaces in place.

The Department of Community Services provides a maximum of up to \$400 per month for child care. The average daily cost of supporting one child's full time daycare is \$515 per month. Additional private licensed homes with portable day care seats need to be established for women in the rural area. Early childhood development is a priority identified by the government. These good intentions need to be put into action by ensuring quality daycare is accessible and affordable for everyone.

3. That employment and social supports be separated into two budget items.

As the ESIA policy currently stands, women who require the maximum transportation allowance to access employment and education opportunities may not be able to access money for medical transportation needs. This leaves women vulnerable in situations where they require medical assistance but have used the maximum allowance for employment and education-related travel.

Recommendations continued...

- 4. That the transportation allowance be provided to recipients in a fair, timely and respectful way.**

Caseworker practice demands that women in some communities have their driver sign an expense sheet after every trip. This is demeaning to women and demands they identify that they are social assistance recipients. Women are also required to show receipts indicating they purchased gas on the day they work in order to be reimbursed. Depending on their work schedule this may not be practical or possible. In some areas women accessing medical appointments inside their hospital catchment areas are not entitled to transportation allowance. This is particularly problematic in areas where women do not have access to public transportation and have a considerable distance to travel.

- 5. That the wage exemptions under the previous Family Benefits program be maintained so that people do not lose wages from their first dollar earned and that these allowable earnings (calculated from net wages earned) be indexed to the minimum wage. As well support for childcare and transportation would remain in place.**

The new wage incentives programs were put in place so people would be better off because they would be receiving money for child care and transportation. Some women find the change positive as the amounts for child care and transportation are adequate for their situation and the 30% they are entitled to can go towards other essential needs for the family. Other women, mainly single adults, do not benefit from the change. In fact, single adults and mothers who were not in need of babysitters and/or transportation money find themselves on the losing end of the new policy. An adult working a minimum wage job one day a week earns \$206.40 each month (gross wages). In effect, an adult working a minimum wage job one day a week under the new policy needs to earn \$333.34 to keep \$100 where before they could earn \$100 to keep \$100. For an adult with dependents, it is necessary to earn \$666.67 to keep \$200. The policy does not reflect a wage incentive for all women. Rather, it increases stress levels among many women forcing them to work longer hours in low-paying jobs. Maintaining the allowable earnings clause and providing child care and transportation adequately reflects a wage incentive.

Recommendations continued...

- 6. That any amount received from an income tax refund not be calculated into the monthly budget.**

Currently, the income tax refund is not considered allowable income. Instead, money is deducted monthly from the social assistance recipient's cheque until the refund is paid off. This means that a social assistance recipient may be denied her full cheque for the number of months required to recover the refund. Until the policy is changed to allow social assistance recipients to keep their income tax refunds, it would be helpful to calculate the income tax refund only into the month it is received and not to pro-rate it over a number of months.

- 7. That co-habitants' monthly entitlement be addressed in both recipients names, not just the male partner. In the case of intimate partner abuse or problems accessing benefits, that the entitlement be issued in the female recipient's name only.**

Issuing the monthly entitlement in the male client's name allows/enables male dominance and often leads to situations where women and their children are faced with undue hardship because the male partner denies them access to entitlements.

- 8. That an independent selection committee for programs such as The Employment Opportunity Program (TEOP) be formed with members from the general public and a Community Services representative and that a standard criteria and selection process be developed and made public to all recipients of Employment Support and Income Assistance.**

While government has identified education as a key component of women's equality, barriers to post-secondary education and adult learning programs have increased. Income Assistance to single parents enrolled in these programs has been cut. Currently, access to The Employment Opportunity Program (TEOP) is generally left up to the discretion of the individual caseworker. Therefore, not all social assistance (SA) recipients are aware of the program. Within the pool of SA recipients who do apply to the program there is room for caseworkers to influence the selection process which potentially leaves some SA recipients at a disadvantage. All SA recipients who meet with their Employment Counselor must be told about their options. Social assistance recipients must be informed about TEOP seats available and the application process as well as receive support from the Employment Counselor in preparing an application. Caseworkers can provide an unbiased service to SA recipients by improving awareness of programs such as TEOP and ensuring an objective selection process that is respectful of all SA recipients.

Recommendations continued...

- 9. That students with dependents who cannot find work, and who without a student loan would be eligible for social assistance, be allowed to receive Employment Support and Income Assistance during June, July and August if they are returning to school in the fall.**

Many single-parent students on social assistance cannot afford to support dependents without assistance during the summer months. Often post-secondary students are unable to find employment to support themselves in the summer months due to the lack of job opportunities, and lack of affordable, accessible child care.

Further, in the situation where parent(s) on social assistance with a child attending a post-secondary program and where the student is working during the summer, living at home and returning to school the following fall, the parent(s) should not be penalized by having their income reduced.

- 10. That the Lawful Confinement policy whereby people under house arrest are no longer eligible for assistance be changed so that they are eligible to receive assistance while serving their conviction.**

The Lawful Confinement policy as it stands now can cause undue hardship. People can be left confined to their home without an income or any means of survival. They can, in fact, be left with no place to turn. Prior to sentencing it should be imperative that recipients be informed of the possibility that they may not be eligible for assistance while under house arrest.

- 11. That an outside agency such as a women's centre be funded by Community Services to provide female clients with advocacy.**

Both female clients and Community Services benefit from clients having an advocate. The advocate would:

- inform clients of their rights, rates and entitlements
- accompany women to meetings and contact workers on their behalf
- assist women with the appeals process
- support clients in addressing complaints & demystify language