

Summary of Key Points in Meeting of Minister Community Services, David Morse, with CHANGES Coalition, June 8, 2005

Present: Peggy Mahon, Jennifer Gallant, Isabel French, Catherine Gillis, Jacquie Farrow-Lawrence, Katherine Reed, Stephanie Hunter
Minister Morse, Harold Dillon, Lyn Hartwell

As outlined in the brief, "Fairness in Education for Single Parents in Nova Scotia," CHANGES is advocating for a change in the policy to enable single parents on social assistance to continue receiving social assistance while they attend university. CHANGES is not advocating for the ESIA program to pay for single parents' university education. Rather it is advocating for social assistance eligibility to continue so that basic needs of the single parents' family can be met.

In the meeting on June 8, the Minister and representatives from the CHANGES Coalition discussed how we can create dialogue around this issue and to examine ways to enable exceptions to the policy, as the Department needs some time to assess the impact of changing the policy.

Five areas were discussed as follows:

1. The Minister proposed that one area that could be addressed is the surcharge for childcare for low-income parents to ensure they have access to childcare without the extra charges.
2. The Minister proposed the possibility of a "rent supplement" program related to housing that could be arranged for single parents who are attending university to ensure they have access to affordable housing. This might be an arrangement worked out with the university; for example, it was mentioned that Acadia currently has "extra" accommodation on campus, or it could be provided for the student for off campus accommodations depending on what is available.
The Minister mentioned that he has entered into discussions with Acadia University about the possibility of a pilot project in which a residence would be designated for single parents to ensure affordable housing. This is just in the preliminary discussion phase, at this point.
3. A third area proposed by the CHANGES coalition is for single parents to have access to social assistance during the summer months (4 months from May to August); so they are not forced to withdraw from university each year in order to be eligible for social assistance.
4. A fourth area proposed by the CHANGES coalition was that single parents on social assistance who want to attend university would be eligible to continue to access the pharmacare and dental plan provided through social assistance while they attend university.
5. A fifth area proposed by the CHANGES coalition was that until the proposed policy change is investigated that the Department have a mechanism where exceptions could be considered for single parents who have been on social assistance would be considered to be eligible for social assistance while attending university. In this case, CHANGES

proposed that preference for exceptions be given to those single parents who are already in university.

One area of concern raised by the Department was the issue of whether opening up the eligibility to single parents who are on social assistance who want to go to university would then open the doors for others who are not single parents. Legally, this needs to be examined as to whether a case can be made for single parents as a special group. Another area of concern to the Department was whether ESIA workers can make exceptions within the current regulations.

Point of Clarification: ESIA workers cannot make exceptions to the policies if such exceptions are in conflict with the regulations or legislation, and the Department will be examining the current regulations to determine if options should be put forward for consideration.

The Minister, on another note, said that he has been meeting with some representatives from the Child Care Sector to discuss the plan for utilizing the Federal dollars coming for Child Care. He anticipates the department's plan for Child Care in the province being ready to take to Treasury Board later this month - as required in accessing the Federal dollars.

The CHANGES coalition members suggested perhaps a broader pilot project focusing on single parents access to university education might be a possible way to proceed, both to see how many would be involved and to explore the impact of the various ways discussed to support single parents while they are in university.

The Minister, the Department staff, and the CHANGES coalition agreed to move forward with further dialogue on the items raised by both the Minister and the coalition and to have another meeting in the near future.