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Guaranteed income said answer to poverty

By Sandro Contenta Toronto Star

Giving Canadians a guaranteed annual income is the only way to break a tragic cycle of poverty, a provincial inquiry into welfare has been told.

"Any fears that the expense involved would bankrupt the country or that a guaranteed annual income would foster greater dependency are myths," David McQueen, a board member of the Family Services Association of Metropolitan Toronto said yesterday.

McQueen, a former economist with the Bank of Canada and now professor at York University, said a guaranteed income program would save money by streamlining assistance now provided by municipal, provincial and federal governments.

More importantly, it would remove the stigma and discrimination many people on welfare now face, McQueen said, and remove the obstacles that prevent them from getting jobs.

McQueen was addressing the Social Assistance Review Committee,

struck by the Liberal government to chart the overhaul of Ontario's \$1.5 billion social assistance system.

In its simplest form, a guaranteed income plan sets a minimum amount of income all residents must receive. Anyone who falls below that level would be given assistance to make up the difference.

At the moment, studies indicate that the 500,000 people receiving social assistance in Ontario fall anywhere from 20 to 50 per cent below the Statistics Canada poverty line. The poverty line for a family of three in Metro last year was \$18,800 annual earnings.

Joanne Campbell, vice-chairman of the review committee, said she is concerned that a guaranteed income scheme "in a sense, accepts that you're not going to have full employment."

McQueen said the social assistance system is now a "sort of ramshackle" guaranteed income program.

Ideally, a guaranteed annual income would not allow anyone to fall below the poverty line, but

McQueen said he realizes right now that would be politically impossible. McQueen's group provides counselling to more than 10,000 families and individuals every year.

As a first step, the income level would be set below the poverty line but people would be allowed to keep a greater percentage of part-time earnings. At the moment, for example, single parents can earn

only \$140 a month without a reduction in their benefits. Anything over that amount is hit with a 50 per cent tax.

McQueen stressed, however, that any such scheme must be supported by proper job-training programs and an increase in subsidized day-care spaces that would make it possible for single parents to seek and keep jobs.

\$100 fines sought for drivers 'robbing' disabled of parking spots

Physically fit drivers who park in spaces reserved for the handicapped are guilty of a "disgusting offence" says North York Mayor Mel Lastman.

He gave notice yesterday that he'll ask city council to increase the minimum fine for the offence from \$10 to \$100.

"Fit people who park in spaces for the disabled are robbing them, keeping them from shopping, shows and a whole lot of other activities," Lastman said.

He reported an "alarming" increase in the number of calls reaching his office, and his cable television show from handicapped drivers who find their reserved spaces occupied by cars not carrying the required handicapped sticker.

Minister says food banks only a stopgap measure

By Sandro Contenta Toronto Star

Continued reliance on food banks to supplement a failing welfare system may lead to an acceptance of stopgap solutions to hunger without dealing with its root causes, says the chairman of FoodShare Metro Toronto.

"Do you have to present visibly starving people before the conscience of Ontario will wake up to the systemic questions that are creating that hunger?" Rev. Stuart Coles asked a provincial inquiry into welfare yesterday.

"If there are hungry people and we have food that we can find for them, then we've got to do it. But we have to go on with the questions, 'how do we stop this horror? How do we stop this disgrace?'" the United Church minister asked the Social Assistance Review Committee.

About 165 food banks provide at least 200,000 emergency meals to

families and individuals each month in Metro.

"This represents a total of nearly half a million charitable dollars which are being used to compensate for a social safety net which is obviously inadequate," Coles said, adding that close to 50 per cent of the emergency food recipients are children.

"Those of us working in the emergency food distribution area are well aware that in providing this service only the immediate problem of being hungry is addressed," he said.

Increased social assistance benefits, improved employment programs, increased minimum wage rates and a guaranteed annual income are all initiatives that must be taken to tackle the root problems of poverty, Coles said.

Coles said the committee must do everything it can to make sure food banks do not become entrenched.