



Join the Conversation

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PUBLIC SERVICES

Public services are a bargain for all of us, from health care and education to roads and public safety. They improve quality of life. They help everyone's dollars go further. As important as they are, however, services can't substitute for needed income and the options and freedom that go with it.

The kind of basic income we want, one that allows people to live with dignity, works with services to improve wellbeing. It can make services an even better bargain. For example, a person who can afford more nutritious food or a recreational activity is individually better off and that also helps reduce demand on our health care system.

Changing to a basic income, therefore, means that some changes to services will happen too. Rethinking services in a proactive way is an important part of basic income discussions. We've highlighted some key things to consider.

Upstream services: Health care and public education are good examples of universal 'upstream' services that help people stay resilient, prepare for life and prevent more serious problems from developing. They are a good fit with a basic income model of income security, which is based on similar principles. In Canada, good examples of underdeveloped upstream services that would work well

with a basic income are child care (as demonstrated in Quebec) and pharmacare (which is included in the health care systems of almost all other developed countries). Both are estimated to pay for themselves through return on investment.

Downstream services: These kinds of programs tend to treat problems, often only when they become very serious, rather than solve or prevent them. They often cost more and don't get lasting results. We certainly need emergency rooms in hospitals, for example, but they're not the best way to address ongoing issues. Foodbanks do not solve hunger or food insecurity. Homeless shelters will never prevent homelessness. The underlying issue with far too many public and charity-based services is that they're trying to compensate for too little income and too much insecurity. If we solve the income security problem, the need for these kinds of services will go down and the smaller number of people left with multiple challenges can get more concerted help.

Conditional services: Some services are tied to social assistance. There are several problems here. They exclude people with very low and precarious incomes who might benefit from them. They also trap people who need services and thus can't risk leaving social assistance. People on social assistance usually

need to access quite a number of services to get by and this can be very time consuming--and stigmatizing. The more finely a service is 'targeted' the more likely it is to miss; people often don't fit neatly into categories. Further, the primary focus of social assistance systems on conditions, rules and enforcement makes it an unwelcoming environment for the best use of 'helping' services. In a basic income model, access to services could be geared to income level, not source of income, as in done already in some areas. When service providers are no longer administering income, they can establish healthier relationships with clients.

Jobs: With a basic income, jobs will change. Some workers are concerned about public sector job loss, while others see genuine opportunity for social workers, for example, to be able to practice social work rather than 'police' money, or for workers in physical and

mental health fields to have greater success with their patients. In many areas, it's automation that is a key driver of job loss, but the demand for human, care-related jobs is predicted by many to grow. Ensuring that these are good jobs is an important goal.

Community: With a basic income, Canadians have much greater ability to participate in their communities, and to be active agents in shaping and delivering the services they need. They are no longer supplicants, but can be partners with service providers. When people say they like the workers at the foodbank but not the fact they have to go there, the answer is to ensure that everyone can shop at the grocery store and have community organizations where people can build relationships and work together. A basic income makes that possible.

KEY FACTS

- Canadians, in 2006, enjoyed an average per capita benefit of close to \$17,000 from public services, such as health care, education and personal transfers that our taxes fund. In median income households the benefit is equivalent to about 63% of income; in households in the \$80 to \$90K range, it's worth about 50%. (*Canada's Quiet Bargain: The benefits from public spending* (2009) Mackenzie and Shillington.)
- The Mincome experiment in 1970s Manitoba showed a drop in visits to doctors and hospitals for accidents, injuries and mental health issues and better high school completion rates for teenagers. (*The Town With No Poverty*, Evelyn Forget)

DID YOU KNOW?

Basic income initiatives have been successful in places with very different levels of social services. Better health and educational outcomes, for example, are common findings of studies in India and Africa, in Dauphin, Manitoba in the 1970s, and in Canada today for families receiving child benefits. Wives in the Madhya Pradesh pilot in India and senior women receiving Old Age Security in Canada speak similarly about the empowerment of having income of one's own.