

Community Voices:

Young Parents in Toronto Speak Out About Work, Community Services and Family Life

A Report of the Prospects for Young Families in Toronto Project



Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
Family Service Association of Toronto

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Finally, we would like to thank the many parents who took time out of their busy lives to share their experiences and stories with us. We appreciate their willingness to take part in the project. It is our hope that their stories, experiences and recommendations for change, will foster action to improve the quality of life for Toronto's young families.

About the Prospects for Young Families in Toronto Project

Prospects for Young Families in Toronto is a collaborative research project of the Family Service Association of Toronto and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto. The goal of this project was to investigate how social and economic circumstances are having an impact on young families and to build support for public policies that can assist them. Our project focused on young families whose head was under the age of 35.

The year-long project worked with young families, staff from community agencies, academics and others in generating strategies and solutions that can help young families in Toronto. This project built on findings of previous research about young families conducted in 1994-95 by the Family Service Association of Toronto, the (then) Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto and the Child Poverty Action Group.

There were three phases to this project. In phase one, we held eight focus groups with young families throughout Toronto to explore their economic circumstances, the range of available social supports, and the impacts on family life. In phase two, the project held three roundtables (Toronto, Scarborough and North York) with a range of front-line and community workers, administrators from social agencies, policy makers, foundations and academics working in a range of areas related to young families. These roundtables contributed significantly to gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening to young families in Toronto and helped to define the policy directions that can address their needs and aspirations. In the final phase of the project, we produced two reports stemming from our work. This report is the result of our focus groups with a wide range of young families throughout Toronto. An accompanying report entitled, *Falling Fortunes: A Report on the Status of Young Families in Toronto*, examines the main economic and social trends that young families are facing and compares them to younger families over the past two decades. It also sets out recommendations for action based on our policy roundtables.

Funding support for this project is provided by the United Way of Greater Toronto and the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

ABOUT US: *Family Service Association of Toronto (FSA)* helps people dealing with a wide variety of life challenges. For 90 years, we have been assisting families and individuals through counselling, community development, advocacy and public education programs. The *Community Social Planning Council of Toronto* is committed to independent social planning at the local and city-wide levels in order to improve the quality of life for all people in Toronto. It promotes diversity, social and economic justice, and active citizen participation in all aspects of community life. For more information visit www.fsatoronto.com & www.socialplanningtoronto.org

Table of Contents

Introduction, Method and Participant Profile	2
Work, Education and Training: Opportunities Out of Reach	3
Toronto Families: A Diversity of Communities	7
High Quality, Regulated, Affordable Child Care: Hard to Get, Hard to Keep	9
Social Assistance: Paying the Rent and Feeding the Kids?	11
The Long Wait for Safe and Affordable Housing	14
Young Families on Health, Public Education and Recreation	15
Resources for Action	17

Community Voices: Young Parents in Toronto Speak Out About Work, Community Services and Family Life

Toronto's young families face serious roadblocks in making a good life for themselves and their children. The rise in non-standard work with its characteristic low wages and poor benefits, coupled with declining support for our cherished social programs, has left young parents and their children at a disadvantage compared to families of generations past. Single mothers and parents who are immigrants, members of racialized communities and teenagers, encounter the greatest challenges to landing a good job, accessing needed social supports and achieving a decent standard of living. Based on focus group research, this report gives voice to the experiences behind the downward trends, and parents' ideas for change to improve the quality of life of young families in Toronto.

Method:

As part of the **Prospects for Young Families** project, the Family Service Association of Toronto (FSA) and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T) held eight focus groups with 58 Toronto parents under the age of 35. The focus groups gave parents an opportunity to share their experiences about:

- Work and social services,
- How experiences of the labour market and social services have an impact on their families,
- Ideas to improve work, social programs and the quality of life of Toronto families.

FSA and CSPC-T staff held the focus groups between February and June 2004 in locations across the city, including venues in the former cities of Etobicoke, Scarborough and Toronto. Broad outreach was conducted to invite participation from families reflecting the rich diversity of Toronto's communities. Five groups were specifically organized to encourage the participation of:

- Aboriginal parents,
- Immigrant parents,
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered parents,
- Survivors of domestic violence,
- Teen parents.

The Community Voices report gives expression to the labour market and community social service experiences, concerns, and ideas for change of a diversity of younger families in Toronto. This report is intended as a resource for public education, community mobilizing and organizing.

Participant Profile

Gender: 81.8% female, 16.4% male and 1.8% transsexual

Age: 18-34 years old with an average age of 24 years; in 5 of the 8 groups, the average age was over 25

Marital status: 47.2% married or common-law and 52.8% not living with a partner

Household size: 2-10 with an average of 3.5 persons

Number of children: 1-4 with an average of 1.7 children

Percentage children under 5: 55.6%

Percentage children 5-12: 29.2%

Percentage teenage children 13-17: 15.2%

Immigrants: 37% with 1 in 5 immigrants residing in Canada for less than 5 years

Ethnoracial diversity: 16.4% from Aboriginal and 40% from racialized communities

LGBT parents: 9.1% identified as gay, lesbian or transsexual

Education level: almost half had not completed high school; 1 in 5 were university graduates

Employment: 30.8% with paid work of whom two-thirds had part-time or casual jobs

Full-time students: 13.5%

Unemployed: 44.2% with the majority being single mothers

Median monthly income: \$1,355.61

Median after-rent daily income per person: \$6.76

Living on less than \$4 per day per person after rent: More than 1 in 4 families

Living below the poverty line (Low Income Cut-Off; LICO): 88.2%

LICOs for a family of 2, 3 and 4 in Toronto, respectively: \$24,745, \$30,774, \$37,253

Incomes less than half of the LICO: 51.1%

Living in a shelter or hostel: 15.4%

Paying more than 30% of income toward housing: 82.2%

¹A list of references is available online at www.socialplanningtoronto.org

Work, Education and Training: Opportunities Out of Reach

Among study participants, 11.5% had full-time jobs, 19.2% had part-time or casual employment, 13.5% were attending school full-time, and 44.2% of participants were unemployed, with the remainder on maternity leave, caring for children and ill relatives in the home, or living with disabilities that restrict their ability to work. Among the unemployed, 8.7% were receiving Employment Insurance. Participants shared many insights about their experience in the labour market, searching for work and making ends meet.

Young Parents Speak Out about Work, Education and Training

The Importance of Work. Participants spoke of their desire for stable, decent employment, the importance of work to their self-esteem and sense of independence, and the challenges that they faced finding and maintaining employment. Participants identified education and training as key to their prospects in the labour market.

Benefits, Working Conditions and Income

- Most participants had trouble finding decent work. Available jobs were often low paid, part-time, temporary, contract or dead-end. These jobs did not provide the stability and security that parents sought for themselves and their families.
- Most jobs offered no benefits such as dental, vision and health care, sick leave or vacation. Working parents without benefits faced difficult choices between staying at home and losing a day's pay or more to tend to a sick child or sending that child to school. Parents worried that taking time off would jeopardize their employment and ability to pay the rent.
- Most parents were unable to accept shift work including evening and midnight hours due to lack of child care. Few positions offered family-friendly flextime or job sharing options.
- Participants remarked that minimum wage jobs did not leave workers much better off than social assistance recipients. Low wage workers struggled to meet basic needs.
- With stiff competition for employment, extensive job searches often produced few opportunities and many rejections.
- The social service sector was identified as a field offering socially positive, often poorly paid, short-term and unstable employment.
- Parents who worked long hours, while bringing in more income, struggled to find time for family responsibilities and relationships.
- Some participants commented on how hard work doesn't necessarily bring a better quality of life. In some instances, modest increases in pay resulted in lost access to subsidized housing, child care and recreation programs. The increase in family income was not sufficient to cover these new costs and they were left further behind in some respects.



Barriers to Employment: Discrimination

- Employers made discriminatory remarks and asked illegal questions during job interviews, such as asking female applicants if they plan to get pregnant. Participants experienced racial discrimination and ageism in hiring practices. Desperate for work, participants often responded to employer questions that they knew to be illegal or inappropriate.

Barriers to Employment: Child Care

- **Lack of access to high quality, regulated, subsidized child care.** Lack of child care presented a serious barrier to finding and maintaining employment. In some cases, mothers lacking child care or a babysitter, brought their children with them to job interviews. In other cases, participants were unable to accept positions because they could not get child care.
- **Difficulty maintaining subsidies.** Parents also had difficulty maintaining their child care subsidies when they were between jobs or between school and work. In these cases, parents had very little time to find a new job in order to maintain their subsidies. The loss of subsidy made it difficult to search for and accept work.
- **Problems keeping work without ongoing access to high quality care.** Mothers were forced to resign from jobs when their babysitter quit, their child became ill, or when they developed concerns about the quality of care their child was receiving. As well, mothers on social assistance who found part-time employment that could lead to full-time work, had trouble maintaining their subsidy because the work was not full-time.

Barriers to Employment: Education and Training

- **Few opportunities for adults to complete high school.** Most Aboriginal parents in the study had dropped out of high school. These parents identified lack of a high school education as a major barrier to finding employment. Some participants attempted to re-enroll in high school but were not accepted by local schools because they were over 18 years of age. Highly motivated to complete their education, participants approached many high schools and contacted their MPs for assistance, with little success. A few parents were enrolled and working toward their diplomas despite these challenges.
- **Lack of access to post-secondary education and training.** In a highly competitive labour market, participants found increasing demands for formal education and training. Many parents identified out-of-reach tuition fees, the high cost of textbooks, lack of affordable training, apprenticeship and mentoring programs, and the promise of unmanageable student debt as significant barriers to accessing education and training.
- **Lack of recognition for internationally-acquired training and education.** As documented in other studies, immigrant parents described a familiar hurdle in finding employment, an inability to have their training and education recognized by Canadian employers. In some cases, problems stemmed from the licensing process for specific professions. In other cases, employers rejected applicants, particularly members of racialized groups, because they lacked "Canadian experience".
- **Overqualified or lack of work experience.** Parents had difficulties landing jobs because they were considered overqualified in some cases, and lacking work experience in others. In particular, youth faced the catch-22 of not being able to get a job without experience and not being able to get experience without a job.



Barriers to Employment: Transit and Employment Support Programs

- In addition, parents identified transportation problems, particularly for night shifts or jobs in the suburbs, as a barrier to maintaining work.
- Participants were divided on their experience of employment support programs. Some had positive experiences with job search support, while others weren't sure where to turn for help.

Supporting Unemployed Workers. Following lay-offs or the end of temporary or contract positions, few parents were eligible for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits or EI training programs. Lack of access to EI left parents with few prospects but to apply for social assistance.



Work, Education and Training: Opportunities Out of Reach

Improving Work, Education and Training Opportunities

- **Create good jobs and provide benefits.** Participants want government to intervene to improve the supply of decent employment. Actions could include government job creation, legislation requiring employers to provide benefits such as sick days, or government support directly to workers for dental, vision and health benefits.
- **Increase minimum wage.** Parents believed that the minimum wage should be set at a level that would allow workers to meet basic needs, not need a food bank or be at risk of becoming homeless, and provide for a decent quality of life. Some participants suggested increasing the minimum wage to \$10 per hour.
- **Set and encourage family-friendly work policies.** Participants want changes in the workplace to allow for more flexible schedules and job-sharing. They suggest that government provide employers with incentives for establishing family-friendly policies.
- **Expand high quality, regulated, subsidized child care.** To ensure parents, particularly single mothers, access to the labour market, education and training opportunities, affordable child care is critical. Parents are worried about the quality of care that their children receive. Child care centres must be staffed by trained professionals in a regularly monitored, stimulating environment. Parents would like to have access to child care for job interviews. In recognition of the changing nature of work in Toronto, parents want access to part-time and evening child care.
- **Improve access to secondary education for adults.** Parents returning to high school want access to schools or programs in their communities. Funding is needed to ensure that adults can attend school in their local community.
- **Improve access to post-secondary education and training.** To improve access, parents recommend lower tuition, more grants, access to Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) while receiving social assistance and more training and apprenticeship programs. As well, parents identified the need for retraining opportunities for injured workers.
- **Recognize internationally-acquired training and education. Stop discriminatory hiring practices.** Participants recommend changes to professional licensing and accreditation practices to provide access for foreign-trained professionals. Action is needed to stop discriminatory hiring practices and the "no Canadian experience" excuse. Immigrants' education and experience is valuable, whether acquired in Canada, in their country of birth, or elsewhere.

- **Increase co-op work experience, apprenticeship and mentoring opportunities.** In particular, youth identified the need for more work experience opportunities through co-op placements, apprenticeships and mentoring programs. Income supports are needed to ensure access to these programs.
- **Improve transit services.** Participants identified the need for affordable transit, better transit services in the suburbs and improved service at night, to support workers with low wages and reflect the changing conditions and location of work in the city.
- **Provide and promote employment supports.** Some participants recommended the introduction of more employment support programs to assist with job search, resume writing and interview skills development. It may be that better outreach is also needed for existing programs.
- **Improve access to Employment Insurance.** Parents want the eligibility criteria changed to improve access to Employment Insurance for unemployed workers. Some participants recommended changing the eligibility criteria to 3 months of employment from the current 900-hour requirement. Some suggested changing the system to provide more training opportunities for unemployed workers, regardless of EI eligibility, and supports to allow people to move out of dead-end jobs into more challenging positions.



Work, Education and Training by the Numbers

- \$7.15: Ontario minimum hourly wage. After being frozen for nine years under the Conservative provincial government, the newly elected Liberals raised the rate by 30 cents an hour in 2004 and committed to increasing it to \$8.00 by 2007
- 62.6: Percentage of minimum wage workers who are women
- 137: Percentage increase in Ontario tuition over the past decade
- 61: Percentage increase in student debt between 1986 vs. 1995 graduates
- #1: Ontario students have the highest debt level in the country
- 2: Liberal provincial government freezes post-secondary tuition for 2 years in 2004
- 70,957: Decline in adult daytime enrolments in Ontario high schools over 7 years (76,800 in 1993-94 to 5,843 in 2000-01) after drastic provincial cuts to adult education in the mid-1990s
- \$2.40: Ministry of Education funding for adult day school students per hour of instruction
- \$9.10: Ministry of Education funding for adolescent students per hour of instruction
- 2004: Liberal provincial government launches review of adult education
- 22: Percentage of unemployed Torontonians receiving Employment Insurance; 20% of unemployed women and 24% of unemployed men in Toronto receive EI
- 58: Percentage decline in EI coverage for unemployed Torontonians since 1990



Community Voices on Work, Education and Training

"You don't go to work, you don't get paid. You don't have a choice. You just don't eat that week."

- on caring for a sick child when you don't have a job with benefits

"I used to work at KFC but I couldn't afford to pay for child care and transportation."

"You psych yourself up to go and do all this job search and when you get out there, you're slapped cold every single time."

"They look at you like you're an idiot, like you didn't know better. They probably think, couldn't she have left the kids at home. How? You only know so many people. Everybody's busy."

- on bringing children to job interviews when you don't have child care

"They don't understand that you can get a better job once you graduate out of college. You can succeed better on your own even when you are a single parent. They don't give you a chance."

- on lack of access to education and training

"I think that's not a good idea. The big loans. You should help them to go to school then they won't be getting welfare if they can get a good job. They'll be on their way."

"We were doing good and then things went downhill and there was nothing around to help. He wants to do retraining but doesn't even know how to begin to get to that point. We broke up because of this."

- on lack of support after job loss due to injury

"It would be nice if someone could step in and help before things go too far down, where it's beyond repair."

- on the hole in the social safety net

"With this OSAP business, it's a bunch of people graduating with a diploma and a bankruptcy. We cannot raise our children as single mothers with this debt. We cannot."

"Some training, you have to be on social assistance, UI. I can't do any of it because I'm not on UI. I'm not on social assistance. I am a housewife and that doesn't qualify for the training that's out there."

- on lack of access to training programs

"Transportation costs too much in this city when you're poor. My daughter stayed home from school yesterday (because we had no money for TTC). It's embarrassing."

Toronto Families: A Diversity of Communities

Parents from a diversity of communities participated in this project. While many common issues emerged, Aboriginal, LGBT, immigrant and younger parents, raised issues specific to their diverse experiences. The following community snapshots convey some of the distinct issues raised by each group.

Aboriginal Families

- Parents identified the racist treatment of Native communities in Canada, through the condemnation of Native customs and language, the introduction of reserves and residential schools and the apprehension of Native children, as having a profoundly damaging impact on their communities. While communities work to heal these wounds, contemporary discrimination and the lasting legacy of the past continue to take their toll.
- Aboriginal participants described experiences of discrimination from employers, at the welfare office and in society in general. Parents who are biracial, or in interracial relationships, described experiences of racism as well.
- Most Aboriginal parents in the study had dropped out of high school and faced many roadblocks in their later attempts to complete their education. Without a high school diploma, parents, despite considerable work experience in some cases, had great difficulty landing jobs. Aboriginal parents want improved access to secondary schools in their communities.
- While Aboriginal organizations offer many excellent programs, participants identified the need for additional free or low cost programs and services to support young families. Parents commented on the erroneous perception that Native people enjoy free and easy access to programs and services. Many experienced barriers to accessing programs.
- Many parents wanted to enroll their children in the Aboriginal Head-Start program but could not access this half-day program because they lacked child care support for the remainder of the day. To facilitate access to this program, parents would like the program expanded or additional child care provided to cover the work day. Aboriginal families commented on their lack of access to child care in general.
- With limited social and economic support, Aboriginal mothers reported feeling depressed and overwhelmed. Many parents did not use children's aid support services for fear that their children might be apprehended. Parents would like more supports available to improve the social and economic situation of Aboriginal families.

LGBT Families

- Despite the rising media presence of gay and lesbian families with children, parents often felt invisible. With few public images of their families, this was particularly true for trans parents. LGBT parents were often assumed to be the aunt, the uncle or the family friend.
- Parents raised issues about access to reproductive technologies, adoption and co-parenting. Members of the LGBT community can face considerable financial expense becoming parents. Donor insemination can be prohibitively expensive, particularly for younger people. Lesbian parents who had used donor insemination, commented on the additional expense they incurred for the non-birth mom to adopt their child. Straight couples using donor insemination do not incur the adoption cost as fathers are automatically listed on the child's birth certificate. Participants interested in co-parenting commented on the lack of formal venues for meeting others wanting to co-parent. LGBT parents want affordable access to reproductive technologies, an end to discriminatory practices with respect to adoption costs, and formal venues to meet prospective co-parents.
- While parents felt the Toronto District School Board was doing a good job representing lesbian and gay families in the curriculum, participants were concerned about the level of support in schools for LGBT youth. Participants recommend anti-homophobia instruction in the classroom and services to support LGBT students.
- Although the 519 Community Centre provides some forums, participants found too few opportunities to get to know other LGBT families. Participants recommended expanding existing forums and providing inclusive venues for LGBT parents and their children to come together and foster community.
- Parents found limited queer-positive cultural venues or institutions that were also child-friendly. Most Church Street restaurants are bars and therefore do not admit children. Local film festivals, such as the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, limit entrance for most of their films to adults. To avoid paying fees to have films rated, most film festival organizers do not have their films rated and must restrict admission to adults only as a result. If rated, more films would be accessible to children and youth. Parents want more queer-positive and child-friendly venues and institutions in the LGBT and broader community.



Younger Families

- Parents under 20 raised many concerns about age discrimination. Despite a strong commitment to their children, these young parents encountered problems with negative stereotypes about teen parents. Participants described negative treatment from the health care, school and social assistance systems, as well as, members of the general public. Young parents want to be treated as individuals rather than stereotypes, receiving the same level of respect afforded other parents.
- Younger parents felt particularly mistreated by the social assistance system. Many believed that workers targeted them as youth, subjecting them to more invasive questioning than other recipients.
- Several mothers described difficulties re-enrolling in high school after leaving during their pregnancies. Younger parents want better access to high school to allow them to complete their education and make a better life for themselves and their children.
- Many parents identified the Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) program as an important source of social and economic support. LEAP provides resources and incentives to assist teenage parents in completing their high school education.
- Participants spoke about the amazing service and support that they and their children receive at Jessie's Centre for Teenagers. Jessie's is a comprehensive resource centre for pregnant teenagers, teenage parents and their children. Participants emphasized the positive impact of Jessie's parenting group.
- Many parents were worried about where they would find support for their families when they were too old to go to Jessie's. Some teenage mothers felt that Early Years Centres catered to older parents. Participants were concerned about negative judgments of older parents in the centres. With limited resources available to teenage parents, participants strongly recommended increased funding for Jessie's and centres like it, to expand existing programs and provide additional services to young parents to age 25.

Immigrant Families

- Parents with limited English identified lack of language skills as a barrier to finding employment. Between family responsibilities and trying to make a living, some parents found it very difficult to find time for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Parents recommended expanded ESL classes and income supports to assist immigrants.
- Parents with internationally-acquired education and training faced barriers in having their experience recognized by employers. Some problems stemmed from the licensing process for specific professions. Despite strong work histories, other parents were told by employers that they needed 'Canadian experience' to be considered for positions. Immigrant parents want a change, whether through law or practice, to ensure that their education and experience are recognized regardless of where they acquired it.
- Immigrant parents recommended additional settlement services with one-on-one support for newcomers. Immigrant parents with limited English language skills face great challenges navigating bureaucratic systems in Toronto.
- Non-status immigrants face particular barriers to accessing services and supports such as housing, employment, health and social services. Non-status women experiencing domestic abuse are in particularly vulnerable situations, living with violence and very limited access to support. Faith-based charities were identified as the primary source of assistance for families without status. To improve the situation of non-status immigrants, recommendations include improving the refugee and immigrant system to help people get landed, providing affordable access to legitimate legal assistance and allowing access to social services and supports, including services for women experiencing domestic violence.



Diverse Community Voices

"When I was working to get back into school, I had turned 19 and none of the schools wanted to let me in." - Aboriginal families

"You don't want to go out there and say because I'm feeling sad, I want you guys (Children's Aid Society) to put a case on me and watch over me like I'm going to be a danger to my children. I'm not. I just need help with my children." - Aboriginal families

"As Native people, we had the whole community with our children. Now we don't have that. Our parents were put into residential schools and told how terrible our culture is and our language is. People try to leave that and come here. It's even harder to get yourself together in the city than it is in the reserve. You don't know who you're supposed to be."
- Aboriginal families

"Sperm is expensive. For queer parents, just being able to start your family is a difficult situation." - LGBT families

"I feel very anxious. My son goes to a Catholic school and I'm not out at all at the school. I'm not quite sure how to approach the whole thing about school." - LGBT families

"There aren't really venues to meet people who are interested in co-parenting. I am interested. So I'd like to meet someone who makes their own sperm, who is a nice caring individual, who would be interested in co-parenting. Now where's the support for that?" - LGBT families

"We're trying everything in our power to better ourselves to make sure our kids grow up and learn. It's hard to have kids when you're sixteen years old living on OW (social assistance). I think that governments should recognize that we have to give to school programs and community programs so young parents have an opportunity to better themselves, to get a career." - younger families

"Jessie's helped me get on welfare. They helped me to start looking for a place to live, helped me get back into high school which I graduated from last year. They were one of the best things that has happened to me." - younger families

"They have the early childhood centres and all of the drop-in programs but I find that they're very intimidating. Most of the people are in their 30s. They're older and you're younger and they look at you, 'oh that poor girl'. You know that look, that look of disapproval." - younger families

"They study really hard where they were and they come here and they start from scratch." - immigrant families

"It's so hard for them, the new ones. It's so hard for them to settle."
- immigrant families

"I was going to ESL English and I wanted to work but how I can work, how I can support myself and kids alone with very low income?"
- immigrant families

"We are not accepted, we are rejected from immigration to stay here. I am so depressed. I can't go back." - immigrant families (failed refugee claimant from country in civil war)

High Quality, Regulated, Affordable Child Care: Hard to Get, Hard to Keep

Lone parents, two-parent families, and parents across diverse communities and income groups, strongly support and identify the need for more high quality, regulated and affordable child care. In a previous section, child care was mentioned as a critical support to enable parents to enter the workforce. Parents also value child care centres as places outside of the home that provide children with educational and creative stimulation and opportunities for socialization with other children. Parents shared with us many issues regarding access to child care and ideas for change.

Young Families Speak Out about Child Care

Lack of Access to High Quality, Regulated and Affordable Child Care

- **Too few subsidized spaces, long waiting lists, expensive child care fees.** Because of the long waiting lists for child care, some parents have started searching for a space years in advance of when they will actually need one. Despite these early searches, available spaces are still not a guarantee. For two-parent families, some parents have found that it makes more sense for one partner to stay home (usually a mom) because their income would just barely cover the cost of child care. In these cases, families struggle on single incomes to make ends meet.
- **Lack of high quality, regulated child care.** Parents expressed concerns about the quality of care that their children receive and the need for regular monitoring of child care sites. On a few occasions, parents became concerned that the caregivers were not competent and withdrew their children from child care. As a result, they were forced to quit their jobs.
- **No access to part-time or evening child care.** Parents with partial child care arrangements could not find part-time care to cover the full work day. In some circumstances, evening care was needed and unavailable to assist shift workers. While informal care through family members or babysitters is helpful, these arrangements are not necessarily desirable or reliable over the long term.
- **Loss of eligibility for subsidy.** In cases where a family's income rose above a certain level, parents have lost their subsidy but have been unable to afford full fees. In these situations, mothers have been forced to quit their jobs to care for children. Parents also had trouble keeping their subsidies between jobs, between school and work, or when leaving a shelter. Families are only allowed to maintain their subsidy for one month when they are neither in school or working full-time. Women leaving a shelter for permanent housing have only two weeks to enroll in school or find full-time employment in order to maintain their subsidy. These grace periods are not sufficient for parents to find full-time employment.

Improving Child Care

- **Expand high quality, regulated and affordable child care.** Parents recommended expanding spaces to eliminate the waiting list and allow for more flexibility in terms of part-time and evening care and care to assist parents engaged in job searches and interviews. Parents want to know that their children are in good hands, being cared for by trained professionals, in stimulating environments that are regulated and monitored.
- **Ensure that child care workers are paid a fair wage.** Parents associated poor care with poorly paid workers in an undervalued sector. Participants recognized that child care workers do an important job that must be compensated with fair wages and good working conditions.
- **Extend subsidies for longer periods of time to give parents a reasonable opportunity to find employment.** Parents suggested that subsidies be provided for a longer period of time for those between jobs, between work and school and leaving shelters. The current two and four week periods are insufficient to find work. Some parents suggested the subsidy be provided for three months as finding work is challenging and time-consuming.

Child Care by the Numbers

- 1,800: More than 1,800 subsidized spaces lost in Toronto in 2002 due to funding cuts and inadequate funding levels by senior levels of government
- 1997: Last time new subsidized spaces were created in Toronto
- 2: Percentage increase in average Early Child Educator salary in Toronto since 2000
- 5 Billion: Federal Liberal party election platform commitment to be spent over 5 years for a national early learning and child care program
- 300 Million: Provincial Liberal party election platform commitment to increase the affordability and quality of childhood education and care in Ontario



Community Voices on Child Care

"The most important asset this society has is our children and yet working for or with children is an undervalued occupation. They constantly say that children are our future but they don't want to invest any money in them."

"I think we can work easier in peace and be much happier seeing that the people who are looking after our kids were trained professionals. If those people (child care workers) are well taken care of, we know that they'll take better care of our kids."

"If I go back to work, I'm just making money for daycare. So do I just stay at home? But then do I go on welfare? It will be tough times if I'm a stay-at-home mom."

"I found a job and honestly I left my kids alone because I had to survive. I had to make money. Every time I worked I was crying and very stressful about what was happening with my kids."

"It seems like the government doesn't want people to have children. The government just isn't child-friendly. They're against it."

Social Assistance: Paying the Rent and Feeding the Kids?

The Ontario government has two main income assistance programs: the Ontario Works program (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The provincial government sets the policies including the rates for social assistance. Municipal governments administer the programs. OW provides financial and employment assistance and is intended as a temporary support for Ontarians. With its low benefit levels, OW is the social assistance program of last resort. ODSP offers income and employment assistance as well but is intended as a long-term support to Ontarians with disabilities.

Among study participants, 45.5% received OW and 7.3% received ODSP. One in five OW recipients was also employed. Young parents had a lot to say about living on social assistance and many ideas for improving the system.

Young Parents Speak Out about Social Assistance

The Rates

- OW rates are too low to cover basic needs. The shelter allowance does not reflect the actual cost of housing in Toronto. OW rates have not kept up with increases in the cost of living.
- In addition to OW, teenage parents on the Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) program received additional funds to complete their high school education. While their incomes remained very low, these funds helped young parents meet basic survival needs.
- OW recipients are not allowed to keep their National Child Benefit Supplement. For families with net annual incomes below \$22,615, the monthly supplement is \$125.91 for one child and \$233.82 for two children. The federal government gives the supplement to social assistance recipients and then the provincial government deducts it from them. The clawback creates confusion and deprives children of a much needed benefit. Senior levels of government have suggested that if parents on OW received the supplement they would be less inclined to work. Parents reject this idea.
- Participants commented on the difficulty of getting on ODSP and surviving on OW while they wait for ODSP application and appeal decisions. The application forms are difficult to understand and initial rejection rates are high. For any chance of success, participants believe that their health care professionals must be very thorough and thoughtful in their responses. Health care professionals routinely advise their clients that they will likely be rejected in their initial application and that their chances of success are greatest during appeal.
- Participants felt that ODSP recipients are better off than people on OW because they receive higher benefits, are able to keep more of their savings, such as Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP) for their children, and receive better treatment from their workers.
- While ODSP rates are much better than OW benefit levels, they still don't reflect the actual cost of housing or the cost of living.

At the Welfare Office

- The OW office loses client paperwork (such as birth and death certificates) frequently.
- Participants regularly receive automated letters from the OW office threatening recipients that they will be cut off of OW if they do not submit paperwork (often documents that had already been supplied to the office) within tight deadlines.
- Clients are reassigned to new welfare workers regularly. As a result, workers do not get to know their clients.
- While some welfare workers offer support and assistance, generally participants felt degraded by their interactions with workers. Participants described 'interrogation sessions' with workers, where they are subjected to aggressive and invasive questioning.
- Teenage parents felt especially hassled by their workers and attributed this treatment to their vulnerable status as youth.
- Generally, workers failed to provide information about entitlements such as TTC passes and funds for clothing and moving expenses. Many participants found out about these resources through other recipients and community advocates.
- Welfare workers were often not available to respond to client questions. Participants complained about the time-consuming telephone system for accessing back-up workers.
- Participants who were accompanied by advocates reported more positive results from meetings with their workers.
- While better off than most OW recipients, ODSP recipients still struggled to meet basic needs and pay for needed medications.

Living on Social Assistance: The Impact

- Many used their food budget to pay the rent. Some used food banks to try to make ends meet.
- Consistent with other research, participants reported skipping meals or restricting the amount and quality of food that they ate, often sacrificing their own food for their children.
- With too little money, participants paid bills late. Some could not afford a telephone.
- Most described feeling stressed, worried, and sometimes overwhelmed. A number of mothers reported experiencing depression and social isolation due to the economic hardship and social stigma of OW. Many concealed their OW status from others, including family members.
- Participants felt especially stressed by the constant threat that they would be cut off of OW as communicated through the office's automated letters.
- Many parents had little or no opportunity for a social life, contributing to their isolation. Without money to pay for a babysitter, many participants were unable to get a break from their children, adding to their general stress level.
- Some parents feared that the Children's Aid Society might apprehend their children due to the poor and overcrowded condition of their housing.
- Prior to receiving OW, some parents had saved money for their children's education in RESPs. As a condition of receiving OW, parents were forced to cash in their RESPs, leaving no money for their children's future.
- Parents felt that the National Child Benefit Supplement clawback was hurting children.
- Participants described OW as a system that creates barriers to accessing employment. Many had too little money for transit for job searches and interviews. Some could not afford appropriate clothing for job interviews or a telephone. Parents felt that low OW rates and the hassles that they encountered at the OW office have made them more stressed, and less healthy with poorer nutrition, putting them at a disadvantage in their job search.
- Parents were unable to access good educational or training opportunities on OW.



Improving Social Assistance

- **Raise the rates.** Participants suggested setting OW and ODSP rates according to the actual cost of housing by city or region with the cost of living including adequate funds for healthy nutritious food. Participants want benefits set according to more individual assessments of need. Other recommendations included reversing the 21.6% cut to OW in 1995, and introducing transit and clothing allowances.
- **Stop the National Child Benefit Supplement clawback.** Participants want to see an end to the clawback and increases in the National Child Benefit to improve the wellbeing of children.
- **Let parents keep RESPs for their children's education.** Participants want the provincial government to increase the amount of savings families are allowed to keep under OW and to exempt RESPs from the calculation.
- **Allow OW recipients to receive student loans and grants.** To improve access to post-secondary education, participants want OW recipients to be able to receive student loans and grants through the Ontario Student Assistance Program and other sources.
- **Introduce education, training and mentorship opportunities for OW recipients.** Participants want the provincial government to scrap mandatory workfare and introduce real education, training and mentorship opportunities that meet the individual needs of recipients.
- **Change the system.** Participants want to see an end to threatening automated letters, rotating workers and the system of interrogation. Welfare workers' performance appraisals should include an assessment of the worker's treatment of clients and ability to provide relevant information and support.

Social Assistance by the Numbers

- 1993: NDP provincial government raises social assistance rates by 1%
- 1995: Conservative provincial government cuts OW rates by 21.6%
- 2004: Liberal provincial government increases rates by 3%, representing an increase of \$28.71 per month for a single parent with one child on OW. Recipients will begin receiving the increase in the Fall of 2004. The provincial government also agreed to not clawback the 2004 increase to the National Child Benefit Supplement, representing an extra \$4 per month for families with one child. The balance of the supplement continues to be clawed back.
- \$985.71: Monthly OW benefit with 3% increase for a single parent with one child, including \$526.33 shelter allowance
- \$1040: Average monthly rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Toronto
- 77: Percentage of Toronto families on social assistance paying market rents in excess of the OW shelter allowance
- 50: In almost half of the appeals assessed by the ODSP's Social Benefits Tribunal in 2000/01, the Tribunal overturned the original negative decision and granted ODSP benefits to the applicant. Studies have documented serious problems with the initial ODSP assessment process. With poor initial assessments, many people with disabilities are unable to access benefits without a lengthy appeals process.
- \$671.56: ODSP shelter allowance for a family of two with 3% increase
- \$728.21: ODSP shelter allowance for a family of three with 3% increase
- 175,000: Number of people using food banks each month in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)
- 50: Percentage of food bank recipient households on OW
- 53: Percentage of food bank recipient households with an adult with a disability or long-term illness



Community Voices on Social Assistance

"The haves, have not an inkling about what it's like to be a have-not. They do not believe that I do not have a telephone. They do not believe that we live in one room."

"Sometimes we don't want to tell people that we are (on social assistance) because we don't want to be associated with the stereotypes."

"Everyone is sick and tired of trying to figure out where they are going to get bus fare to get their kids to daycare or where they are going to get money to get their kids diapers."

"We are stressed to death and the kids know it. The kids can't be kids."

"I worked full-time until my daughter got sick and hospitalized in the summer. Lost my job, lost everything. Everything fell apart. I had no help. I was forced to go on social assistance."

"They make you feel like, oh well you're just here for a hand out. It's just a very degrading experience."

"I keep getting these letters saying, oh you got to send this in or you're cut off next week. All of those letters that keep coming. It's horrible. I feel so controlled."

The Long Wait for Safe and Affordable Housing

Housing arose as a critical issue for young families throughout this project. Parents face many hurdles in their search (and wait) for safe and affordable housing.

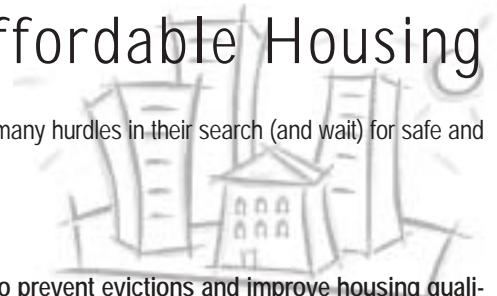
Young Parents Speak Out About Housing

Safe and Affordable Housing

- Most parents struggled with high rents paying 45% of their income toward rent on average. High rents left few dollars to cover other essentials. Some families sacrificed their food budgets to pay the rent and used food banks as a result.
- Many participants were on waiting lists with little hope of getting subsidized housing for years. Larger families faced longer wait times. For those with subsidized housing, some waited as many as eight years to get an apartment.
- Participants identified the former Conservative government's removal of rent control from vacant units in 1998 as a major contributor to high rents in Toronto today.
- Housing problems included cramped, overcrowded conditions, poor quality units in need of repair, and some with roach problems.
- Participants reported experiences of discrimination on the part of landlords. Aboriginal parents, members of racialized groups, single mothers, and youth described situations of being rejected by landlords without any consideration of their application. Social assistance recipients faced particular difficulties being considered for housing.
- Women who had experienced domestic violence faced barriers to accessing housing. While some were able to access subsidized housing through a priority system, others found it difficult to produce the required documentation to qualify for priority housing as a survivor of domestic abuse.

Improving Access to Safe and Affordable Housing

- **Introduce a national housing program.** Parents recommended massive expansion of rent geared-to-income, affordable housing programs to eliminate waiting lists, provide more supportive and co-operative housing and reduce homelessness.
- **Re-establish rent control.** Participants suggested the reintroduction of rent control to stop the further escalation of housing costs.
- **Improve services for women who have experienced domestic violence.** Participants identified the need for additional support to women's shelters, a more flexible process to allow survivors of domestic violence priority access to subsidized housing, and more affordable housing, to ensure women have options for escaping violence.



- **Take action to prevent evictions and improve housing quality.** Parents want the Tenant Protection Act changed to give tenants time to address problems and prevent eviction. Participants also recommended action, through legislation or enforcement, to address repair, bug and rodent problems.
- **Improve access to home ownership.** Despite the high rents that they pay, sometimes similar to mortgage payments, many participants felt that they would never own a home. Some participants recommended initiating a plan to improve tenant access to home ownership.

Housing by the Numbers

- \$884: Average monthly rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Toronto, a 21.1% increase over 5 years
- \$1,040: Average monthly rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Toronto, an 18.3% increase over 5 years
- 73,697: Number of Toronto households on the waiting list for social housing in 2003
- 37.7: Percentage of families paying more than 30% of their income on rent in Toronto Census Metropolitan Area
- 2,300: Number of one-parent families that used Toronto shelters during 2002, a 51% increase since 1990

Community Voices on Housing

"It's supposed to be a renter's market. Trust me, it's not a renter's market. The people who are telling you that are the rich people."

"I'm tired of playing that roulette wheel every month. Spin the wheel, what bill am I going to pay this time. Let's hope the phone doesn't get cut off. Let's hope I don't get the eviction letter again."

"I have very very hard time to find apartment. I have some money. I give it to the supervisor. I gave her cash money. Otherwise nobody would take us. I said we are new immigrants. We don't have jobs. We look for a job. Everywhere they say no."

"A lot of places won't accept you just because you are on welfare. When we went apartment hunting, as soon as you say social assistance, they look at you like you are from outer space. They hang up on you. It took us a long time to find an apartment."

"Since my child was six months old, she's been forced to live in one room with her mother that's infested with cockroaches and they won't do anything about it. I've been trying very hard to get myself out of this."

Young Families on Health, Public Education and Recreation

Parents spoke about health care issues and expense, the public education system and access to recreation programs. Young families felt the day-to-day effects of declining support for social programs.

Young Families Speak Out about Health, Public Education and Recreation

Health Issues

- Poverty was seen as both a cause and effect of ill health. Some families dropped into poverty after a parent became ill and could not work. Others found that poverty contributed to their declining health, including poor physical and emotional states. Several mothers with low incomes struggled with depression, social isolation and feeling overwhelmed.
- Women escaping domestic violence dealt with multiple issues including feelings of anger, depression and fear, and many questions regarding their future economic survival. Women's shelters and counselling programs offered important supports during difficult times.
- Some women faced challenges in recovery for alcoholism. Growing up with abusive and alcoholic parents, these women found support through counselling services to break the cycle, but had difficulties covering living expenses when they were unable to work during recovery.
- Several parents commented on costly vaccines, medicines and health care services no longer covered under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). Parents worried about the impact of rising user fees and the new provincial Health Premium.
- Lack of access to dental coverage presented a hardship for many families. Most parents did not have benefits and had to pay family dental bills out of pocket. Parents on social assistance lacked access to dental services except for emergency procedures. Vision care was also an issue for many working families.

Improving Our Health

- **Reduce poverty and ensure access to safe and affordable housing.** To improve family health, parents want programs to reduce poverty and provide housing. Many parents felt that the stress of living in chronic poverty put their health at risk. Programs to ensure economic security and housing would go a long way to reducing that risk.
- **Improve health, dental and vision coverage.** Parents want improved access to a range of essential health services including dental and vision coverage. As the ranks of the contingent workforce swell, the problem of lack of access to essential health services will increase as well.
- **Provide a continuum of support for women who have experienced domestic abuse.** Mothers who had left abusive partners recommend the expansion of services to support women including shelters, permanent housing, counselling services and income support.
- **Improve access to counselling services.** Participants recommended the expansion of counselling services to support parents with issues such as depression, childhood experiences of abuse and addictions.



Public Education

- Parents were concerned about the impact of cutbacks on their children's education. Issues included overcrowded classrooms, loss of teaching assistants, elimination of school community advisors for immigrant students, poor resources for children with learning disabilities and special needs, and restrictions on English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.
- Access to after-school programs varied widely by neighbourhood with good accessible programs in some areas and few offerings in others.
- Lesbian, gay and transsexual parents raised concerns about supports for LGBT youth. As well, parents were concerned about how rising anti-Muslim/anti-Arab bias following September 11, was impacting on school children.

Improving Public Education

- **Improve funding to the school system.** Parents want adequate funding to reduce class size, restore teaching assistants and school community advisors, provide ample resources for children with learning disabilities and special needs, ensure access to ESL classes and improve after-school programs.
- **Provide support to LGBT youth and deliver anti-oppression education in the classroom.** Parents want to ensure that supports are available to LGBT youth and that the education system actively promotes tolerance and acceptance among all people.

Recreation

- Many parents had problems accessing affordable recreation programs for themselves and their children. Parents commented on the loss of after-school programs and the introduction and increase in user fees for recreation. At City-run recreation centres deemed priority centres, families could access programs for free but found stiff competition for limited spaces.
- Through the City of Toronto Parks and Recreation Department's Welcome Policy, Toronto residents who cannot afford to pay user fees for recreation programs can apply to access programs for free. While some families with low incomes accessed subsidies through the Welcome Policy, many parents had negative experiences with the application of the policy and were hesitant or unwilling to apply. Parents described feeling humiliated and stigmatized by the application process and the insensitivity of some recreation centre staff.
- Parents with modest incomes had difficulties finding affordable recreation programs for their children when they no longer qualified for subsidy but could not afford full fees.
- Transit costs presented a barrier for some families without local access to recreation centres.
- Parents commented on the negative health impact that lack of access to recreation programs had on themselves and their children.

Improving Recreation

- **Increase Parks and Recreation funding to improve access to programs and reduce user fees.** Parents recommend putting additional funding into the City's recreation programs to improve service.
- **Improve funding to public education to expand after-school programs.** Many parents found that loss of after-school programs left few local options for their children. Schools are an important hub for providing recreation programs in local communities. Parents want changes to the funding formula to ensure local access to recreation.
- **Change the Welcome Policy to ensure non-stigmatized affordable access to recreation programs.** When applying for subsidy, parents want to ensure that their families' private income situations do not become a matter of public knowledge in their neighbourhoods. Some parents suggested sensitivity training for recreation staff. Others recommended that the City adopt a subsidy application procedure similar to the YMCA's process that provides greater confidentiality.

Health, Public Education and Recreation by the Numbers

Health

- 47: Percentage of Canadians in the lowest income bracket that rate their health as very good or excellent vs. 73% in the highest income group
- 42.4: Percentage of women 15-24 who reported experiencing intimate partner violence
- 27: Percentage of women 25-34 who reported experiencing intimate partner violence

Public Education

- 88: Percentage of GTA elementary schools with ESL students
- 62: Percentage of GTA elementary schools with ESL teachers
- 43,000: Number of Ontario elementary school students on waiting list for special education, a 24% increase since 1999/00

Recreation

- 43: Percentage decline in community use of schools in Toronto between 2000 and 2002
- 69: Percentage of agencies using school space that experienced an increase in costs between 2000 and 2002
- 5: Toronto District School Board opens schools in five high needs neighbourhoods for free use by community groups
- 20 Million: Provincial government commits new money in 2004 to open school space for community use in Ontario

Community Voices on Health, Public Education and Recreation

Health

"Vaccinations are \$90 a shot and she needs four shots. I guess it's pasta again."

"They're worried about kids with obesity and all these problems. It's because we can't buy healthy food for our children. How can you? If you can't afford to give your children three healthy meals a day then you're going to have children that are eating junk."

"A balanced diet would save a lot in the long run for health costs. If people looked into these things, there's ways to save for the future if they just invested today."

Public Education

"They need to put the teaching assistants back in the schools. That's an additional stress that we have to worry about. They say the first five years are most important, so why are they messing with the first five years?"

"My daughter has a learning disability which means that she is brilliant but can't read or write. To the largest extent, we're warehousing these kids. There's all these great methods out there. But they don't have the resources in the classroom."

"If I was going to list what are dire needs, that's language, inclusion in the classrooms, ESL programs, class size, religious tolerance being taught in the curriculum."

Recreation

"The (Parks and Recreation) worker yells, 'If you want the Welcome Policy, you should have all that straightened out.' And there it is. Here are all these other moms and their nannies that I know, who knew me and never knew how poor I was, until now." - on using the Parks and Recreation Welcome Policy for subsidized recreation programs

"Camps, summer camps, things like that, we can't afford. They changed everything in the schools, user fees. All of the prices for activities have gone up."

Resources for Action

While this list is by no means an exhaustive directory of resources and advocacy groups in Toronto, it does provide some new ideas about how to find out about programs and services in your neighbourhood, get answers to questions about your rights, and take action with local groups to make change in your community.

Information and Resources

General Referrals

211 Toronto is a telephone service that provides information about community, social, health and government services in Toronto. This 24-hour-a-day service is free, confidential and available in many languages. Just dial 211 to reach an information and referral specialist. You can also search for information on their website at www.211toronto.com

Your Rights

Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation is a non-profit human rights organization that promotes human rights in housing. Through its casework program, CERA provides one-on-one assistance to individuals and families across Ontario experiencing discrimination in their search for housing. CERA, 340 College Street, Suite 101A, Box 23, Toronto M5T 3A9, Tel. 416-944-0087, www.equalityrights.org

Community Legal Education Ontario is a community legal clinic that produces hundreds of clear language pamphlets, many in multiple languages, on topics such as social assistance, landlord and tenant law, refugee and immigration law, workers' compensation, women's issues, family law, employment insurance and human rights. CLEO does not provide legal advice. For advice, call 211 to reach a legal clinic. You can download CLEO publications online, drop by their office or call CLEO to request publications on specific legal issues. CLEO, 119 Spadina Avenue, Suite 600, Toronto M5V 2L1, Tel. 416-408-4420, www.cleo.on.ca

Federation of Metro Tenants Association is a non-profit organization which advocates for better rights for tenants. Call their Tenant Hotline at (416) 921-9494 for information about your rights as a tenant. For groups facing an above the guideline rent increase, call for assistance at (416) 413-9442. Check their website for additional resources at www.torontotenants.org

Ombudsman Ontario is an Officer of the provincial Legislature. S/he is independent of the government and political parties. The Ombudsman investigates complaints about the administration of provincial government organizations, makes recommendations to fix problems and if needed, refers cases to the Legislature. If you feel a provincial government organization has treated you in a way that is unfair, illegal, unreasonable, mistaken, or just plain wrong, contact Ombudsman Ontario at (416) 586-3300 (Toronto), 1-800-387-2620 (French), 1-866-411-4211 (TTY, hard of hearing and deaf), info@ombudsman.on.ca, www.ombudsman.on.ca

Ontario Human Rights Commission investigates complaints of discrimination and harassment, makes efforts to settle complaints between parties, prevents discrimination through public education and public policy and looks into situations where discriminatory behaviour exists. OHRC was established to administer the Ontario Human Rights Code which protects people in Ontario against discrimination in employment, housing and other areas of community life. If you have a question or complaint, call (416) 326-9511 or TTY (for people with hearing impairments/speech loss) (416) 314-6526. www.ohrc.on.ca

Resources

519 Community Centre is a multi-service organization serving diverse communities, including the LGBT community. It is located in the Church and Wellesley neighbourhood. For program information, call, drop by or check their website. 519, 519 Church Street, Toronto M4Y 2C9, Tel. (416) 392-6874, www.the519.org

Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. For report cards, resources and information about taking action on child poverty, check their website at www.campaign2000.ca or contact Ms. Liyu Guo at (416) 595-9230 x244

Canadian Council for Refugees is a non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees in Canada and around the world and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada. For information about policies affecting refugees, check their website at www.web.net/~ccr

Canadian Federation of Students provides students with an effective and united voice, provincially and nationally. Members include post-secondary student unions and associations across the countries. For policy, research, campaigns and lobbying information, check their website at www.cfsontario.ca/main.shtml or call (416) 925-3825.

Catalyst Centre celebrates and promotes innovative learning, popular education, research and community development to advance positive social change. Among its activities, the Centre is involved in the development of an activist school, provides workshops and courses, hosts meetings on participatory budgeting and offers community access to an extensive research collection of popular education materials. For more information, check their website at www.catalystcentre.ca or call (416) 516-9546.

Chinese Canadian National Council is a leading voice in the community on issues of equity, social justice, human rights and community organizing. CCNC has 27 chapters across Canada including a Toronto chapter. To find out more or to volunteer, check their website at www.ccnc.ca, email national@ccnc.ca or call (416) 977-9871.

Community Social Planning Council of Toronto engages in social research, policy analysis, community mobilizing, and community education and advocacy to improve the quality of life for all people in Toronto. Check the website for research reports and program information at www.socialplanningtoronto.org or call (416) 351-0095.

Council of Agencies Serving South Asians is an umbrella organization of agencies, groups and individuals that provide services to the South Asian community. Check the website for upcoming events, reports, information and more at www.cassa.on.ca or call (416) 979-8611.

Daily Bread Food Bank is more than just a food bank. Daily Bread is a busy warehouse with responsibility for getting food to thousands of families across the GTA each week. They also work hard to raise awareness about the issues affecting their clients and advocate for social change. For research reports, volunteer information and more, check their website at www.dailybread.ca or call (416) 203-0050.

Disabled Women's Network Ontario is a progressive, volunteer-driven, feminist organization promoting social justice, human rights and the advancement of equality rights through education, research, advocacy, coalition-building, resource development and information technology. Their website is chock-full of information about social issues and advocacy campaigns. <http://dawn.thot.net>

Family Service Association of Toronto (FSA) helps people dealing with a wide variety of life challenges. For over 80 years, FSA has been assisting families and individuals in Toronto through counselling, community development, advocacy and public education programs. Check their website at www.fsatoronto.com or call 416-595-9230.

Income Security Advocacy Centre works with and on behalf of low income communities in Ontario to address income security and poverty. Check their publications web page for newsletters, reports and fact sheets on poverty and income security. www.incomesecurity.org

Native Canadian Centre of Toronto is a community-based non-profit organization which provides a gathering place to deliver programs and services for Native people while striving to reflect the traditional Native cultural perspective. Drop by, call or check their website for program information and events. NCCT, 16 Spadina Road, Toronto M5R 2S7, Tel. (416) 964-9087, www.ncct.on.ca

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants acts as a collective voice of immigrant serving agencies, coordinating responses to shared needs and concerns. OCASI engages in advocacy, public education, policy, research, training and professional development. Check their website for more information about upcoming events, campaigns, reports and more. www.ocasi.org

Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres is a provincial Aboriginal organization representing the collective interests of twenty-seven member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout the province. The OFIFC administers a number of programs which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as health, justice, family support, and employment and training. Check their website for information about Friendship Centres, programs, jobs and more. www.ofifc.org

Settlement.org is a provincial website that provides a range of information to immigrants including resources for finding work, sponsorship, ESL, health, housing, settlement counselling, community development and professional development. www.settlement.org

Advocacy Groups

Anti-Poverty/Income Security

Living Wage, Living Income Campaign is demanding raises to the minimum wage and social assistance rates. For more information, contact the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice at (416) 441-3714 or check their website at www.ocsj.ca

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty is a direct-action anti-poverty organization based in Toronto. OCAP mounts campaigns against regressive government policies as they affect poor and working people. They provide direct-action advocacy for individuals against eviction, termination of welfare benefits, and deportation. OCAP, 10 Britain Street, Toronto M5A 1R6, Tel. (416) 925-6939, www.ocap.ca

ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) Groups:

ODSP Recipient Support Group meets every third Monday of each month at Queen West Community Health Centre, 168 Bathurst Street, Program Room A, 1:30-3:30. Food and transportation money provided.

Toronto Region ODSP Coalition meets on the last Friday afternoon of each month at 519 Church Street at 1:30. Both community agency staff and recipients are welcome, to learn more about ODSP benefits and rights, and to lobby for improvements like a real rate increase. The chair is Catherine Manson at torontodisabilityaction@yahoo.ca

ODSP Action Coalition is the provincial coordinating network for provincial organizations and representatives of local ODSP action groups. The coalition plans, strategizes, and consults on issues with the Ministry. Nancy Vander Plaats is the coordinator and can be reached at (416) 438-7206 or vanderpn@lao.on.ca

Child Care

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care advocates for universally accessible, quality, non-profit, regulated child care in the province of Ontario. For membership information and resources on child care in Ontario, contact OCBC at (416) 538-0628 or check their website at www.childcareontario.org

Health Care

Toronto Health Coalition is composed of individuals and organizations from across the city who believe that the five principles of the Canada Health Act are being eroded and must be defended. THC belongs to both the Ontario Health Coalition and the Canadian Health Coalition. To find out more about the coalition, call (416) 929-1545 or check their website at http://toronto_health.tripod.com/thc.html



Housing

HomeComing Community Choice Coalition is a group of committed volunteers from diverse backgrounds that believe that people with mental illness have the right to live in communities of their choice. HomeComing works to overcome community resistance so that people with mental illness can enjoy the same freedom as others to live in communities of their choice. Download the "yes, in my backyard!" tool kit for developers of supportive housing at www.onpha.on.ca/affordable_housing_initiatives/nimby For more information about the coalition, contact Project Manager Paul Dowling at homecoming@rogers.com or call (416) 698-8425.

Toronto Disaster Relief Committee is a group of individuals from a range of backgrounds and professions that advocates on housing and homelessness issues. TDRC declared homelessness a national disaster and demanded that Canada end homelessness by implementing a fully-funded National Housing Program through the One Percent Solution. The One Percent Solution asks that all levels of government spend 1% of their budgets on housing. General meetings are held on the first Thursday of every month. For more information, call (416) 599-8372 or check their website at www.tdrc.net

LGBT Issues

David Kelley Services / Family Service Association of Toronto: LGBT Parenting Network provides resources, information and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans parents and their families. For information call Rachel Epstein 416-595-0307 ext. 270.

David Kelley HIV/AIDS Counselling Program provides short and long-term professional counselling to individuals, couples and families living with, or affected by HIV/AIDS. There is no fee for service.

David Kelley Lesbian/Gay Counselling Program provides professional short term individual, couple, family counselling and group services for lesbians, gay men and related communities. Fees are on a sliding scale based on income. For counselling appointments call: 416-595-9618. For more information on David Kelley Services visit their website at www.fsatoronto.com

Egale Canada advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified people, and their families, across Canada. For campaign and membership information, check their website at www.egale.ca

Multi-Issue

Metro Network for Social Justice is a non-profit network of organizations committed to promoting social and economic justice for everyone in the City of Toronto. Find out about their working groups and other opportunities to get involved. MNSJ, 25 Leonard Avenue, Box 44, Toronto M5T 2R2, Tel. (416) 703-3796, www.mnsj.org

The Parent Action Network is a group of parents that advocate for social change to improve the quality of life of families in Toronto. For more information, contact Colin Hughes at (416) 924-4640 x3375.

Non-Status Immigrant Issues

No One is Illegal (Toronto) is a group of immigrants, refugees and allies. NOII is working to educate, mobilize and network to defend immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, and indigenous peoples, to oppose war and racism, and to deepen understanding of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy and migration in today's world. For more information, check their website at <http://toronto.nooneisillegal.org> or email nooneisillegal@riseup.net

STATUS Coalition is a broad coalition of individuals and organizations advocating for the regularization of status of all non-status immigrants living in Canada. For more information, check their website at www.ocasi.org/status

Public Education

Toronto District School Board Parent Groups offer several opportunities for parent involvement in the school system. Check their website for information about School Councils, Ward Councils, Parent Community Network, and Community Liaison Groups at www.tdsb.on.ca/stucom/parent_groups.htm or call (416) 397-3000.

People for Education is a group of parents who are working to support public education in Ontario. The People for Education Network is seeking volunteers to help with their research, fundraising, conference organizing and newsletter. Check their website for local contacts at www.peopleforeducation.com or call (416) 534-0100.

Recreation and Access to Public Space

SPACE Coalition (Save Public Access to Community Space Everywhere Coalition) is a network of organizations that support affordable, accessible space for non-profit community programs that serve children, youth, adults and seniors in publicly funded facilities such as schools, libraries, recreation centres, municipal buildings. In particular, SPACE advocates for changes in the provincial education funding formula to recognize the importance of community access to school space. For more information, contact Ann Fitzpatrick at (416) 924-4640 x3482 or amfitzpatrick@torontocas.ca

Transit

Rocket Riders is a non-profit citizens advocacy group dedicated to public transit issues in the Greater Toronto Area. Meetings are generally held on the first Tuesday of each month at City Hall in committee room 2 between 6:30 and 9:30. Phone to confirm: (416) 596-0660. www.torontoenvironment.org/rocketriders

Workers

Toronto Organizing for Fair Employment is a worker's organization that is working to improve the rights and working conditions of workers who are in unstable contract, temporary and contingent jobs. TOFFE offers drop-ins and workshops, and has organizing committees on temporary work and contract work based in different parts of Toronto. These committees guide the education, campaign, outreach and organizing work of TOFFE. To get involved or find out more, contact TOFFE at (416) 531-0778 or check the website at www.toffeonline.org

Youth

For Youth Initiative is a by youth for youth agency that uses pop culture to bring critical theory and social systemic change to the streets of the former City of York, North Etobicoke and West Toronto areas. FYI offers life and employment skill building, recreational programs, community development initiatives, alternative education, needs assessment, referral and informal counselling services, and an expanding multimedia project. To volunteer or for more information, check their website at www.foryouthinitiative.com or call (416) 653-3311 (in York), (416) 614-6269 (in Dixon).

Toronto Youth Cabinet serves the population of Toronto by empowering youth to make a difference in the lives of others. TYC works on a range of issues impacting youth from youth violence to homelessness, raves to urban planning, and more. To join or for more information, call (416) 392-3586 or check the website at www.torontoyouth.com/youth_cabinet