

2003 Federal Budget: Cold Comfort to Vulnerable Ottawa Families

Ottawa, February 19, 2003: Yesterday's federal budget received only a passing grade from local social services agencies.

“This budget speaks of strengthening support to communities and families, but overall it fails to address the ongoing and worsening problem of Canada's eroding social safety net,” said Timothy Simboli, Executive Director of Family Services a la famille Ottawa. “The budget increased the child tax benefit supplement, promised more funding for child care, and introduced a new child disability benefit. Sadly, this good news will have absolutely no impact for many poor Ottawa families.”

Income Support: The federal government has promised to increase the supplement to the National Child Benefit, so that by 2007, poor families will receive a maximum of \$3,243 per child. Unfortunately for residents of Ontario, that supplement is deducted dollar for dollar from poor families' social assistance cheques, leaving them no better off than before. In Ottawa, over 43,000 children live in poverty. Sixty percent of these children's families will receive no benefit from this new federal money.

Elder Care: On the positive side, the new Compassionate Family Care Leave Benefit program is an excellent start for the numerous families in our community who are living with the challenges of caring for elderly and dependent loved ones. The new program promises up to 6 weeks' leave for individuals to care for gravely ill family members. More and more, families are doing what the state and formal systems used to do.

Mental Health: Completely missing from the federal budget was any commitment to mental health dollars. The Romanow report recommended that mental health be made a priority in the health care system. Depression and stress disorders comprise more than 30% of work-related disability claims, and mental health claims are the fastest-growing category of disability costs in North America, elipsing even cardiovascular disease. In this context, the lack of focus on mental health in today's budget is alarming.

“People in this community depend on more than income support programs for their well being: they need community programs like Family Services, Canadian Mental Health, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters even when their income are adequate. It's the municipal that provides most of these badly-needed services. Our provincial government's poor track record of passing federal monies onto municipalities does not give us much cause for hope. Unless the new Canada Social Transfer is designed with strong accountability and teeth, it will do little to repair a badly damaged social safety net.”

Family Services à la famille Ottawa has been serving families in the community for over 80 years with counselling, education and advocacy. They help individuals and families in distress or at risk to attain greater health and well being, improve their coping skills, and achieve their potential.

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