

Caledon poverty advocate disappointed with cancellation of basic income pilot program

Written By JOSHUA SANTOS

A Caledon East resident and poverty advocate is disappointed over the demise of a government-led income pilot program.

Jim Mulvale, a co-ordinator of the Ontario Basic Income Network said the group feels the Progressive Conservatives missed-out opportunity to test out the Ontario Basic Income Pilot and do a thorough evaluation.

“The primary concern for us is the over 4,000 people who made adjustments in their life expecting to get this benefit for three years,” said Mulvale. “The last cheques are being mailed out this month. They're being left high and dry.”

The former reigning provincial Liberals launched the three-year program, supplying 4,000 low-income disadvantaged Ontarians in Thunder Bay, Hamilton-Brantford and Lindsay with a guaranteed income. They wanted to test a growing view at home and abroad that basic income would provide a new approach to reducing poverty in a sustainable way, according to a news release.

“The Conservatives promised during the election campaign to let it run its course and do the evaluation, but then when they were elected in June, they just canceled the project and evaluation,” said Mulvale

The government announced in August 2018 the program will end at the end of the fiscal year. They said payments from the “wind down” of the basic income research project will continue until March 31. They said this will allow participants enough time to transition to more “proven support programs without putting an undue burden on Ontario taxpayers.”

“We have a broken social service system, said Lisa MacLeod, minister of Children, Community and Social Services, in a news release. A research project that helps less than four thousand people is not the answer and provides no hope to the nearly two million Ontarians who are trapped in the cycle of poverty. We are winding down the basic income research project in a compassionate way.”

The Liberals wanted to see how basic income might help people living on low incomes better meet their basic needs, while improving food security, stress and anxiety, mental health, education and training and employment and labour market participation among other categories.

The Basic Income Canada Network (BICN) AND Ontario Basic Income Network (OBIN) performed a survey and, in their report, Signposts to Success, they found the program was indeed showing positive results. They compiled answers from 424 recipients, over 9.4 per cent of the 4,500 enrolled in the pilot.

The Signposts to Success report is good news that has powerful significant for all Canadians, said Sheila Regehr, chair of BICN. “It clearly shows that when people have some basic security and genuine options, they make the best of them.”

About 88 per cent of respondents reported less stress and anxiety, 74 per cent were able to make healthy food choices, 58 per cent improved their housing situation, 55 per cent were more physically active, 45 per cent reported fewer health problems and 34 per cent found the basic income supported employment by affording transportation to work, child care or ability to start or expand a business, among other statistics.

“We're not sure where everybody is going to end up or how well they're able to manage by the problems caused by the cancellation,” said Mulvale.

Mulvale said the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, haven't had “any extensive outreach to folks getting kicked off the program.”

?It's kind of liking fending for yourself as best as you can,? said Mulvale. ?There's been some local groups that have been trying to work with people leaving the pilot and help them get re-established with Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program or other supports.?

The government said the research project had an extraordinary cost for Ontario taxpayers. They state it would have required increasing the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST) from 13 per cent to 20 per cent if implemented across the province.

Mulvale acknowledged that it would have been a significant part of government expenditures but said we're already spending a lot of money on what we see as very ineffective programs with Ontario Works in particular.

?This would've been an excellent opportunity to look at the pilot and what worked well, what needed adjustments, how much money it was actually going to cost, said Mulvale. In any costing of a basic income scheme, it's very important not just to look at the actual cost of the benefits going out but also to look at where you might save money that would've been spent on other programs, including income support. Those need to be factored in to what the actual costs of a program is.?

He said the group now has a project underway to reach out to all members of provincial parliament from all sides of the house, from all the different parties across the province and try to talk to them about the need for better income security measures.

?The pilot is canceled, it's history now, so we're thinking more medium to long term and what might be a better approach to income security for everyone in Ontario,? said Mulvale.

He said he contacted Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones' office and is waiting to hear a call back to establish a meeting with her as part of this provincial outreach initiative.