

An investment that would pay off -

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(an active PACC member and participant in Poverty Free Ontario Initiatives and provincial PFIB and ISARC Initiatives. Published On Sat Mar 6 2010

The People's Review of Social Assistance is a process led by 20 social assistance recipients to identify what's wrong with the current system and to propose doable recommendations to change and enhance the way municipalities deliver services, communities offer support and senior levels of government provide income security benefits. The project is supported by the Daily Bread Food Bank and Voices from the Street. The Star is highlighting some of the participants in the review. Today's article is by Mark Sussman.

As a teenager, my life took a bad turn, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which left me unable to work or attend school. I was grateful then, at 18, to be accepted the first time I applied to the Ontario Disability Support Program.

That gratitude turned to anger and disbelief, however, when I read the humiliating letter from anonymous officials who had done a paper assessment of my circumstances, telling me I would be "incapable of working for the rest of my life."

I wondered how anyone could so confidently predict what my future held for me. Still, it was that assumption of my worth that motivated me to attend college part-time, in the hope of avoiding a lifetime of poverty and perhaps to prove to myself and others just how capable I was. Of course, it hasn't been easy. Given the amount I am allotted for rent, I've had to live in unstable housing where every morning someone woke me demanding money for drugs. I was hurt once by another tenant and had to keep quiet or risk losing the roof over my head.

I started to find my voice when I became a member of a grassroots organization in York Region spearheaded by the Poverty Action for Change Coalition. It is through this organization that I discovered the remarkable opportunity to participate in a project called the "People's Review." We are training to be peer researchers in our own communities, to come up with questions to put to social assistance recipients about their struggles, their ideas for change and their hopes for the future.

I have met and listened to my fellow panel members and had my eyes opened to some of the horrors of trying to survive out there. I've heard from people with challenging physical disabilities who have to wait years just to have the right to choose a personal support worker. I've heard how a single mom who moved here from a different province was threatened with receiving zero assistance because it was her responsibility to track down her missing ex-husband and sue him for child support. And I've heard how people suffering from addictions are told simply to "get over it."

I was ashamed as a Canadian to learn that one member of our panel, who came here as a refugee without identification, was handcuffed at the airport and taken to a detention centre. And that another of the newcomers on our panel is qualified as a dentist but is blocked from practising unless he retrains – something he simply can't afford to do.

It might surprise some to know that a major theme in our meetings is that there seems to be no way out of poverty. That what we receive, if we are finally deemed qualified to receive it, is barely enough to survive. This can, and has, caused people to act out of desperation, including staying in an abusive relationship or contemplating robbery.

People who are on social assistance have vulnerabilities, either noticeable on the surface or hidden, for which they need help. What they need – what I need – is to be able to eat nutritious food, to live in a safe environment, to feel like we are more than a number. And it's essential that the public and the politicians understand that all people on ODSP and Ontario Works (tragically seen as the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor") who are capable of becoming financially self-sufficient, whether through education, trades or business ownership, want to do so.

There needs to be a shift in governmental thinking when it comes to social assistance. I'd like Queen's Park to know that providing enough money for healthy diets and increasing opportunities for people to contribute their skills and abilities rather than waste away in shame and isolation would be an investment that would pay off big time in savings, especially to our burgeoning health-care budget.

Don't worry, we're not asking you to create any more committees or studies. We've got that covered with our People's Review. All we are asking you as our elected officials, the ones who are entrusted with making the decisions that directly impact our lives, is to review the evidence. Then all you will need to ask yourself is: How can we *not* afford to do this?

Mark Sussman lives in Aurora. He is learning to be a paralegal and doing advocacy work related to poverty.