

SOCIAL SERVICES

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NDP proposes three-way deal for welfare jobs

However, welfare officials in London said the plan's success depends too heavily on a healthy economy and an unlikely glut of job opportunities.

By Charlie Gillis
The London Free Press
and news services

The NDP government plans to reform the social assistance system and boost people off welfare by starting three new programs, Community and Social Services Minister Tony Silipo announced Thursday.

But local outreach workers, politicians and welfare recipients are already shooting holes in the government's scheme.

Speaking at a Toronto college, Silipo announced the government will replace welfare with three initiatives to help recipients train for and find new jobs. They are:

- **Job Link:** A program to help 100,000 recipients prepare for and find work through training, education and work placement programs every year. Participants will receive extra benefits to defray training and job-hunting costs.

- **The Ontario Child Benefit:** It will provide a monthly cheque to parents with low incomes — including parents who work full-time — to cover their children's basic needs.

OTHER REACTION

- **Susan Eagle,** United Church Outreach, London: "The plan provides for 100,000 positions for education and training, but it doesn't say whether tuition will be funded, or if child care will be provided for those who take it."

- **Faith Coates,** single mother on social assistance, co-director of Life Spin, a referral agency for low-income families: "This white paper buys into the stereotype of the welfare recipient as under-educated, unskilled and lazy. But a lot of plants have closed down recently and many welfare recipients have skills, but can't find anywhere to use them."

- **Lucy Brown,** administrator, Kent County social services: "In general, I approve of the plan. But I am concerned it will eat up two programs and replace it with three new ones, and that it will be

WELFARE IN LONDON

- **Recipients:** In 1992, London's social services branch handled almost 13,000 cases, with about 22,000 people relying on welfare.

- **Incomes:** As of January, 1993, a family of four on social assistance receives between \$972 and \$1,292 per month in shelter and basic allowance benefits, depending on their accommodation costs. A single person would receive between \$366 and \$536.

- **Cost:** Welfare costs hit \$89.25 million (city ratepayers shouldered \$13.4 million of that) in 1992.

- **Increases:** The cost of welfare has increased an average of 20 per cent a year for the past three years.

- **The Ontario Adult Benefit:** A single, monthly cheque replacing regular welfare. It's designed to meet adults' basic needs while they hunt for new jobs.

The plan, which Silipo expects to be running by 1995, would replace the two-tier system of social assistance and family benefits.

SAVE IN LONG RUN: Though Silipo didn't specify the cost of launching the program, or whether it would affect current welfare rates, he predicted it would save taxpayers' dollars in the long run.

However, welfare officials in London said the plan's success depends too heavily on a healthy economy and an unlikely glut of job opportunities.

"Unless these programs are accompanied by a simultaneous effort to stimulate the economy, a lot of people will still be on social assistance," said Robert Collins, planning and policy director for London's social services department.

"It's not going to be a financial benefit to anyone if there aren't places for people who take the education and training."

About 22,500 Londoners currently depend on social assistance or family benefits, Collins said. Province-wide, one in nine people — more than 1.2 million — rely on welfare.

Directors of Life Spin, a London outreach group for welfare recipients, said the policy offers no child care to single mothers seeking training, yet penalizes those who choose to stay home to raise their children.

"If I don't take a full-time job from McDonalds (after volunteering for Job Link), my income will be reduced from its present rate," said Jacqueline Thompson,

ONTARIO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ontario has two kinds of aid for the jobless: general welfare and family benefits, demand for which has jumped sharply since the 1990 recession. How the program caseloads have increased:

- **General welfare:** Jointly financed by the federal and Ontario governments, and municipalities, it supported 568,900 people last year and 278,600 in 1990.

- **Family benefits:** Paid by Ontario alone, most often to single parents and the disabled, it supported 652,000 people last year, up from 444,300 in 1990.

PLAN: It assumes people want jobs

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a single parent on social assistance. "And this plan doesn't say a thing about paying for child care or tuition."

And if the government was listening to London Mayor Tom Gosnell's welfare prayers, they failed to answer them with the reduction in rates he says will reduce caseloads and generate new investment in London.

"They're making an assumption that most people on welfare want to be re-educated and re-trained," he said. "You need a huge involvement from the private sector to find jobs for these people . . . but as long as people can remain on welfare by their own choice, the business climate isn't going to improve."

A few social workers welcomed parts of the plan. John Liston, executive director of the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex said he approved of the top-up for low-income, working parents.

"It recognizes the basic value we should be putting on children in this province," he said.