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RESPONSE TO PAY THE RENT AND FEED THE KIDS CAMPAIGN

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, October 7, 2003, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Staff develop a comprehensive analysis of a range of options to support Social Assistance recipients in meeting their food and shelter needs.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides a preliminary assessment of the implications of the Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Campaign recommendations. It also identifies additional options that may support the goals of the campaign.

3. BACKGROUND

The Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids campaign made a presentation to the Community Services and Housing Committee on September 10, 2003. A copy of the Communication to Community Services and Housing Committee is attached (*see Attachment 1*). They are seeking endorsements from organizations and agencies in York Region and have requested Regional Council's endorsement.

The following is the list of specific actions the Campaign wants the Region to endorse:

- Raise the shelter allowance portion of Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits to average rent levels.
- Increase the basic needs portion of these benefits to 1994 levels (restoring the 21.6% cut).
- Index social assistance benefits to the cost of living.
- Expand rent-geared-to-income programs that provide affordable housing.

York Region has a history of responding to the needs of vulnerable residents and has already undertaken a number of initiatives that support meeting the needs of OW and ODSP participants as well as other vulnerable groups, including:

- Initiatives aimed at increasing the availability of affordable housing such as the Housing Supply Strategy, the 10-Year Capital Plan, and increases to the number of Rent-Geared-to-Income units.
- Initiatives that support the developmental needs of children and support parents in participating in employment such as increasing the number of child care fee subsidies.

- Initiatives that provide additional supports to children whose parents are OW participants such as recreational summer camp programs.
- Funding of community initiatives which have mitigated the impact of Provincial government decisions on York Region's most vulnerable residents.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The Regional Municipality of York recognizes the need to address the issues raised by the Campaign and is also concerned about the impact that Provincial government decisions have had on the ability of OW and ODSP participants to pay their rent and feed their children. This concern was first addressed in a committee report in 1995. The Region has also proactively responded directly to the needs of vulnerable residents through the provision of discretionary programs including adding 100% Regional funding to enhance service levels in the absence of corresponding Provincial subsidy.

An initial analysis of the Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Campaign showed that based on the current social assistance caseload, the implementation of the Campaign's recommendation to increase the basic needs portion of benefits to 1994 levels and indexing benefits to the cost of living will result in:

- An estimated \$2.5 million net Regional tax levy increase for OW program (note: this includes a 21.6% increase to both the basic needs and shelter portions of benefits in order to assess some level of shelter cost impact and also includes a cost of living increase).
- An estimated \$1.2 million net increase in the Regional tax levy for a cost of living increase to ODSP allowances.
- An increase in the potentially eligible number of residents in York Region who may now qualify for social assistance.

This is a preliminary estimate of the minimum impact of the Campaign's recommendation on the Region. Costing for the potential increase in the caseload size will have to be undertaken to determine the full impacts of this recommendation. A more comprehensive costing of raising the shelter allowance portion of OW and ODSP to average rent levels would also need to be undertaken to assess net cost to the Region for these proposals.

In addition to the solution proposed by the Campaign to the impact of government decisions, there are other options that could also meet the overall objectives identified by Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids. Some of the options may be more immediately feasible. For example, the available financial resources of OW and ODSP participants would increase if the Provincial government allowed them to keep their National Child Benefit rather than deducting it from participant allowances. Further exploration of the range of options that could enhance supports to OW and ODSP participants in a way that is responsive to the needs of participants and which considers the impact on Regional taxpayers should be considered.

4.1 Relationship to Vision 2026

Supporting the most vulnerable residents in York Region including OW and ODSP participants and their families support the Vision 2026 goal to “support a safe, caring and healthy community and promote a high quality of life.”

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this committee report, however, there are financial implications related to the implementation of the recommendations of the Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Campaign.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Campaign will seek endorsement from groups and organizations throughout the Region.

7. CONCLUSION

The Regional Municipality of York remains concerned about the impact of Provincial decisions on the financial resources of OW and ODSP participants and has proactively attempted to mitigate these impacts through a number of initiatives. As the Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids campaign highlights, there is a need to explore ways to support OW and ODSP participants in meeting their needs and the needs of their children. The Community Services and Housing Department is committed to reviewing and recommending ways to do this that meet the goals of the Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Campaign and balances Regional community needs.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachment referred to in the foregoing was forwarded to each Member of Council with the October 8, 2003 Community Services and Housing Committee Revised Agenda and a copy thereof is on file in the Office of the Regional Clerk.)