



## Benefit for 'hungry' renters urged

**Need to ease burden of Ontario households with no money left after rent paid, coalition says**

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**LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN**  
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An extra \$189 a month would buy a lot of groceries for Pamela Soutar and her two daughters, who are left with just \$74 of their welfare cheque after paying rent and utilities for their cramped High Park walk-up.



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Pamela Soutar hugs Chrysti, 9, in their High Park flat. Rent and utilities take most of welfare cheque, Soutar says.

The income boost is what Soutar, 39, would receive under a new housing benefit program proposed by a coalition of advocates, community groups, landlords and two private foundations.

The group, which is releasing its detailed proposal today, estimates the program would provide an average \$100 a month to 194,000 low-income households renting in the private sector. Annual cost to the province is put at \$240 million.

The group wants the McGuinty government to endorse the idea in its eagerly anticipated poverty plan due in coming weeks.

"The number one reason people use food banks in this city is because they are spending what little money they have on rent," said coalition member Michael Oliphant of the Daily Bread Food Bank, calling the proposed payment "a hunger benefit."

Since public housing is just 5 per cent of the province's housing stock, the group believes a benefit targeted to regular renters could play an important role in cutting poverty.

"Cost of housing (has) the greatest impact on the household budget" and is "the most destabilizing cost if not paid," the group argues in its report.

A spokesperson for Children's Minister Deb Matthews, who chairs the province's poverty reduction cabinet committee, said assistance for low-income rent payers is a complex issue that will be explored next spring in Housing Minister Jim Watson's long-term affordable housing strategy.

Ontario has had shelter allowance programs in the past. But most have been short-lived and narrowly focused, leaving most struggling households to fend for themselves, the coalition says.

The largest program is the shelter component of welfare and disability payments, introduced in 1989. However, these were slashed by 21.6 per cent in 1995 and frozen for nine years, and no longer reflect rental costs in any part of the province, the report says.

The group wants to see the new housing benefit apply to all low-income Ontarians, similar to the new Ontario Child Benefit.

However unlike the child benefit, which outraged anti-poverty activists by triggering some reductions to social assistance, there would be no new clawbacks, said former social services bureaucrat John Stapleton, who advised the group.

"We felt it was really important (to deliver) this benefit on top of welfare to help ease the transition from welfare into work," he said.

It would be the first new benefit for singles on welfare, who currently experience the deepest poverty in the province, he added.

The group is proposing that all low-income households burdened by rent should be eligible for the benefit, including families paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent and singles paying more than 40 per cent.

The only exceptions would be childless households under age 25 – to exclude students – and those over age 64 eligible for the seniors' property tax credit, the report says.

A household's monthly benefit would reflect the family size and local rents. Soutar's projected \$189 stipend is a factor of Toronto rent levels for three-person households.

The City of Toronto is also recommending a housing benefit as a key component of its 10-year affordable housing plan.

Michael Shapcott of the Wellesley Institute supports the coalition's idea but believes it should be much more generous and apply to any household spending more than 30 per cent of income on rent.

Soutar, who relies on school nutrition programs and food bank visits to make ends meet, hopes Queen's Park does something to help families like hers.

"It's awful for anyone to have to live this way," she said while unpacking donated groceries. "It's particularly hard on kids. Children shouldn't have to rely on food banks to get fresh carrot sticks."