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CATHERINE PORTER

Linda Chamberlain left her dream job because it was making her broke.

She's richer earning nothing, living in her subsidized apartment and getting monthly disability cheques from the government — \$260 a month richer.

When South Riverdale Health Centre offered her a once-a-week-job as a peer support worker on their diabetes program, she accepted with one stipulation: don't pay me.

"It's no sense making that money," she says. "Then I'd have to deal with the rent going up and the whole thing again."

The whole thing?

After three decades of battling schizophrenia and homelessness and poverty, Chamberlain finally got a job. She worked 2 ½ days a week as a peer support worker on the very floor where she once lived at the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction. It'd be hard to find a better success story.

Except, under the antediluvian web of provincial rules, she lost half of her paycheque to the government, while her rent-geared-to-income skyrocketed by 471 per cent.

She couldn't keep up. Her bills mounted. She was constantly hungry. She started carrying an empty container to work in case there was a platter of fruit or sandwiches on offer.

"It was killing me slowly," says 61-year-old Chamberlain — pink hair, pink glasses, pink cardigan, pink lipstick. "I was worried I'd get back out drinking and self-harming."

Staff threw two goodbye parties for her — one for the patients, with vanilla cake and pink balloons, and the other for all the doctors and nurses, who wore pink puffs in their jacket pockets or pink blouses in her honour.

"To a lady who inspires us to be the best we can be," her old boss Christine wrote in her giant goodbye card.

"I just loved that job," Chamberlain tells me. "It was all I could do to hold back tears."

How can this be? Don't we want those welfare bums to get jobs?

Welfare policy expert John Stapleton looked into Linda's case. He's written a paper called "Zero Dollar Linda" for the Metcalfe Foundation which details the various conflicting welfare and subsidized housing rules that snared Chamberlain.

His key point: for every dollar Linda earned over \$440 a month, one set of government workers increased her rent, while another set took half of her paycheque. The right hand does not talk to the left.

"But Linda's municipal landlord didn't take that into account," Stapleton writes. "They counted her earnings at 100 per cent although Social Services had effectively cut them by 50 per cent."

"Linda's story shows us that we are also strangely willing to penalize disabled people for working — not once, but twice."

Maybe we quietly like having welfare bums to kick around. If they got their own paycheques, where would we funnel our anger?



Toronto's Linda Chamberlain quit a job she loved because she was poorer with part-time work and a paycheque than she is simply collecting welfare. Nov. 19, 2010.

Carlos Osorios/Toronto Star

It's not as if the government doesn't know about this problem. Stapleton was part of an expert panel corralled by Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur last December to examine the 800 welfare rules and outline a plan to overhaul them. A month later, they proposed 13 quick fixes that would address the welfare system's most vicious and self-defeating regulations. Meilleur implemented only four.

Among the nine outstanding is what Stapleton now calls "the Linda Chamberlain rule."

"The Ministry of Housing workers should recognize 50 per cent of someone's earnings have already been deducted," says Stapleton.

It would come down to a simple word change. Set subsidized housing rental rates to a person's net — not their gross — income. Why won't Meilleur do that?

She told the *Star's* Laurie Monsebraaten it wouldn't be prudent during a recession. But how does it save us money to force Chamberlain, and the 4,000 other part-time workers who receive government disability cheques, to quit their jobs?

That job was Chamberlain's off-ramp from the system. She was headed for full-time work.

It was also a type of medication. Working at something we love keeps us all healthy.

"When you're working, you start to feel valued — you feel good about yourself," says Chamberlain. "It gives you such great self-esteem and confidence and gives you back the dignity you lost through the stigma of mental health."

Chamberlain is still very busy. She volunteers with the Dream Team, advocating for affordable housing for psychiatric survivors. She runs a soup kitchen in the basement of her building and fosters the cats of people with mental illness while they go into hospital. Three scratch against the posts in her apartment right now.

This Sunday afternoon, she will run for the board of the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and by evening, she'll cook dinner for seven of her neighbours in their building's basement kitchen. They, like her, have diabetes. Come January, she plans to organize aqua-fit classes for them at the nearby recreation centre.

Chamberlain might be jobless, but she does a lot of work. Why can't she get paid for it?

"I miss getting a paycheque and being able to shop on a Friday like everyone else," she says as we part ways. "Don't you love working?"

**Catherine Porter's** column usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at [cporter@thestar.ca](mailto:cporter@thestar.ca)