

November 23, 2010

Ontario's social assistance system is supposed to do two things: provide financial assistance to those in need and employment assistance to help individuals prepare for, find and keep a job.

So why did the system fail Linda Chamberlain so completely that she quit the job she loved?

As the *Star's* Catherine Porter reported on the weekend, Chamberlain fell victim to the confluence of two pieces of provincial legislation, both designed to act as a safety net for Ontarians. When she worked more than a few hours a week, her subsidized rent went up more than her ability to pay. Under the Social Housing Reform Act, her rent increased dramatically based on 100 per cent of her earnings. But under the Ontario Disability Support Program, she was only allowed to keep 50 per cent of her earnings.

Each department followed its own rules, without regard to the consequences. The more Chamberlain earned, the poorer she got.

This is hardly a system that encourages people to "find and keep a job." It is, as Premier Dalton McGuinty has acknowledged, a system of counterproductive rules that "stomp" people into ground, hurting them and our economy.

In a paper for the Metcalf Foundation, John Stapleton, a former social services bureaucrat, argues that these rules make the move to self-reliance almost impossible. He's right.

"I can't afford to work," is how Chamberlain summed up her experience. We hope that Housing Minister Rick Bartolucci has paid close attention to her words.

The housing ministry says that it has looked at ways to "make the social housing system fairer ... and to encourage the transition out of poverty by reducing disincentives to work."

We'll soon know how serious the government is about fixing the problem that ensnared Chamberlain and adversely affects thousands of other Ontarians trying desperately to pull themselves out of poverty through work.

Bartolucci is set to release Ontario's long-term affordable housing strategy shortly. If the fix – setting subsidized rents to a person's net, not gross, income – isn't already part of the strategy, it should be added.

Rules like this one aren't just mean-spirited and unfair; they also undermine the overall goal of the social assistance system, which is to move people toward self-reliance.

When Chamberlain got a job working on the same ward of Centre for Mental Health and Addiction where she used to be a patient, she became a psychiatric success story. When unbending rules made her quit that job, she became the poster child for the failure of our housing and social assistance systems.

If the government can't fix this problem – and quickly -- there is little reason to have confidence that it can deal with the multitude of other problems in a rules-bound social assistance system that does a better job of keeping people down than giving them a hand up.