

Getting off the Hamster Wheel Together

**How To Change the World Through
the Power of Collective Action**



This presentation is hosted from territory that is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg, and groups around the Great Lakes to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Beyond simply acknowledging the territory of the First Peoples of this land, I also want to acknowledge the context in which I work.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have been subject to oppressive and disempowering policies, programs and systems since and before Canada was founded. Social assistance, which is one of these programs, is inherently degrading. It means a life of policing, surveillance, and deep poverty. Indigenous Peoples experience disproportionate levels of poverty because of targeted and sustained colonial policies, legal systems, violence, and cultural genocide that continues today.

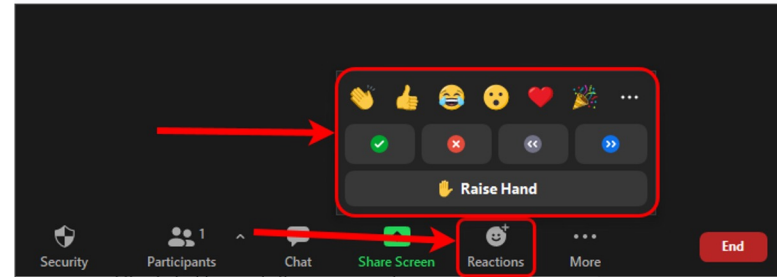
Acknowledgements must come with active commitments to holding our governments to account, pushing them further, and supporting Indigenous Peoples on social assistance to be able to leave the condition of poverty and live life on their own terms.

Legal Disclaimer

- This presentation is for general information purposes only and nothing shared today is intended to be legal advice
- For specific legal advice, if you live in the province of Ontario, contact info@isac.clcj.ca
- This slide deck is current as of May 30, 2023

Welcome!

- Use the chat!
- Mic off: Please keep your mic off during the presentation unless we are interacting
- Camera Optional: I would love to see you on camera but feel free to turn it on and off as you like
- Questions



Goals for today

By the end of today's presentation I hope that you will:

- Know a bit more about how poverty is quantified and discussed by “decisionmakers”
- Think about the power of relationships as fundamental to moving towards not just individual change but systemic change
- Get active in the movements to improve social assistance and end poverty that are ongoing in your region!

What is the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC)?

- Specialty community legal clinic in Ontario
- Part of a province-wide community legal clinic system with over 60 “geographic” clinics and 10+ specialty clinics
- Created in 2001 specifically to deal with broader anti-poverty issues within Ontario

“Three prong” approach to protecting and advancing the rights of people living on low incomes in Ontario, particularly those who are on social assistance or are precariously employed.

Our three areas of work are:

- Litigation
- Policy Advocacy
- Community Organizing

Public Legal Education is a core part of our mandate.







SOCIAL CONNECTION!

Social connection is the driver of good and successful organizing

Organizing is ALL ABOUT building and strengthening relationships

You cannot build collective power without connection.



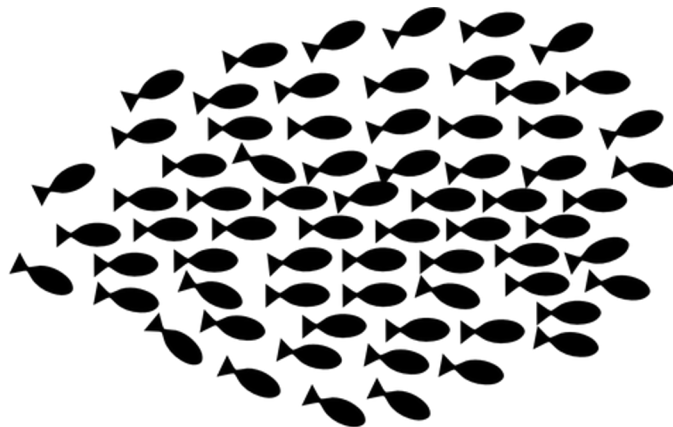
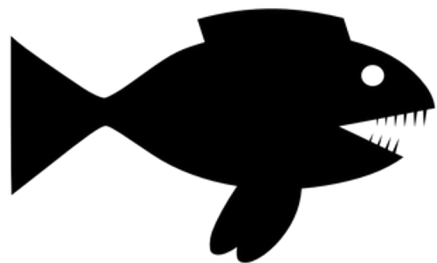
Poverty restricts access to meaningful & sustained connections

This happens in really obvious ways with regard to reliance on temporary housing; part-time, unstable, or exploitative work; food insecurity...

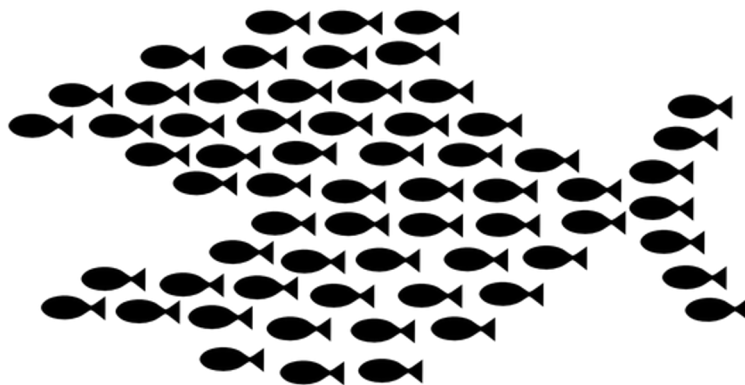
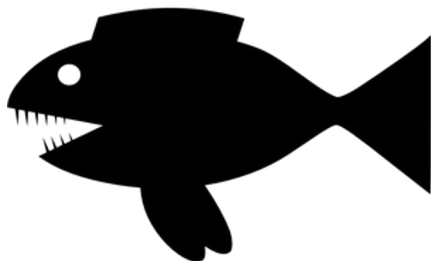
But it also happens through individualizing systemic problems.

Poverty is often the end result of big complex social phenomenon being rendered down into individual experiences where fears of not being good enough, self sufficient enough, or strong enough are reinforced by a society that hates poor people.

How do we encourage and contribute to the building of connections that foster desire and ability to enact systemic change, and that don't simply reproduce the same logic of isolation, individualization, or moral failure that is an everyday experience for so many clients that navigate the social service landscape?

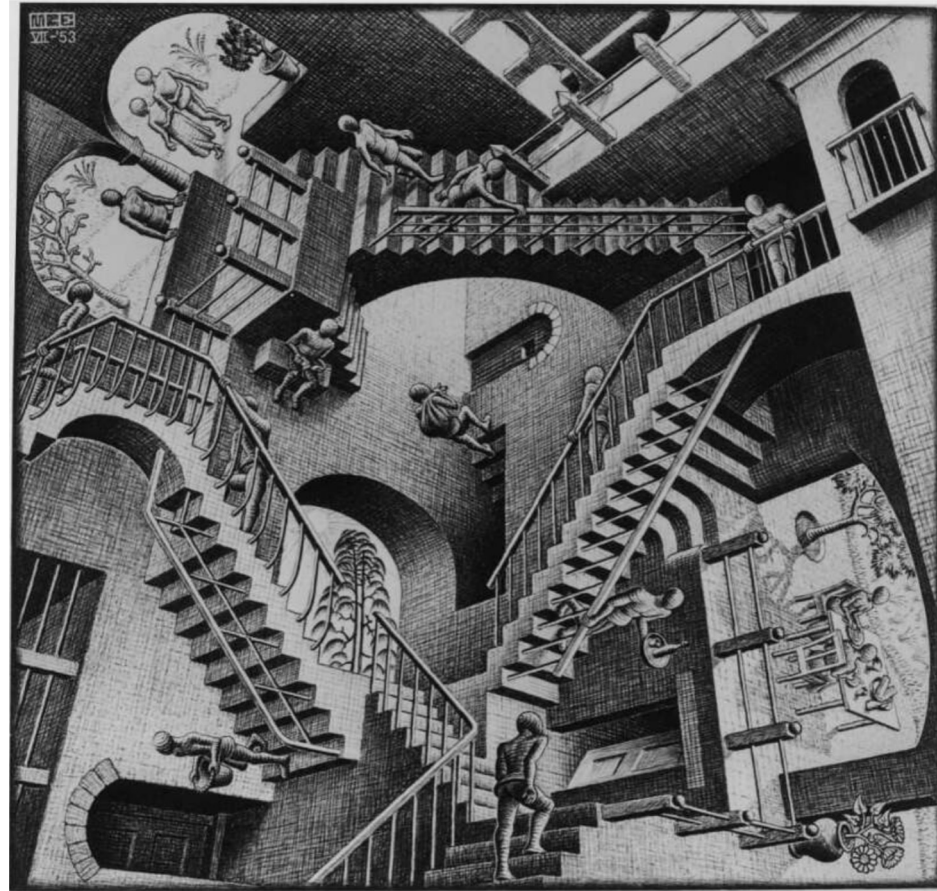


ORGANIZE!



Poverty Reduction Frameworks and Strategies

- UN Social Development Goals (SDGs)
- Canada Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Local/Regional Poverty Reduction Strategies



UN Social Development Goals (SDGs)

- 17 Social Development Goals, with 169 targets and 230+ indicators
- In 2015, all 191 UN members agreed to try to achieve the SDGs by 2030.
- Agenda 2030:

*This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. **We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge** and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.*

- Agenda 2030 builds on decades of work by different countries and UN agencies, going back to 1992



Canada & the UN Social Development Goals (SDGs)

- PM Trudeau now co-chair of UN SDG Advocates group to raise international awareness of SDGs
- Canadian Government has done extensive work on interpreting the 17 SDGs to bring them into the national context:
 - 2019 “Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy”
 - 2021 “Taking Action Together – Canada’s 2021 Annual Report on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs”
 - 2021 “Moving Forward Together: Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy”
 - 2nd “Voluntary National Review” to be presented this summer at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.



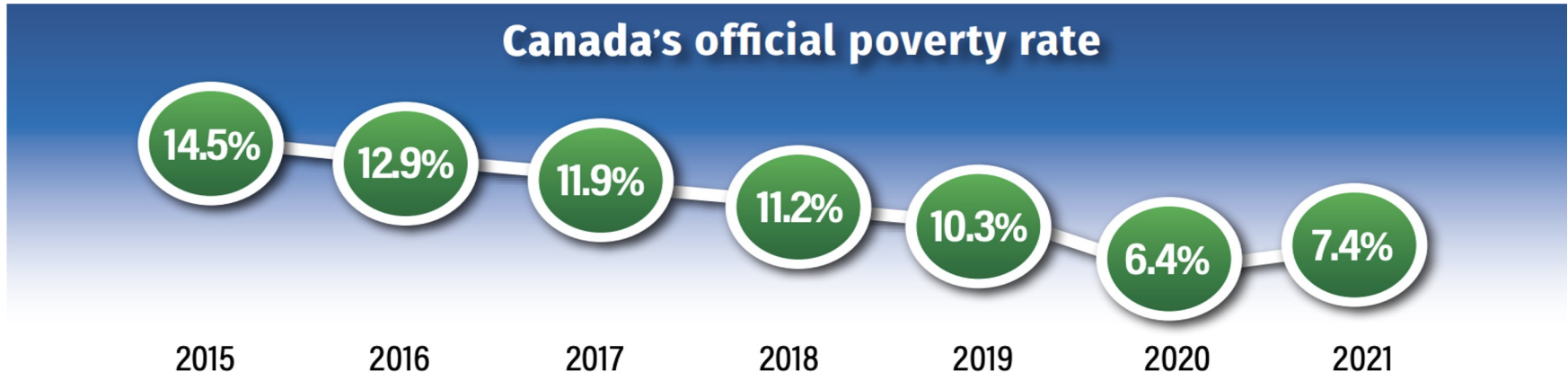


Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS)

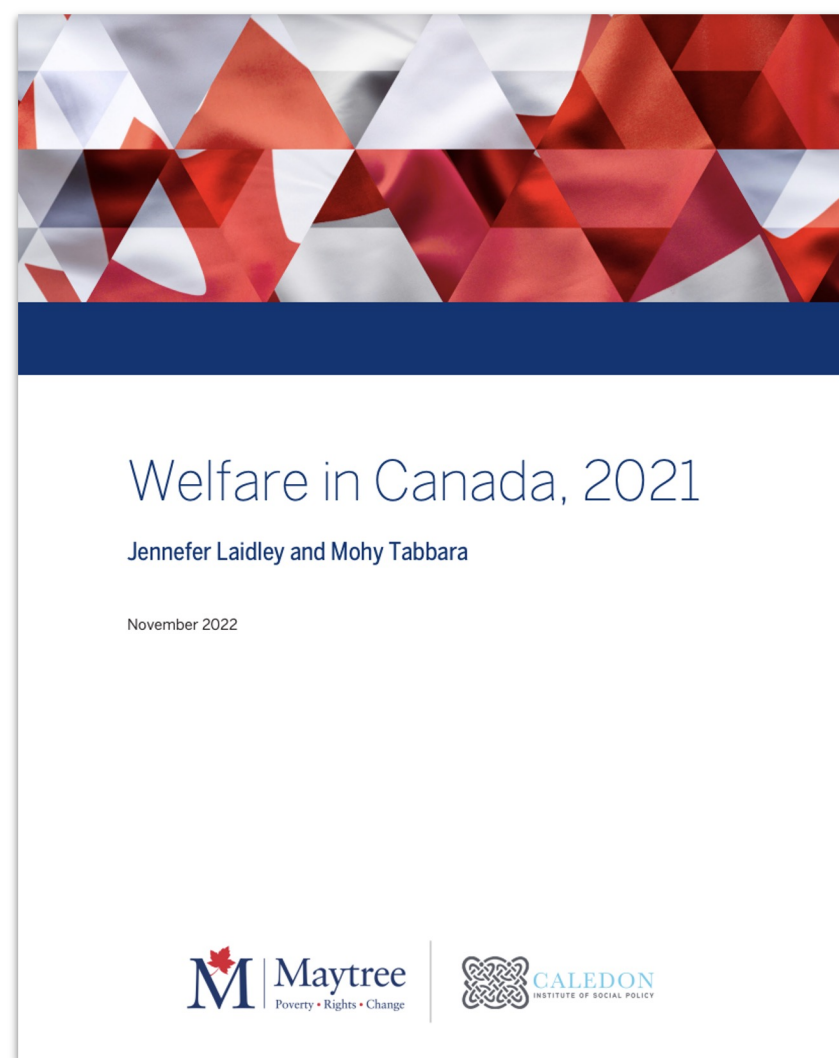
2018: PRS Strategy “*Opportunity for All: Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy*” released:

- Determined concrete poverty reduction targets (relative to 2015 levels)
 - a 20% reduction in poverty by 2020
 - a 50% reduction in poverty by 2030
 - 12 indicators tracking poverty gaps, income inequality, housing, food security, health needs, etc.
- Created Canada's Official Poverty Line (called the MBM) to measure poverty and track progress
- Created National Advisory Council on Poverty

2019: Government of Canada passes the *Poverty Reduction Act*

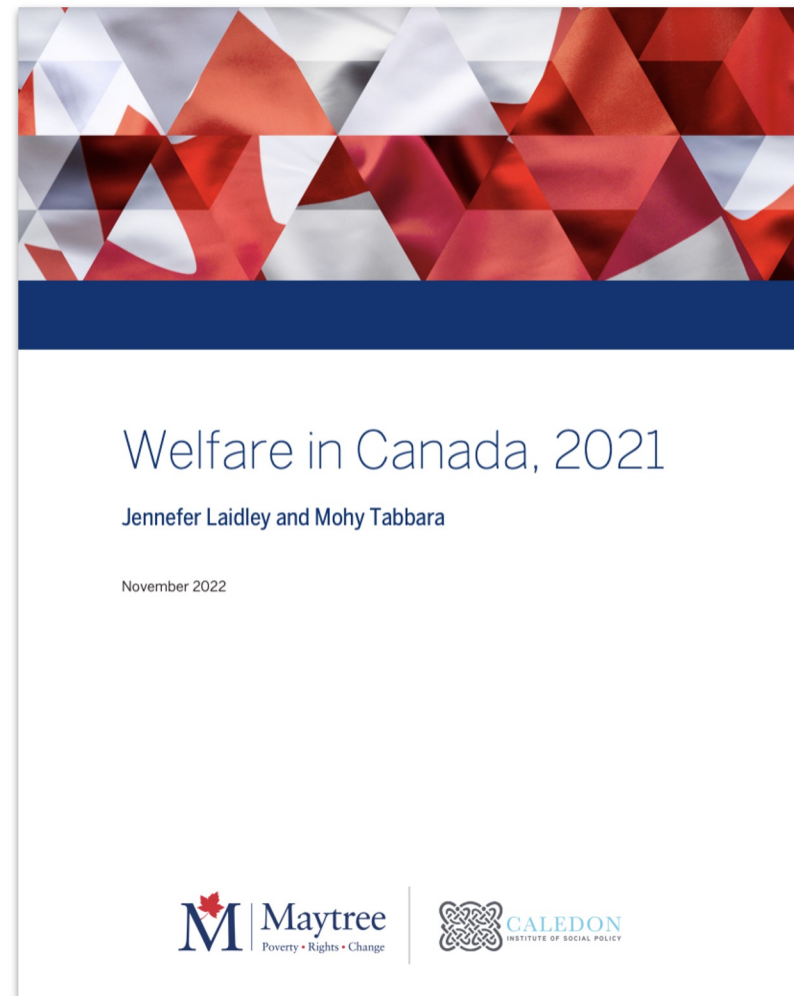


What about real life
for people on social
assistance?



Some key findings:

1. Welfare incomes were deeply inadequate across Canada. All households receiving social assistance in every province lived in poverty, and the large majority lived in deep poverty.
2. Most jurisdictions did not make substantive increases to already inadequate social assistance benefits.
3. Total welfare incomes increased in a limited number of cases in 2021. In most instances, higher inflation in 2021 negated their positive impact.



Source: <https://maytree.com/welfare-in-canada/>

Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy

- 2009: Ontario passes *Poverty Reduction Act* which must include:
 - A poverty reduction target
 - Initiatives aimed at addressing poverty
 - Indicators to measure the strategy's impact
 - A new strategy every 5 years and annual reports
- Ontario is on its third poverty reduction strategy (2020-2025)
 - Four pillars of the strategy focus on: jobs and employment; connecting people to services and supports; making life more affordable; driving progress (mostly creating highspeed internet connectivity)
- Major emphasis on getting people to “exit” social assistance. The “poverty reduction target” in the current strategy is:

Get more social assistance recipients to move into meaningful employment and financial stability. The government will provide the right supports and services with the goal of increasing the number of social assistance recipients moving to employment each year from 35,000 in 2019 to 60,000 by 2024.

Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy: Compared to Reality

- no change to OW rates (currently \$733 a year) or earning cap
- no additional funding for wrap-around services that support people who are “furthest away” from market employment, only short-term training programs
- inadequate supports for people who use drugs and who are seeking rehabilitation services close to home
- less funding for public schools, very slow movement on reducing childcare fees, no childcare worker retentions strategy, instead occasional cheques sent to parents
- increasing the minimum wage only by the amount required by law, ignoring the cost of living crisis and exceptionally high costs of housing
- no support for people on social assistance with regard to the costs of digital access, while moving services online

What is the Welfare Wall?

- A term used by politicians and policy makers to refer to barriers that they feel discourage people from leaving social assistance
- The assumption is that if people on social assistance are financially better off than people earning minimum wage, they won't be motivated to work.
- The fact that most minimum wage earners don't get drug and dental benefits while social assistance recipients do is another aspect of the "welfare wall".

Impacts of the Welfare Wall:

- Used to justify keeping OW/ODSP rates low
- Shifts focus on individual failings, rather than systemic barriers like child care and lack of training
- Perpetuates stereotypes that people on welfare are lazy and don't want to work
- Suggests "working" is the only answer to ending poverty
- Ignores the reality that low-wage, precarious work makes up an increasing segment of the current labour market.
- Pits the working poor against people on social assistance

Ontario Rates, Rules & Recent Changes

- 5% Increase to Basic Needs rate and Max Shelter Allowance for ODSP recipients
 - New earnings exemption rule for people receiving ODSP
 - Annual increase to ODSP rates related to inflation
-
- No changes to supports for people receiving OW
 - Still working to maintain the Welfare Wall
 - Would these changes have happened without collective efforts?

Ontario Rates, Rules & Recent Changes

→ 5% Increase to
Basic Needs rate
and Max Shelter
Allowance for
ODSP recipients

**First rate
increase since
2018!**

Family Type	Previous				New as of July/Sept. 2022			
OW	Basic Needs	Max Shelter	Max OCB	Total	Basic Needs	Max Shelter	Max OCB	Total
Single	\$343	\$390	\$0	\$733	\$343	\$390	\$0	\$733
Single Parent - 1 child	\$360	\$642	\$122.83	\$1,124.83	\$360	\$642	\$125.75	\$1,127.75
Single Parent - 2 children	\$360	\$697	\$245.66	\$1,302.66	\$360	\$697	\$251.50	\$1,308.50
Couple	\$494	\$642	\$0	\$1,136	\$494	\$642	\$0	\$1,136
Couple - 1 child	\$494	\$697	\$122.83	\$1,313.83	\$494	\$697	\$125.75	\$1,316.75
Couple - 2 children	\$494	\$756	\$245.66	\$1,495.66	\$494	\$756	\$251.50	\$1,501.50
ODSP	Basic Needs	Max Shelter	Max OCB	Total	Basic Needs	Max Shelter	Max OCB	Total
Single	\$672	\$497	\$0	\$1,169	\$706	\$522	\$0	\$1,228
Single Parent - 1 child	\$815	\$781	\$122.83	\$1,718.83	\$849	\$821	\$125.75	\$1,795.75
Single Parent - 2 children	\$815	\$846	\$245.66	\$1,906.66	\$849	\$889	\$251.50	\$1,989.50
Couple	\$969	\$781	\$0	\$1,750	\$1018	\$821	\$0	\$1,839
Couple - 1 child	\$969	\$846	\$122.83	\$1,937.83	\$1018	\$889	\$125.75	\$2,032.75
Couple - 2 children	\$969	\$918	\$245.66	\$2,132.66	\$1018	\$964	\$251.50	\$2,233.50

Ontario Rates, Rules & Recent Changes



New earnings exemption rule for people receiving ODSP

- Was \$200/mth, with 50 cents of every subsequent dollar earned “clawed back” from social assistance income
- Now \$1000/mth, with 75 cents of every subsequent dollar earned “clawed back” from social assistance income
- **No changes to people receiving OW**
- Some pros but also some cons with this change

Ontario Rates, Rules & Recent Changes

Annual increase to ODSP rates related to inflation

- Unclear what the rate will be but it's unlikely that it will reflect the real cost of inflation
- The calculation included in the regulations is vague
- Government has not yet announced details despite promising the increase for July 2023



Despite **every level of government** acknowledging the seriousness of poverty, and the difficulty of exiting it:

- Social assistance incomes still WAY below the poverty line
- Culture of denial of material support as punishment (Strips away dignity, self-worth, and well-being)
- Surveillance, intrusion, lack of clarity about rules
- Low liquid asset limits: Must have virtually nothing before eligible and can't save cushion necessary to move out of poverty
- Income rules and reporting: Incomes are capped below poverty line – changes from month to month give no income certainty
- New digital processes that inadvertently punish people who have low digital literacy and minimal access to the internet and technology
- Inadequate/unaffordable housing
- Food insecurity increasing (6.9 million people in Canada!)
- Difficulty in finding good, permanent jobs that pay a living wage
- Discrimination based on disability status and other aspects of identity still prevalent
- Stigma associated with living in poverty



Bottom Line:

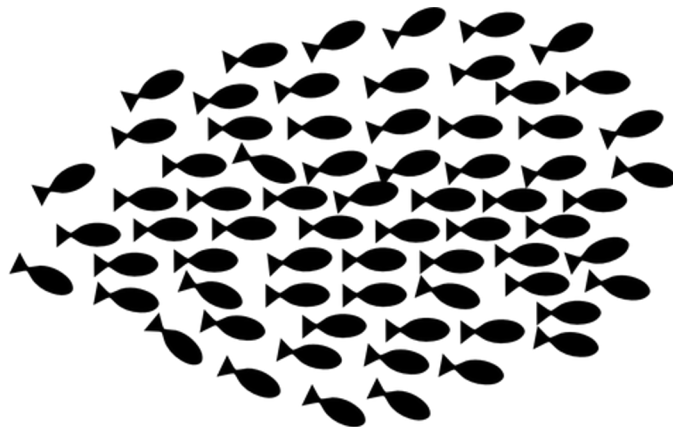
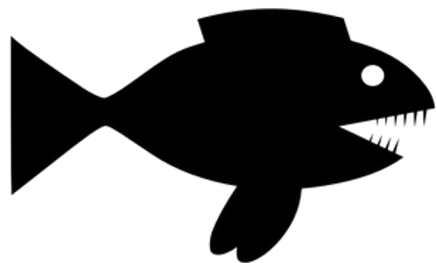
The pace of change is not keeping up with reality

Welfare Wall is maintained

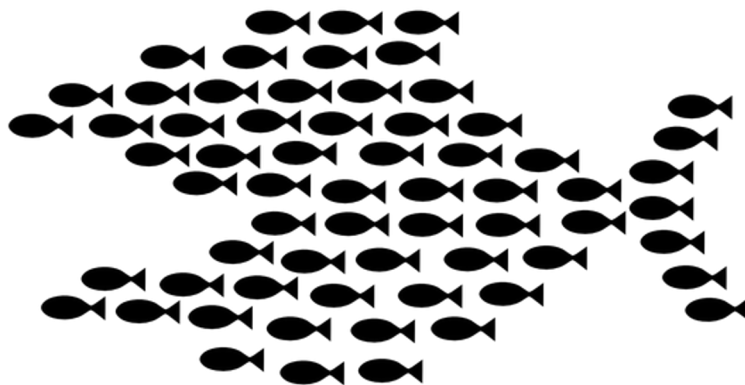
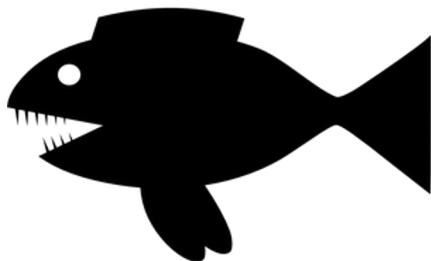
There are still HUGE GAPS between what is needed and what is made available

Governments will not willingly give us what we need.

The only way we have ever gotten what we need is by working together.



ORGANIZE!



Community Organizing is a Long Term Battle

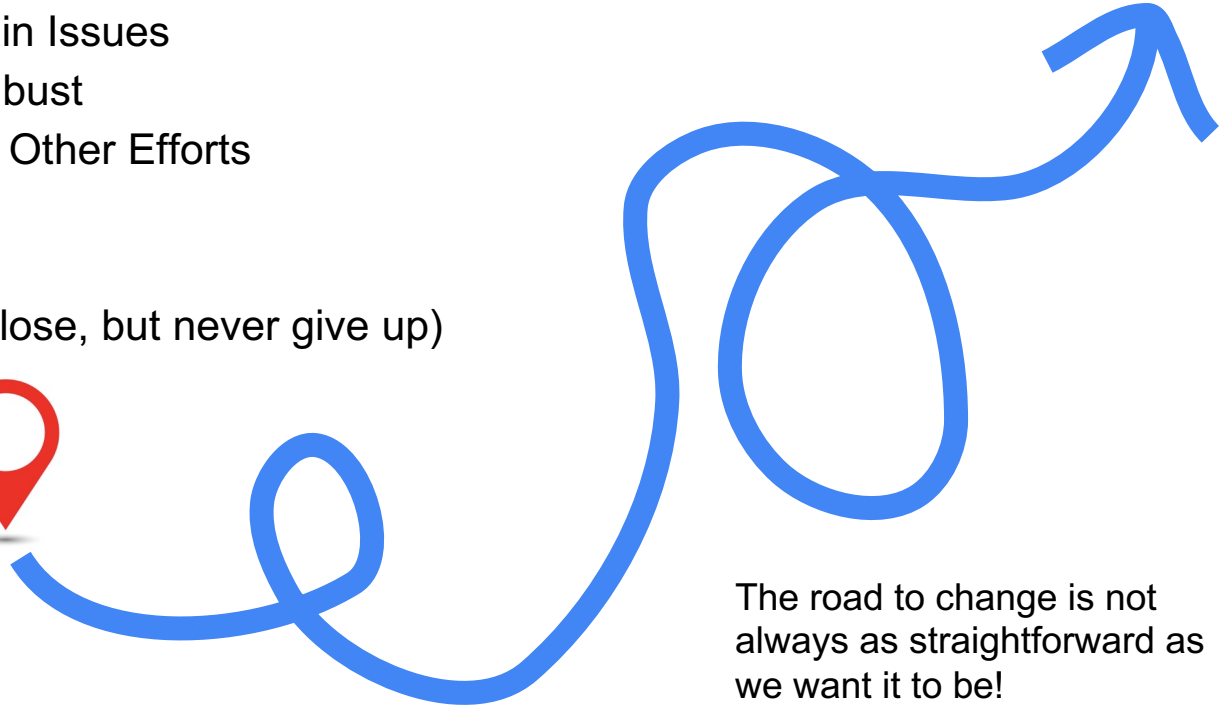
It starts with talking.

- Talk to EVERYONE.
- Talk to people you work with. Talk to your family and friends.
- Build on the trust-based relationships you already have.
- Listen to people's stories. EVERYONE has a story.
- Question your own reactions.
- Be gentle but relentless (with yourself, with others).
- Talking helps build alliances, alliances win change.
- We can't win systemic change on our own.



Where to start?

- Talk to People Most Affected
- Determine the Main Issues
- Get ready to Mythbust
- Build Trust & Join Other Efforts
- Plan & Strategize
- ACT!
- Win! (Sometimes lose, but never give up)



The road to change is not always as straightforward as we want it to be!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- In Spring 2022, while the government was working on the budget, ISAC and allies saw that there was a **window of opportunity** to push for increased social assistance rates
- Rates had not been increased since 2018
- Inflation averaged 6.5% annually (but was closer to 12% since 2018)
- Provincial government had enjoyed receiving lots of funding from the federal government, much of which it was not actually spending

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- ISAC staff had a team meeting to discuss what exactly we wanted to call for, what types of **activities** we could do to get the public aware and involved, how to activate our broad networks of colleagues, clients, friends, and allies, and how to deal with backlash
- We decided to:
 - Write an open letter, put a broad call out for signatures from community legal clinics, community organizations, non-profits, etc.
 - Use media connections to promote the open letter

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- Immediately after sending out the call for signatures, we got an email from a respected advocate who worked for a non-profit
- The email said that **asking the government to double the rates was going too far**, and it would jeopardize what we've been able to accomplish so far
- The advocate asked us to reconsider, said they couldn't support our ask to double the rates, and that they hoped to work together on similar issues
- The advocate had copied several other respected advocates on the letter

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- ISAC staff met to discuss the advocate's email, and the points they raised, and **discussed it with clients and close allies and advocates** who had called for rate increases
- At the same time, the list of signatories to the open letter calling on the government to double the rates was growing
- Groups who were signing on were from Thunder Bay, Halton, Guelph, Renfrew, Toronto, Northumberland, Sudbury, London, Norfolk county, Windsor, Barrie, and many other places
- Many groups were **led by people with disabilities**, people on social assistance, injured workers, or worked very closely with them

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- ISAC staff decided to keep going with the campaign, and also reached out to the advocate to **discuss ways to work together** in the future
- When the letter was publicly released at the end of July, it had garnered **over 250+ signatures**, despite being sent initially to about 60 organizations, who were given a deadline of less than a week to add their names.
- The media picked up our press release, leading to **over 50 stories**, many with original interviews with ISAC staff and other allies across the province who were willing and interested to speak to the need to double rates
- **Two major political parties** included doubling the rates in their political platforms and their ongoing messaging about social assistance

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

Campaign Example: Double the Rates!

- The Ontario budget which had initially been released before the June 2022 election was re-introduced in early August 2022.
- In it, the government pledged to **raise ODSP rates** by 5%.
- Subsequent announcements from the government included the other two recent changes to ODSP that were mentioned earlier.
- Though technically true that a 5% increase is the biggest increase to ODSP rates ever, this was the same government that froze ODSP rates since 2018, and there was no change to OW rates.

Which area of organizing stands out here?

- ☐ Talk to the people most impacted
- ☐ Determine Main Issues
- ☐ Myth-bust
- ☐ Build Trust & Join Others
- ☐ Plan & Strategize
- ☐ ACT!
- ☐ Win!

What's happening now?

- Other organizations have taken up the call to double the rates, in some cases, calling for AT LEAST doubling social assistance rates, given the cost of living crisis and the challenges of accessing free and adequate services
- Some foodbanks have called for an emergency \$100 supplement for all social assistance recipients
- Labour organizers have made doubling social assistance rates a key part of their broad-based demands
- New coalitions are springing up

Did we win?

What does winning look like?

- We asked for 100% increase, we got... 5%. Plus some other changes. With a government that does not negotiate!
- How many more organizations are connected to us and with one another because of this campaign?
- Did we change any attitudes? Did we move the needle?

There is always more work ahead of us.

But we can't do it without each other.



Thank you!



Get in touch:

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Visit our website:

www.incomesecurity.org

Check us out on Twitter:

@ISAC_Ontario



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