



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Denying EIA Benefits because of outstanding Warrants – Unwarranted!

The Provincial government announced recently that it will take away Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) benefits for people with outstanding warrants for serious crimes. Recently there have been a couple of high profile cases where there were delays by the police in picking up individuals with outstanding warrants and this move appears to be the Province's response.

The change will do little to reduce the number of serious offenders especially because it does nothing to get those who don't rely on social assistance to turn themselves in. The measure announced by Manitoba's Attorney General focusses on the very poor, and will make it harder for those with the fewest resources to move themselves out of poverty. In effect, the proposal will turn the EIA program from a system of protection to one of punishment and enforcement, fundamentally changing its purpose, scope and performance.

Ironically, denying social assistance because someone is thought to have outstanding warrants could violate his or her Charter Rights which could set the Province up for a costly legal challenge. Social assistance was designed to provide assistance for those who need it, not just to those who the government thinks deserve help. As well, the government's action sends a mixed message – those targeted are expected to demonstrate personal responsibility while the province ignores its own responsibility to provide a

minimal level of financial support for its citizens. A classic case of “do as I say, not as I do”.

Those applying for EIA are acting in a responsible way. Taking away benefits for some could force them underground and push them towards desperate actions, such as stealing to support themselves and their families.

Furthermore, this move has the potential to create great hardship for the families of those involved. Despite the government's assurance to the contrary, taking away benefits from individuals will almost certainly impact their families. While the total amount of money available to a family shrinks, the number of people needing support remains the same, so there will simply be less to go around.

The new measures have the potential to be a nightmare for EIA officials to administer. At best, these measures introduce a complicated and time-consuming step as case workers will have to look up everyone applying to see if they have a record, and anything outstanding. There is also the very real likelihood that those who have no warrants will find their benefits frozen or denied – due to mistaken identity - because they have the same name as someone who does have an outstanding warrant.

Of greatest concern is that EIA will come

there is an alternative.

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to be seen as an extension of the police, courts, and Corrections – something it was never intended to be. Those who have had bad experiences with Corrections or the courts may be discouraged from going to EIA for benefits, creating greater hardship for their families.

This new measure is out of character for a government that professes to be committed to helping Manitobans move out of poverty. Not only does this measure appear to punish those who are the most vulnerable, it reinforces a misperception that those on social assistance are not to be trusted and are likely to be criminals.

Warrant enforcement needs to be dealt with in a more holistic manner, not in a piece-meal fashion that creates more problems than it solves. The first step is for the government to hold meaningful consultations to look at the problem and solicit ideas for a comprehensive solution – something that was not done before the new measures were announced. Any solution should be examined for unintended consequences, and be supported by facts and evidence. Any new measure should be in keeping with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, apply equally to all and actually address the whole problem not only a small part of it.

By adopting a more collaborative, evidence-based and comprehensive approach, the government would show voters that it is committed to effective and fair action on behalf of all Manitobans.

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