



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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Rent Assist increase: community work in action

Thanks to community advocacy, low-income Manitobans will have more money to help pay their rent. Three years ago Make Poverty History Manitoba (MPHM) began building support for increasing shelter benefits to 75 per cent of median market rent. The provincial government responded and this July, low-income people will have better access to a safe and affordable place to live.

The MPHM coalition believes that stable housing is a basic right and a necessity for full participation in the community and economy. But people on social assistance have long been struggling to secure housing because the income they receive to pay for shelter has not kept up with the cost of renting in the private market. A lack of housing security creates a huge barrier to participation and success in education and employment, which provide important pathways out of poverty for those who are able to work.

More than 145 organizations from across the province endorsed MPHM's campaign to increase shelter benefits. The government responded in Budget 2014 with the introduction of Rent Assist - a new shelter benefit program - and a commitment to provide a maximum benefit equal to 75 per cent of median market rent within four years.

The introduction of Rent Assist in 2014 was welcomed by community leaders, but they emphasized that people living in

poverty cannot wait any longer to get the assistance they need to secure housing and the opportunities that come with it. They called on the government to fully implement Rent Assist in Budget 2015.

While endorsements from the Manitoba Liberal and Conservative parties helped move things forward, the NDP government listened to the community, acknowledged the urgency to act, and responded in Budget 2015 by committing to reach the target benefit level by the end of 2015 with an initial increase scheduled in July.

Increasing shelter benefits has long been a community priority and Budget 2015's record investment gives the most vulnerable Manitobans more of the support they need to build a better life for themselves and for their families.

With the \$22 million investment, single adults can receive up to \$513, up from \$435 per month for their rent - a one-bedroom rental unit costs approximately \$780 in the private market. Two-parent families with two children can receive up to \$742 per month - a three-bedroom rental unit costs approximately \$1160.

When Rent Assist is fully implemented this December, low-income Manitobans will feel an immediate impact. The new benefit will play a key role in helping to ensure that they no longer have to choose between making monthly rent payments

there is an alternative.

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and having enough food to eat – a choice that even low-income families working full time at minimum wage have had to face. They too will feel some relief as Rent Assist is available to all low-income Manitobans not just those on social assistance.

Making the benefit available to people on and off of social assistance represents an innovative approach. This positions Manitoba as a leader in the delivery of shelter benefits as we are one of the only provinces to extend benefits to the working poor. It sets the stage for people on social assistance to more easily transition off of assistance, into employment, and for some eventually into financial independence.

Rent Assist is one piece of the puzzle. It is a key component of a package of actions that MPHM has been calling on the province to implement to reduce poverty and social exclusion in Manitoba. These actions are outlined in a community-based report called *The View from Here*. The provincial government has increased efforts in recent years to address poverty through a comprehensive approach with investments in social housing, child care, training and jobs for people with barriers to employment, literacy, and funding for community-based poverty reduction efforts.

Low-income rates in Manitoba have been on a downward trend over the last decade but persist at unacceptable levels. Poverty is a complex challenge with no silver bullet. It requires strong public services and support for community-led initiatives that address the interrelated factors that contribute to poverty and social exclusion. We need to build on existing public investments that support a comprehensive strategy if we are to achieve more significant results.

As we head toward a provincial election in the spring of 2016, MPHM will look beyond Rent Assist to see how each provincial party will demonstrate its commitment to a comprehensive approach

to address poverty in Manitoba.

Kirsten Bernas is a steering committee member of Make Poverty History Manitoba and a Research Affiliate at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba. The View from Here can be downloaded at: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/view-here-2015>

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