

Moms Matter



Vanny's Story: Never Enough, Always Worried

On the first day of the month, provided I have correctly completed and sent my card in on time, I receive from Social Services \$983.62. This is the amount that the government allows a single parent with three school-aged children. From this amount, a deduction of \$165 for child support (that my ex-partner presumably pays me) is made. Another \$156.66 is deducted. This amount is the National Child Tax Benefit that the Federal Government has granted to low income families, only to have the provincial government claw it back from families receiving social assistance. This leaves a balance of \$661.96 which is deposited to my bank account. After I pay my rent (\$326 subsidized housing costs), phone (about \$45), cable TV (\$38.94 and my family's main source of entertainment, although certainly a luxury), bank service charges (\$15), my life insurance (\$27.50), home fire and theft

insurance (\$25 - I know three families who have lost all they have to fires ...), I am left with a balance of \$184.52. This amount will have to pay for groceries (the two oldest boys eat as much as grown men and usually want second helpings while my youngest is a fussy eater and I often have to fix him something else - that is AFTER he has smushed his meal into a disgusting mess that no one else wants and so must be tossed out!). It must also pay for transportation (\$10 round trip for the family to take the bus to the library), clothing, hair cuts, school lunches, birthdays, toiletries, laundry and cleaning supplies, extra shoes (they must have indoor-only shoes for Phys Ed), head lice shampoo (\$10 per bottle, 3 treatments x 4 people per infestation - we've been bug-free so far this year but it does occur at the worst times!), a second pair of shoes towards spring (x2 each - those pesky indoor shoes again and they ARE growing boys!), and occasional treats after school as an incentive to do their chores and as a reward for doing well in school. It also pays for over the counter medicines (kids get fever and colds like the rest of you and should be made as comfortable as possible while they recover). Also, though no fault of the government but a major impact on us, child support is often late or comes in by \$10, \$20 or \$40 a time which is nearly impossible to budget for. So I often rely on the corner store. They allow me to put purchases on a tab until I can pay; now, that's very generous of them and I'm grateful, but I end up paying convenience store prices.

If you've been following closely, you'll realize that there simply isn't enough money to pay for all of this. I receive a "baby bonus" cheque which pays for food until the end of the month, home craft supplies (paper, etc.), and the corner store tab. Here are some things I cannot afford or struggle to purchase:

- Dental care for myself. Social Services allows adults \$75 per year only for emergency dental care - NOT preventative, NOT cleaning, NOT checkups but tooth extractions ONLY - I had one abscessed tooth extracted last Christmas, and have two

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more bad molars that need to come out but I've used up my emergency allotment for the year - I'm keeping my fingers crossed that my front teeth stay intact. The children are covered for basic dental care that used to be every six months, but when we were transferred from Family Benefits to Ontario Works, this was reduced to once every nine months.

- Transportation and entertainment. We walk just about everywhere we have to go. We live in the North End, so to go downtown to shop costs about \$10 round trip by bus. There is no money for movies or the theatre. The last movie we saw was A Bug's Life at SuperFlicks over three years ago and that was only because we had a ride there and back. We rarely rent movies as each one of my kids has different tastes and the movie rental place near us wants \$2.75 per movie ... x3? Get real! There have been no birthday parties since the Harris cuts and although the boys get invited to lots of their friends' parties, I have to say no more often than not.

- Personal items. There is not enough money for monthly personal supplies ... I won't elaborate. There is not enough money for me to eat as much as I should. I don't eat dinner until the boys have had their fill. I'm usually too stressed out over food wastage to eat with them. The only milk I drink is in my tea - milk is for the kids. The only fruit I eat is the free snack offered during my volunteer time - fruit is for the kids. I know this sounds martyrish, but many single parents - poor parents in general - sacrifice their food for the kids. It is common for me to skip meals several days at a stretch. I am a fairly recent smoker (5 to ten cigarettes per day). I discovered that a pack of cigarettes - \$2.85 for the cheap kind - is cheaper than eating. Smoking curbs my appetite and relieves some stress. Quit smoking aids, many of which I've tried, are not covered under the Ontario Drug Benefit Plan and are hugely more expensive than actually smoking. Vitamins are also very expensive, so we don't buy them. I have a skin disorder that is aggravated by stress but the treatment is also not covered, nor can I afford to buy it. A while back, my doctor prescribed Ensure (a nutritional supplement) to help me get my weight up but the drug plan removed it from their listing so he could no longer prescribe it. Since the Harris cuts, we no longer qualify for regular Food Bank usage. They had to change their access qualifications so now we're only allowed a once-per-year emergency visit. Another thing I can't afford is clothing (new or used) or a personal life. My social life is restricted to my volunteer activity only. Babysitters are too expensive (\$5 per hour per child) and besides, with essentially raising the boys alone, I have little energy left to properly nurture a personal relationship.

- Extras for the boys. My middle son has a stuttering problem. For a while he was getting help every week at Hotel Dieu's speech pathology department, but the cost of the buses downtown was restrictive and we put it on hold for now. Speech therapy for stuttering is not offered through the schools. The boys cannot play soccer at Soccer Magic (too expensive - over \$100 per season plus equipment). They do play T-ball during the summer in the neighbourhood house league - it's free, but in return I'm expected to work at bingos to supplement the cost to run it. We simply don't participate in community activities unless they are free or very low cost.

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There is more that I could relay to you, but the foregoing should give you a fairly good grasp of my reality and day-to-day living on social assistance. What all this means as it relates to the effect on me and my family's health (both physical and emotional) is this: our quality of life is diminished when we cannot afford to participate in extra-curricular activities where transportation costs are barriers. Sacrificing food to the children reduces my ability to cope with the stresses associated with raising active young boys and is obviously not good for my physical health. Disregarding my own emotional needs does not send a positive message to my children and I often feel alone. This is my own issue but I find it hard to just relax - you know, just take a day off, free time for myself. I get up at 5:30 every day to read the paper and plan my day. But I cannot sit at my front window or on the balcony during the day - what if someone drove by and saw me doing nothing. "Look at that Welfare bum", they might say, "goofing off." So I keep myself as busy as humanly possible. All my free time is spent volunteering in the community to give something back to the agencies that support low-income families "earning my keep", working for my cheque, and ultimately trying to improve my and my family's environment while role-modelling volunteerism and social consciousness to the boys. But I'm always either coming out of or going into another depression period. Down time after the boys are asleep is spend worrying over the next day's meals, which bill will or will not be paid, and so on ... many sleepless nights.

I was raised in a middle class family and I have a great deal of guilt around living on assistance and not being able to maintain a relationship with the kids' father. I wrestle with feelings of low self esteem, as I was brought up to believe that being on Mother's Allowance and having unplanned children meant that I was a failure. I used to view women like myself with contempt. I have worked full and part time jobs, supporting myself and often my partner, since I was 17 years old, before I had children. I have now developed compassion for others and understand that many women end up in these circumstances due to a lack of information and support or because they've left an abusive situation. My volunteerism has broken some of my sense of isolation but not always the loneliness and despair. Once, when I suggested to a caseworker at Family Benefits that there was not enough government money to properly support a family with any dignity, she stated that "family benefits are there to support the kids, not you". You may ask why your tax dollars should support families like mine and I would say that I wouldn't want to live in a society that didn't care enough about people in need to help them out.

Government grants to businesses, new and old, figure in the billions in this country. Incarcerated people are fed three meals a day and have a lot of perks during their stays. Ontario taxes also support University and College grants to give students a helping hand, a better education, and a brighter future. Despite people's financial differences, we all really need the same things: love, respect, understanding, dignity, and the supports that enable us to accomplish these things and to maintain a healthy, happy, successful lifestyle.

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Shanna's Story: No End in Sight to Poverty

Almost 20 years ago, the Canadian government pledged to end child poverty. They said they would "alleviate child poverty in Canada by the year 2000". Now in 2009, I think the statement must have contained a typo. It should have read more accurately "by the year 2000, we are going to elevate child poverty in Canada".

It's a crime that anyone in a country as affluent as ours suffers from any kind of poverty, let alone child poverty. It's time for people to recognize that when you're ending overall poverty, you're also ending child poverty, period.

I am a single mother of an 11-year old son and we both live in poverty. Living in poverty is a full time job. I spend a phenomenal amount of time and energy ensuring that our basic needs - food, shelter, clothing - are met.

For my son, poverty means limited choices, such as not being able to go on school trips, play hockey, or even buy a candy bar at the check out counter in the grocery store.

For me, poverty means tough choices, such as whether to buy toothpaste or toilet paper, whether to buy enough food for two dinners or just enough for tonight and buy laundry detergent so we can have clean clothes tomorrow.

The list is infinite and poverty means many things to different people. But living in poverty always means going without. Luxury items such as haircuts, movies, or cable television don't exist in our world. For these, we rely on the good graces of our neighbours.

Pawn shops have become a sore beacon of hope for those trying to supplement meagre monthly incomes. Where I live, people often sell what little they have in order to buy a few basic staples, such as bread and milk. People are forced to sell something worth \$90 to get \$12 back, just to buy an evening's meal.

Then there's the proliferation of cash shops that feed off poor people. They take advantage of people who struggle to survive, who live from hand to mouth from month to month.

I think the federal and provincial governments need to work together to fix things. We need to put money back into a new improved system before it is too late. It is getting to the point where things are unfixable. Unless the federal government intervenes right now, it will be too late. Here are my ideas:

- Tell the Ontario Government to stop immediately their clawback of the Canada Child Tax Benefit. This money was supposed to help Canada's children, not Ontario's government.
- Increase the Canada Child Tax Benefit for low income families.

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- Set a national standard that coincides with the United Nations mandate for addressing the third world conditions in which Canadian children in poverty live. In their report, the United Nations set some strong recommendations to which the Federal Government must adhere.

More Ideas from the National Council on Welfare:

- Eliminate income taxes for people living below the poverty line.
- Create a national system of childcare and early childhood education.
- Raise the current minimum wage to ensure that people who work full time have a reasonable chance to escape from poverty.
- Raise welfare rates so that they cover the minimum basic needs of adequate food and safe shelter.
- Provide supports for welfare recipients to re-enter the workforce in meaningful jobs. Forcing parents on welfare into demeaning, dead-end jobs creates serious stresses that undermine their ability to take care of their children.
- The government must provide money to cover the costs of prescription drugs, dental care, and eye glasses for welfare recipients and low wage workers and their families.

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Joanne's Story

My journey really began a few years ago when I decided to leave a very unhealthy marriage. Unfortunately, once I was on my own, I found myself in another unhealthy relationship with the welfare system. I felt like a failure and was afraid to speak up and ask questions. I was intimidated and didn't want to be seen as a trouble-maker.

At the same time, I was also experiencing some hostility from my community. Many seemed to have a negative view of single mothers on welfare assistance. All this negativity created a burden that I'm sure many other single mothers feel.

With the help of some friends, I took steps to improve the quality of my life. I met some extraordinary women who formed the Single Mothers Support Network. Together, we have led a crusade to empower single mothers. I now have a stronger voice and a tougher backbone.

This is why my story is on this web site. I want to share the information that the Single Mothers Support Network has given me because I truly believe that knowledge is power. I want women to come to this web site and see that they have the right to ask questions and that they can stand up for their rights without fear or intimidation. I want women to know what they are entitled to and how to fight injustice. My motto in life is to help people help themselves. I hope that this web site helps to empower you and please remember that all mothers are extremely important and strong.

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Melissa's Story

I am a single mother of a 17 year old disabled child and we both live in poverty. Living in poverty means we don't rent movies. I sold tickets so my son can go on a school trip. My son gets his hair cut at the school for \$2. There are other things, too. My cheque each month pays my rent, cable, phone, PUC, and the rest that's left is for food. People think I have it easy, but I don't.

Raising a disabled child isn't the easiest job in the world. I have my good and bad days with him. He has Down's Syndrome plus autism. He demands a lot of time and always has to be supervised. I get a handicapped allowance for him, which is not enough. It has to pay for parent relief plus extra clothing and bowel medications that aren't covered by my drug card, so I end up paying \$400 each month. I have to keep receipts for these things and hand them in once a year. When my son turns 18 (in November), he will get his own cheque and I will get next to nothing. So how is a person supposed to survive? We never know what the government is going to do next.

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Nicky's Story

Well, after losing my job because the company moved out of province, I was laid off. After that I applied for assistance. While receiving assistance I returned to school. I was struggling to achieve the math credit that I needed so that I could go to hairdressing school. I finally did it and stopped there. Not long after that I became pregnant. Having a child on assistance, I had to work weekends to make ends meet and just so we could survive.

Well, years have now passed but I've also had a plan. I still don't know if it's going to work but I'm still trying because I have nothing to lose. Here in Kingston rent is a bit expensive but you have to try and keep up. After paying bills you really don't have money for food, so what happens sometimes is that the bills get left back. I can't look my child in the face and say we have no food. She really wouldn't understand. And further more, I couldn't do it to myself. Food was always there in my home when I was growing up, so I have to do the same.

The only thing that happens is you hear the phone ring, you say "hello." The person asks to speak to me. Sometimes I'm not sure why the people are calling to remind me about the money I owe. But I try not to let it bother me. I know they have to get paid, it's just a matter of it being late.

Well, I'm trying harder now. I've gotten a part-time job to try and ease my burden a bit. My goal is really to be rid of the system completely. It's not going to be today or tomorrow but sometime soon I hope. You feel so much better about yourself the less you need them, and they also treat you with a little more integrity.

So if you want to try to make a difference, do it for yourself, not for them. Believe me, it's like regaining your life because right now being on assistance means the government is in charge of your life. It's worse than having your parents tell you what to do.

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Mary's Story

I am a single mom with two school-aged children. It is not easy being single plus a mom on top of that. My children have different needs because of their ages. My son is 13 and my daughter is 6. I hope you see where I am going with this. My son is a teenager with teenager needs. He wants what all teenagers want - that is brand name shoes, clothes, and jackets. You name it he wants it. He feels if he doesn't have it that he is not cool like his friends and he will be singled out of the group! But what is a mother to do when there is no money to buy these things for your child with all of life's other expenses?

Working with a fixed income is a job by itself - trying to figure out which bills get paid this month and which get left behind in order to accomplish other needs within the home. The basics such as food and personal hygiene are my number one priorities. I have to make sure food is within the home at all times because my children would not understand if there was nothing to eat and I wouldn't know how to explain that to them.

I am attending programs, volunteering my time and attending school. And in a few more months I will be at the stage of my accomplishment which will lead me to a more positive future without government assistance - which can be helpful and a pain in my ass at times.