Quit shortchanging the needy

Budget planning, at all levels of government, too often ignores its harsh economic impact on the most vulnerable members of society. Dismissive – sometimes mean-spirited – policies only make a bad situation worse for those without a voice in the decision-making.

The arrival of fall brings us back into familiar routines, a return to school perhaps and the falling of the leaves.

It also heralds another cycle of budget deliberations at various levels of government. And while there will be no changes to the two former fall traditions, we do want to influence the latter.

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For too long, economic planning reflected in government budgets has affected the nature and extent of social policy, without recognizing how such policies affect those less fortunate in our communities.

These decisions determine the ability of our communities to influence the well-being of those who are marginalized and in need of our community's support.

Over the past decade, a disturbing tenor crept into these deliberations. Not only were budget decisions not responsive to the needs of those living on the margins, but a mean-spirited quality permeated many of these discussions.

Witness, for example, cuts to social assistance in Ontario in the mid-1990s, resulting in one third of recipients being removed from social support — many of them single-parent families.

While the Conservative government of the time proclaimed the outcome a sign of accountability, the results should not have been surprising. Homelessness increased, food banks became a refuge for greater numbers, more women seeking safety from violent relationships were put on waiting lists for places of safety, and increasing numbers of children had to be parented by the state under child-welfare agreements.

At the same time, thousands were facing the calamitous effects of being cut off social assistance, the social safety net that had taken generations to create was being dismantled.

It was a kind of "perfect storm" — a convergence of trends that increased risk to some while simultaneously withdrawing the support that had been required to buffer the effects of poverty, joblessness and violence.

And what might be the longer-term effects of continuing in this direction?

One outcome that we have been monitoring is the increasing trend for children to come under the care of children's aid societies.

The release last year of Protecting Children is Everybody's Business, a report funded by the City of London and United Way of London and Middlesex, reported the trends of poverty, violence and unmet mental-health needs of both children and adults contributed to conditions that witnessed a doubling in the rate of children brought into care between 1995 and the beginning of this decade.

The lesson? Eliminating names from a social assistance list does not magically solve a problem. If not addressed, the vestiges of problems swept under the rug — poverty, unemployment and violence — will continue to afflict those who have the least power in our society to influence decisions that arise at budget deliberation time.

There is additional evidence that problems ignored do not disappear, but merely resurface in a more perplexing and challenging part of our community.

A study by London's police family consultants noted that, in the absence of appropriate mental-health services, persons in need are increasingly likely to become involved in the criminal justice system; a phenomenon recently retired police chief Brian Collins noted with increasing alarm during the latter days of his tenure.

Outcomes such as these should come as no surprise. The decline of the middle class, the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor, reduced funding for the social safety net that took generations to establish, have all been identifiable to even the most casual observer over the past decade.

These outcomes stand in stark contrast to those who have actually benefited economically during the same period. In Ontario, economic policies benefited those who, arguably, were in the least need of tax breaks and special consideration.

Few have realized that despite the world economic resurgence of the 1990s, poverty rates actually increased in the majority of industrialized countries — including Canada.

And the evidence is now in regarding the effects of poverty on marginalized persons. Negative life outcomes associated with poverty include lowered vocational and academic success, poor health, violence and numerous childhood adjustment disorders. The 2003 Report on Child Poverty in Ontario suggested that:

- Child poverty among single-parent families is 43 per cent.
- The rate of child poverty is larger for younger children.
- More than one in three children with a disability lives in a low-income family.

And while Ontario's poverty rate was lower than the national average of just more than 21 per cent, our province reported the fastest growing rate of poverty, moving from just less than 15 per cent to slightly more than 20 per cent between 1990 and 1996.

We do not pretend to understand the complexities of economic policy. We do, however, seem to have a unique advantage over economists in appreciating the effects of economic and social policy on individuals who require our social services, not just to get by, but to actually survive both as individuals and as families.

There seems to have been a belief that balanced budgets would benefit everyone equally, as it would provide for a stronger economy; we believed that all would share in the opportunities that would emerge.

In a unique opportunity, results from recent focus groups conducted with social service providers in London assist in unravelling the impact reductions in services have meant to marginalized persons.

With respect to the impact of the erosion of social services, providers have noted:

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▶ "Neighbourhood-based supports, programs for children, ESL classes, supports that are necessary to neighbourhoods, disappeared overnight. Core funding for neighbourhood centres disappeared. Small programs that are neighbourhood specific are gone or are in jeopardy."

▶ "We are seeing more concurrent disorders, addictions and mental health (problems)."

▶ "Mental health, addictions, child welfare, poverty, housing, racism, illiteracy, status problems, dislocation, loss of identity; 100 per cent of our clients are simultaneously dealing with problems in one or more areas identified above at the same time as they are dealing with women abuse."

We are not alone in this increasing realization regarding the impact of social and economic policy on marginalized persons.

Marilyn Callahan, in examining British Columbia social policy, reminded us about the seemingly all too obvious, that:

▶ Government policy has a human impact.

▶ Equal outcomes will not result from treating everyone the same.

▶ The best policies are those where consultation has played a considerable role.

▶ Special measures are required so that those disadvantaged can make their views known.

American author and journalist H. L. Mencken noted: "For every human problem, there is a neat, simple solution; and it is always wrong."

So here is what we are proposing.

During the course of this budget cycle, government administrators and politicians use a simple list of benchmark criteria to ask questions about the decisions they are to make. This list includes the following:

1) Who is most likely to be negatively affected in our community by this decision?

2) Will a group that has been disadvantaged by previous budget cuts and social policy decisions be re-victimized by the current decision?

3) Is there a support network in place to avert the potentially negative outcomes of this decision on already marginalized groups?

4) Is there a group in our community that should be invited to speak about the unintended effects of this decision?

5) Is there an alternative to the current decision that could neutralize harm, if not positively benefit, an already at-risk group of persons in our community?

We would ask that interested persons use these five questions to inform discussion and indeed measure the decisions that are being made.

While we don't believe this will be a magical solution to the challenges that marginalized persons and our community resources face, it just might stem the tide of increasing the problems that we face while we continue to grapple with the underlying causes.

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