

*Statements by Ministers*

I would mention to both my colleagues who have just spoken that I think we need to be careful in terms of how we refer to people who are unfortunate enough to be on social assistance. The words we use to describe them are important. I heard them referred to as client groups, et cetera. We must be careful, even though we are sometimes talking in technical terms, that we do not put a label on people who are on welfare and, in that way, perpetuate a stigma which exists and which is often being promoted in the larger society. I know many people feel like second class citizens and they should not. Social assistance is one of our security programs and it is their right when they have no other option.

● (1530)

As a person who practised social work for many years and as someone who has worked with many low-income people in my own community, I have never met a person who really wanted to be on social assistance. Most people would far prefer to have a job at a decent rate of pay and be independent. Unfortunately, jobs are either not available or they are so low paid that a person cannot support a family and so they have no alternative but to seek social assistance. In many cases as well a person may have been unemployed for such a long time, or not have been in the job market at all, that they lack the skills and confidence to compete in the open market. Here again it is easy for people to deliberately speak about people on welfare who do not want to work. That is not the case. It may be that sometimes they need further support and training, but they certainly need jobs. People on welfare have such abominably low incomes that it is hard enough to feed and clothe their families and pay the rent; they certainly have no money left to spend on transportation looking for work. As well, most of them do not have the kinds of clothes needed to seek work or get into the work-force. There are many things which inhibit and discourage people and make them feel depressed.

I think social assistance should be used in a positive way and I commend the Minister for this approach. I also commend him for indicating his opposition to what I think is commonly known as work for welfare schemes where persons are forced into almost any job to in effect pay for their welfare. That is a very negative kind of social policy and I am very glad we are all against that. We welcome moves to remove the disincentives which exist in the system and I hope the opportunity will be provided for people on welfare to move into training programs and federally-subsidized jobs. I hope that is what we are talking about. I am not altogether sure because the Minister did not spell out the job opportunities. It is essential that social assistance allowances be maintained while people are training or looking for work so I commend the Minister on these changes, as well as his colleagues in the various provinces and territories.

My main concern, Mr. Speaker, is that we must be sure there are training opportunities for people generally. We should not differentiate between those on welfare and others in this respect. The training opportunities must be realistic with respect to the education some people have as well as future job markets. I commend the Minister for these moves, but I hope

that he makes sure there are the right kinds of training opportunities for people. There is nothing more discouraging for someone who has been on welfare or unemployed for a long time than to take a training program and, at the end, end up back in the welfare cycle again. However, that is what is going to happen if we do not have jobs at the end of a training program. Neither do we want people coming off welfare and competing for jobs by pushing someone else out. That is not going to solve anything. We really need many more jobs in the community.

I appeal to the Minister and his colleague, the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald), to take a whole new look at an old area of work, that of community jobs. There are many, many examples in my community where literally thousands of people, particularly women who have been on welfare, got their first start through work in this area. They might have worked in one of the local food co-ops or in the local school or library. They might have started in child care services. While I never did really like the short-term nature or low rates of pay of the Manpower programs we used to have, I must say there is an advantage in these kinds of programs if they can be extended for people who have been on welfare. I know many hundreds of them living in public housing projects in my riding who have developed a lot of self-help services and shown they have the talent and potential, but they really need to be able to feed their families while doing this kind of thing. I have worked in situations in the past where these kinds of programs have been developed very aggressively and training has gone along with them. Many of the people involved have subsequently moved up into para-professional kinds of jobs.

I therefore ask the Minister to consider this as one area which is particularly suited to people who have been on social assistance, particularly mothers, many of them in their middle years, who are going to find it hard even with training to get into the competitive job market. People on welfare should be treated the same as other citizens, although I hasten to add that often certain kinds of pre-employment programs are necessary for people who have been unemployed for some time. We have a lot of figures to show that when people have been unemployed they begin to get more and more depressed. They soon begin to lose their confidence and blame themselves. It is not their fault. It is the system we have which really does not have enough jobs for the people who need and want them. We really have to give much greater emphasis to the job end of the problem if this program is going to work.

I would also like the Minister to consider, along with his provincial colleagues, whether there might be a more flexible use of social assistance or family allowance programs. There could be a type of family benefit program which would continue an allowance for children at the same rate, let us say, that they get while on social assistance, when a mother who is able to get a job inevitably finds it to be low paying, barely sufficient for a single person. I think a program like that would more than pay for itself because it would allow women to get off welfare and stay off.