



Supporting clients living in poverty

Authors: Amy Nelson BSW, student midwife and Vicki Van Wagner RM, PhD
Contributor: Cheryllee Bourgeois, RM

- Between 50,000-100,000 children are born into poverty per year in Canada.(1)
- Poverty is a determinant of maternal and child health.(1)
- Women have higher rates of poverty than men, and are more likely to live in lower-income households than men (24% versus 18%, respectively). The POWER Study in Ontario found that low-income women in Ontario are particularly disadvantaged with respect to health status.(2)

Poverty is a strong determinant of preterm birth, intrauterine growth restriction, obesity, low birth weight and gestational diabetes.(3,4) This is due to many issues such as chronic stress, inadequate housing, unemployment, poor diet, maternal smoking or drug use, single parent households, depression and insufficient social support.(1) A higher proportion of pregnant women living in poverty are teenagers and/or have low levels of education.(1)

Midwives are well positioned to address these issues and improve outcomes due to their close relationships with both clients and broader community service providers. Clients are unlikely to self-identify as under-resourced or living in poverty. Whenever possible the midwife should be proactively discussing and offering resources in a manner free of judgment. The key to providing meaningful support is creating a respectful environment that maintains a client's dignity.

Creating a supportive environment for clients:

Appointments

Lower socioeconomic status is associated with decreased prenatal care attendance.(1) Missed appointments can mean that important tests are delayed or that problems which could have been prevented (anemia or high blood pressure, for example) may turn into more serious health concerns. Be flexible and understanding if clients miss or are late for appointments, consider providing home visits and/or book longer appointments if you anticipate needing more time with specific clients. Work within your fullest scope, take blood during clinic visits and minimize your client's need to attend more appointments or travel. Some practices use a group-prenatal model that has good outcomes for participants.

Nutrition

When having informed choice discussions on issues like health, nutrition or diet based supportive measures, be mindful that clients may not be able to access nutritious food or the means to seek it out. When a client is focused on getting enough food instead of what kind of food it may be impossible for some clients to follow nutritional guidelines. When appropriate, midwives can recommend food banks, community agencies, and/or give a grocery gift card. Midwifery practices can also consider placing snacks in the waiting room.

Breastfeeding

Research has shown that women with lower income felt that they had less knowledge and confidence about

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breastfeeding.(5) In addition, they may have fewer friends and family who have breastfed so knowledge may not be passed on to each other.(5) Whenever possible midwives should involve the client's support person when teaching breastfeeding so that the support person is also knowledgeable about proper technique and can assist the client at home.(5)

Home visits

Postnatal home visits from health care providers have been shown to have a positive effect on parenting behaviour and parenting skills, particularly for under resourced families.(1)

Transportation issues

Practices may consider providing public transit tickets or taxi chits to under resourced clients. Enquire about plans to get to the planned place of birth prenatally and proactively offer support when appropriate.

Resource lists and referrals

Midwives should have an understanding of the community agencies in their area in order to make appropriate and helpful referrals. Cultivate relationships with key social service providers from community agencies in your area and those frequented by your clients. Familiarize yourself with the programs where you are referring clients and when possible let clients know what to expect when they are accessing services or places that are new to them. Practices can create lists of resources and community agencies to be given to all clients.

Access to drugs

Familiarize yourself with common extended health programs such as the Interim Federal Health Program and the Ontario Temporary Health Program for refugees and the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch coverage for Status Indians and registered Inuit as well as ODSP and Ontario Works (see below). Writing a prescription for over the counter medication, for example vitamin D, can mean the medication or supplement may be covered under extended drug benefits.

Donations

Midwifery practices can come up with creative systems such as mom-to-mom donations of maternity clothes or baby supplies. Some ideas for distribution are:

- Using gently used donations, create a small welcome package for every new mom with a few basic items.
- Have a basket or small box in your waiting room—this both normalizes taking items and can be a conversation starter between clients.
- Connect clients with community agencies that provide layettes and other baby start up items.
- Some practices have a fund where clients can make donations to help others with routine prenatal expenses such as lab work or ultrasounds, bus fare or grocery gift certificates. Consider having tokens and a few grocery gift cards on hand.

Some drug companies such as Duchesnay Inc. (the manufacturer of Diclectin) have “compassionate coverage” policies which allow a limited supply of free medication to midwifery practices.

Parenting supports

If you think your client may benefit, speak to them about receiving extra support in home, explore the option of a visiting homemaker or mothercraft- type program. Women with many children and/or socially complex situations may find it of particular benefit. It can be helpful to make clients aware of free programs to support parenting offered by:

- Public Health Units
- Ontario Early Years Centres
- Public libraries
- Community organizations
- Community Health Centres
- Language, culture or faith-based organizations
- Agencies such as the YMCA/YWCA, community centres and community programs often have subsidized memberships and programs. This could help clients meet other parents and provide them with a sense of belonging. This may also help with potential social isolation.(5)

Prenatal classes

Cost is an issue for clients wishing to attend prenatal classes and may prevent some women from attending. Create a list of prenatal classes that are no cost or sliding scale. Identify classes that address further barriers such as childcare and transportation.

Supporting clients receiving social assistance

Ontario has two social assistance programs to help eligible residents of Ontario who are in financial need. Ontario Works helps people who are in temporary financial need. Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) helps people with disabilities. Both programs involve mandatory and discretionary benefits. Mandatory benefits are provided to all eligible recipients of Ontario Works and ODSP through the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Discretionary benefits are provided on a case-by-case basis and are administered by municipalities; what benefits are available may vary according to where your client lives.

It is important for midwives to be aware that a single person living on Ontario Works receives a minimal amount per month: \$626.00 is supposed to cover their housing, bills, groceries and other basic needs. Please refer to this link for the Ontario Works rate chart (as of October 2013): <http://www.peelregion.ca/ow/applying/rates.pdf>

Midwives can support their clients by being advocates and provide further dignity to clients by having some knowledge about Ontario Works and ODSP benefits. Here are some specific steps you and your practice can take:

1. Make it easy for clients to access verification or documentation. Some clients might be embarrassed to ask their care providers to sign and/or complete forms needed to access various benefits. Practices may want to create template letters to make it simple for midwives to provide necessary documentation.
2. Midwives should be aware of the additional benefits to which pregnant clients or new mothers are eligible. Many clients may not even know they are entitled to these benefits. Knowing about other potential benefits for clients means midwives can offer to sign forms and provide documentation without the client having to ask.

Social assistance in Ontario primer

The following benefits may be available to clients receiving Ontario Works or ODSP:

Pregnancy/breast-feeding nutritional allowance

- All pregnant women on Ontario Works are entitled to receive an additional benefit of \$40 or \$50 (if lactose intolerant) per month through the Pregnancy/Breast-feeding Nutritional Allowance. *To access this benefit during pregnancy, clients need their midwife to fill out a form provided by their Ontario Works case worker confirming pregnancy and due date.* Clients only need to give verbal confirmation to their caseworker to continue to receive this benefit for the first 12 months of breastfeeding.
- If formula is used the baby will then be eligible for a monthly Special Diet Allowance of \$145.00 or \$162.00 (lactose intolerant babies). *A midwife's note is required to confirm that a woman is not breastfeeding.*

Medical transportation

- This benefit is only paid when medical transportation expenses exceed \$15 per month.
- Verification of each appointment must be provided to the client's case worker. *Inform clients of this benefit and proactively offer appointment verification rather than putting clients in the position of having to ask for it.*
- If multiple appointments are needed such as ultrasounds, lab investigations or appointments with a consultant, *booking the appointments within a single month means the client is more likely to be eligible for this benefit.*
- People living on Ontario Works are exempt from paying the \$45 ambulance co-payment fee.

Prescription, dental and vision coverage

- People living on Ontario Works have prescription drug coverage. As Ontario Works is based on month-to-month eligibility, a drug card is issued each month.
- Most drugs are covered. If a drug is not covered, the case worker will look for a substitute drug (often a generic drug) that is covered.
- *Write prescriptions for over-the-counter medications* such as prenatal vitamins, antifungal agents or postpartum pain relief so that clients living on social assistance potentially won't have to pay for them out-of-pocket.
- *Midwives can let clients with gestational diabetes know that Ontario Works will cover all diabetic supplies such as test strips, blood glucose monitors and lancets.*
- Adults living on Ontario Works do not have dental coverage. There may be discretionary funds for adult dental coverage if emergency dental services are needed or to enhance employability. Some municipalities provide access to free dental care for qualifying families, check with local authorities in your area.
- As a discretionary benefit, the Ontario Works office in your community may cover the cost of eyeglass frames and lenses, repairs and replacements. Routine eye examinations are covered for adults receiving Ontario Works.

Other benefits

- This is the term which covers other discretionary funding available through the Ontario Works program. *These benefits actually include many items or services but some that may be important to mention to clients are help with covering costs of baby supplies like a crib, infant clothing or a breast pump.* Amounts vary by municipality.
- A newborn allowance may be available in some municipalities (e.g. Toronto). You may need to provide documentation for your client to receive this benefit.
- Your client may not be able to access these benefits until a short waiting period after the birth. You can help your client by knowing about the application process in advance and planning accordingly.

Employment-related expenses

- Clients may be able to access discretionary funding for *necessary transportation, telephone expenses, medical examinations and clothing (maternity clothing) or even school supplies.*

Participation requirements

- All employable people living on the Ontario Works program must actively look for a job. Pregnant women are required to job search until they give birth or as long as they are medically able. If a midwife feels that looking for work/employment would cause problems for a client or her pregnancy, a medical note can defer participation requirements.
- *Midwives can advocate for clients by informing them of and offering this potential exemption, when appropriate. Having a template letter available can make this easier for the midwives in your practice.*

Other employment and employment assistance activities benefit

- There may be funds available if a client requires financial help for job searching or school or training expenses. This benefit may help a client who needs maternity clothes to look appropriate for interviews, transit passes, or funds to help defray 'grooming' costs.

All social assistance policy directives are online at:

<http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/en/mcass/programs/social/directives/index.aspx>

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