

How prepared were we for this pandemic? Many individuals and families did not have financial reserves to protect them and are hit hard by job loss, lack of child care or need to quarantine. COVID brought us all a crisis but many low income families would say a crisis existed before. This includes those we now say are essential services workers. They had unstable or precarious jobs, worked more than one job because of low wages and had little time to offer to their kids. They could not qualify for Employment Insurance or saw their job disappearing in the face of increased automation. Some of the many consequences to living in poverty include poorer health, lower success rates in school, and higher crime rates. All of these have a negative cost attached.

Canada quickly recognized the need to provide more income to individuals and families following the public health regulations required by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Employment Insurance program was made more accessible and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit provides a worker, who has lost income because of COVID-19, with a temporary income support of \$500 a week for up to 16 weeks. This program is generally easily accessible and helpful to many.

The GNWT brought changes to its Income Assistance program. New applicants required “minimal verification to ensure they are registered as quickly as possible”. Current clients no longer need to report each month to make sure they would get consistent payments. GNWT also offered a payment of \$500 to families to help them “stock up” to deal with COVID-19. As with the federal program, this gives minimal reporting or administrative burden on the recipients.

Now is the time to seriously consider expanding such income programs in the post-pandemic crisis. Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) is way to provide everyone with an income that is enough to pay for basic needs. BIG, along with our basic services such health care and education, should allow a life with dignity, regardless of a person’s work status. As with these COVID program, or changes to Income Assistance during COVID, Basic Income Guarantee does not have a demeaning, excessively burdensome process. This makes it different than Income Support which Basic Income Network says is “too little, too late and too many conditions”.

Some say BIG decreases the incentive to work but pilot projects show most people keep working. There are also fewer hospitalizations, fewer accidents and injuries and youth tend to stay in school more.

BIG helps people be better prepared and more able to handle life’s setbacks. It fosters a better balance between work and family caregiving. People will mostly still want to work but will have more choice in the type of work they do. However, it does not replace other public services like health care, student financial assistance or pensions.

Some people say it would be too expensive. In 2018, it was estimated that to provide a national program similar to the Ontario program would cost around \$43.1 billion once you subtracted federal government spending for low income and vulnerable Canadians. What if we also considered the savings that come from fewer hospitalizations and lower rates of incarceration?

So what do you think? Once COVID-19 is gone, should we move to a Basic Income Guarantee? Should we be doing it now?

