

Source: Toronto Star - Nov. 22, 2006

No name, no face, no status, no identity

JOE FIORITO

Debra was coming home with a couple of bags of groceries the other day. She didn't notice when her purse slid off her bundle buggy.

Along with the purse, she lost a little money, some small personal things and every trace or proof of her identity except herself.

She might as well have fallen off the edge of the Earth because, with no identification in this town, during these lean and suspicious times, you are sunk.

And so Debra came of a recent morning to a community drop-in centre on Bloor St. W. near Christie St.

Here, twice a month, is where homeless or disadvantaged men and women can get help to replace their lost or misplaced identification, thanks to PAID, or the Partners for Access and Identification program.

What would happen if you lost your purse or wallet? Oh, I see you flinch. Try replacing your birth certificate, your OHIP card, your social insurance number, your native status card or your permanent resident card if you are jobless, or on a pension or a fixed income, with no way to get around town and with no permanent address; you can double the difficulty if, like me, you have trouble filling in forms.

The ID clinics are a boon, but they are doomed. They operate with funds provided by the federal government through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, SCPI for short, pronounced "skippy."

The ID clinics had their funding cut earlier this year, but they were given an administrative extension by the government in order to wrap up their affairs, and they were given an additional extension of a couple of months by the City of Toronto. No one I know has any idea if this program will be rescued.

Debra got in just under the wire. PAID is no longer accepting any more requests for ID after Dec. 4.

Naghmeh Mohajer works for PAID. Her questions for Debra were routine: Where was she born; does she have a family doctor; what is her mum's maiden name; where was her mum born; what is her father's date of birth; and so on.

Debra was unclear about some of the answers. She was unsure of her mother's age, but she thought she remembered her mother's date of birth. Naghmeh made a quick ink calculation on the palm of her hand.

I didn't know anyone still did that.

Debra's ID will be delivered to the offices of PAID in a few weeks, and Naghmeh will then deliver it to the drop-in.

Naghmeh saw a dozen other people over the course of the next hour; among them was a young man named Chad who just got out of jail. He surrendered his ID when he went into the slammer and he never got it back when he came out. Apparently, that happens often.

Chad is living in a shelter. He said, "I need my health card and social insurance number. I gotta get a bank account. You need ID for that." He looked worried. "I can't get a paycheque without a bank account. You need ID to get a job."

The stories continued all morning. Bruce lost his ID. That happens when you have no safe place to keep your stuff. And Rob, who was born in the Yukon, said, "I can't find my ID. I think it got scooped."

He meant it was stolen.

Rob said it is impossible to get social assistance without proper ID. He also said, "I've got a college education, but if it weren't for this lady, I don't know what I'd do. I guess I'd be on the street scratching my head."

PAID employs seven workers who conduct an average of 100 ID clinics a month in some 30 different locations around town. Last year, PAID helped people get 7,115 pieces of ID. They do this on a grant of a measly half a million dollars a year.

The people who apply to replace their papers are usually the hardcore homeless, or they are couch surfers, or they do not have jobs, or they are otherwise in need.

In 2002, at a conference in Dubai, SCPI was cited by the United Nations as having made an outstanding contribution to improving quality of life.

Here's why I scratch my head.

According to Diane Finley, the minister of human resources and social development, there have been no cuts to SCPI funding. But PAID has been forced to tell clients that it cannot accept applications for ID after Dec. 4, and staff will be out of work as of the end of February.

There is nothing to take its place.

An existential bind: The feds say they have not cut funding, but the story coming from many of Toronto's shelters, drop-ins, food banks, community information services, skills development programs, harm reduction programs and various Out of the Cold programs is that no one really knows if or when there will be any more SCPI funding, and when or how they ought to apply.

Hardly a best practice.

Source: Toronto Star - Nov. 22, 2006