

INCOME ASSISTANCE REFORM

Policy Primer



The Government of Nova Scotia offers income support to people who need financial assistance through its Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) program.

Although the program is in place to help recipients meet their basic needs, support available is not enough, and program rules keep people trapped.

With over half of food bank clients in Nova Scotia reporting government support as their primary source of income [1], it's clear that ESIA is not meeting basic needs.

That's why we're calling for the Government of Nova Scotia to index ESIA benefit amounts to the poverty line and to allow recipients to earn and save more before claw-backs kick in.

What is ESIA?

ESIA is a provincial income assistance program that provides financial support to people who do not have enough income to support themselves or their families. This can include people who are working some hours, people who are in between jobs, or people who cannot work for various reasons, such as being fulltime caregivers for family members.

In addition to financial support, ESIA provides job-seeking and skills training support to help connect recipients to employment opportunities.

Why are ESIA reforms needed?

- **Benefit amounts leave people in deep poverty.** For many households, income received through ESIA is more than \$15,000 below Canada's official poverty line[2]. This forces recipients into food banks and other crisis support services as they struggle to survive.
- **Support is clawed back when recipients try to earn income.** Recipients who work part-time or casual jobs and receive wages that exceed \$350 per month have their benefits clawed back[3]. This becomes a barrier to recipients taking on more paid hours to bridge the poverty gap caused by insufficient ESIA rates.
- **Asset limits prevent recipient ability to build a safety net.** Individual ESIA recipients cannot hold more than \$2,000 in assets at any time (or \$4000 for a family of two)[4]. This prevents recipients from being able to build financial resilience or save as much as possible for unforeseen household costs that may come down the line.

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What specific reforms are needed?

ESIA rates must be sufficient to help address food insecurity, and thresholds for earning and savings need to be expanded.

So we are calling on the provincial government to:

- Rapidly increase ESIA benefit household rates by 25% every year until recipient income reaches the Market Basket Measure – Canada’s official poverty line.
- Initiate ESIA claw backs only when all combined household income reaches the poverty line.
- Immediately double ESIA recipient asset limits.

Want to learn more?

Contact us at advocacy@feednovascotia.ca

References:

1. Food Banks Canada. 2025. [Hunger Count 2025](#).
2. Liadley, J. and T. Oliveira. 2026. [Welfare in Canada, 2025](#).
3. Government of Nova Scotia. No date. [Employment Support Services: Information for Clients](#).
4. Government of Nova Scotia. 2026. [Employment Support and Income Assistance Regulations](#).