



2024 Ontario Pre-Budget Submission

To:

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
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from ODSP Action Coalition
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[via email]



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Founded in early 2000s, ODSP Action Coalition is a volunteer, grassroots provincial advocacy group led by Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) recipients, with a network of valued allies including legal workers, disability/poverty-related NGOs/NPOs, health care professionals, social policy experts and other advocates. Our mandate includes advocating for improvements to ODSP to allow for clients of the program to live with adequacy, security and dignity.

While our coalition acknowledges that the minor changes to ODSP introduced by the province over the past couple of years were steps in the right direction, people with disabilities in Ontario continue to struggle while living well below any recognized measure of poverty, and while contending with ever-increasing rent, food insecurity, inflation, and homelessness. Clearly these steps accomplished very little in terms of lifting clients out of legislated poverty, particularly those unable to work or adhere to a rigid schedule that typically comes with employment.

2023 brought with it continued record-breaking food bank reliance, with social assistance recipients (OW & ODSP) accounting for [over half of food bank clients](#) in Ontario. People with disabilities continue to be forced to make difficult choices between purchasing food or paying their rent, hydro and other essentials. Food banks were never intended to serve as a permanent supplement to low social assistance rates and non-livable wages, but evidently the province is satisfied with that paradigm.

One does not need to be an economist to understand that woefully inadequate social assistance rates are a primary driver of the homelessness crisis gripping every municipality across Ontario. Indeed, municipal councils and agencies [across the province](#) have been calling for OW and ODSP rates to be increased as they are asked to do more with less. Downloading social housing to cash-strapped municipalities and expecting the profit-driven private market to fill the void of *truly* affordable housing options has proven to be an unmitigated disaster.

ODSP Action Coalition receives dozens of emails/messages each month from fellow ODSP clients/applicants in various states of duress, despair, frustration and angst. We do our best to refer folks to a variety of resources based on their circumstances, including their local community legal clinic, while being clear that we ourselves are not legal experts and cannot offer legal advice.

Next to complaints about caseworkers, we are seeing a growing number of complaints regarding the structure of the benefit unit and how disabled people are being discriminated against when other household members' income — typically that of their partner/spouse — is deducted from the disabled person's benefits. There is a power dynamic at play which can make the disabled person feel like a burden and as though they've been stripped of their autonomy, independence and dignity, breeding contempt

and conflict in relationships. It is no coincidence therefore, that currently [90 per cent of ODSP cases are single](#), up 10 percentage points from only five years ago, which is also adding to the rise of the [loneliness epidemic](#) that has been making headlines over the past year.

Furthermore, using a [Gender Based Analysis Plus \(GBA+\)](#) lens, we know that more women live with disabilities than men, and women are more likely to experience financial abuse such as being deprived control over, or access to, household finances, which can keep women trapped in physically and/or mentally abusive relationships and/or toxic environments.

With the above considerations in mind, we urgently call on the province to immediately take steps to implement the following recommendations in the year ahead:

- 1) As a start, immediately double ODSP and OW rates. Tying ODSP benefit rates to inflation last July when they were and still are well below any recognized Canadian measure of poverty, has ensured legislated poverty in perpetuity. Additionally, OW has not been increased since 2018 and fails to provide recipients the means and resources to even seek employment, such as readily available internet, cell phone and transportation, not to mention bare essentials like a roof overhead and nourishment.
- 2) With food and grocery prices continuing to spiral out of control and food bank demand breaking records on a monthly basis, make the *maximum* Special Diet Allowance mandatory for ALL recipients.
- 3) Using a GBA+ lens, adopt a [hybrid definition](#) of the 'benefit unit' that does not reduce a recipient's benefits as a result of other household income, while recognizing elements of family need such as those of direct dependents under 18. Times have changed considerably since the ODSP definition of the benefit unit was first established. It's long overdue for ODSP to catch up with the times.
- 4) In lieu of sufficient affordable housing options, create a 'made in Ontario' portable housing benefit that prioritizes homeless people with disabilities and those receiving social assistance paying private-market rent, so they may remain housed. The province must recommit to building *deeply affordable, adequate, and accessible* housing — including age-appropriate supportive housing options — where residents can live with security, comfort and dignity.
- 5) Reinstate stronger rent controls, including closing the 2018 rent control loophole (which exempts rent control on units first occupied after Nov 15, 2018), and initiating vacancy control that maintains the rent of a rental unit between tenancies.
- 6) Replace the current myriad rate structures with a single flat-rate for all clients by combining the basic needs and shelter allowance components into one amount, irrespective of clients' living arrangements.

- 7) Reverse the outsourcing of OW/ODSP employment services to third-party entities and remove “pay per performance” incentives that risk coercing clients into potentially dangerous, ill-suited, dead-end, and/or low paying jobs, while letting others fall through the cracks.
- 8) Exempt TFSAs, RRSPs and other investments generally intended for retirement from ODSP asset limit considerations so that clients may have a chance of avoiding complete destitution when they turn 65.
- 9) While we applaud the province’s move to expand the employment earnings exemption to \$1,000 per month, we recommend increasing the exemption to \$2,000 per month while reducing the clawback rate to 50 per cent on earnings over \$2,000. Clients should also be permitted to reconcile earnings monthly or annually, whichever is more efficient and convenient for them.
- 10) Treat ‘income replacement’ programs like Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPP-D) Employment Insurance (EI), and injured workers (WSIB) entitlements the same as earnings from employment.
- 11) Allow recipients fortunate enough to receive gifts and voluntary payments, to reconcile them annually to align with the \$10,000 annual exemption, thereby improving efficiency while reducing intrusiveness.
- 11) Introduce a Digital Allowance to allow social assistance clients to stay connected with their caseworkers, and other essential resources/information. Assistance is also needed to help clients obtain web-enabled devices, and technological literacy training. The province’s “Digital First” strategy demands it.
- 12) Make a public commitment that the province will not claw back any amount from the yet to be finalized/implemented federal Canada Disability Benefit.

We appreciate your consideration and expedient implementation of the above recommendations that will help people with disabilities to live with the security, autonomy, adequacy, and dignity they deserve.

Sincerely,
[via email]

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