

Information to help you provide feedback to Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan

The provincial government is currently requesting public feedback on the next 5-year poverty reduction plan.

An important part of poverty reduction is Ontario's Social Assistance programs which support low income and vulnerable individuals who are in need of income support. Social assistance includes both Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

In late 2018, the Ontario government announced some significant planned and proposed changes to social assistance which would deepen poverty for many low-income and vulnerable individuals and families in Ontario.

As a result of public outcry, the Ontario government stepped back on *some* of the proposed negative changes. This was a positive development.

However, the Ontario government is still considering some serious negative changes to social assistance. Below is background information explaining the current proposed negative changes to social assistance.

Furthermore, the social assistance program as it currently stands is extremely inadequate as the benefits that are provided to recipients keep them in poverty. Social Assistance needs to be greatly improved.

The poverty reduction plan consultations are an important opportunity to ask the provincial government not to make the proposed negative changes, but instead to make investments in our social assistance system.

We encourage you to ask the government to:

- Reverse its plan to cut \$1 billion from the Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works
- Maintain the current ODSP disability definition
- Increase the social assistance rates so they are in line with the cost of living in the communities where recipients live
- Consult with relevant stakeholders as it reforms social assistance programs

How to Participate (the deadline to participate is March 30, 2020)

- You can participate through an online survey or by submitting written feedback here: <https://engage.ontario.ca/en/engagement-initiatives/developing-new-poverty-reduction-strategy-ontario>
- You can participate by emailing feedback to: prso@ontario.ca
- You can participate by mailing feedback to: Poverty Reduction Strategy | 315 Front Street West, 3rd Floor | Toronto, Ontario | M7A 0B8

Background Context on Social Assistance Reform

The Government's Proposed Budgetary Cuts

The April 2019, the provincial budget announced \$1 billion in cuts to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCSS) by 2021-2022.¹ This is an immense cut that will impact those who rely on OW and ODSP for basic subsistence and who are already living below the poverty line. This cut will guarantee that families living well below the poverty line will struggle even more than they already do.

The Government's Proposed Change to the Definition of Disability under ODSP

In November 2018, the government of Ontario announced plans to change the definition of disability under ODSP to align with that of federal programs. Although details have not been announced, the intention seems to be to

¹ 2019 Ontario Budget. *Ontario's Economic and Fiscal Outlook in Brief*. April 11, 2019. <http://budget.ontario.ca/2019/brief.html#section-2>.

adopt the definition of disability used by the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) program.

The CPP definition of disability is more restrictive than the ODSP definition and is meant to encompass those who are almost entirely precluded from any employment, whereas people receiving ODSP benefits are encouraged to work as they are able. The CPP definition is also meant to encompass people with prolonged, or life-long, illnesses. The current ODSP definition, however, is much broader and includes disabilities that will last a year or more on an episodic or continuous basis. Additionally, the Federal government's House of Commons HUMA Committee recently reported how the disability definition under the CPP-Disability benefit is inadequate and needs to be expanded to better serve people with episodic disabilities.²

This proposed disability definition change could potentially disqualify many vulnerable Ontarians from ODSP, particularly those that live with time-limited disabilities and episodic disabilities, such as mental health issues, addictions, chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, hepatitis C, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic migraines, and some forms of cancer. If this definition change is adopted, a significant number of disabled individuals who would currently qualify for ODSP benefits no longer will.

Changing the ODSP disability definition will plunge many persons with disabilities into further poverty. If enacted, those who do not qualify medically for ODSP will have to rely on OW. Receiving OW instead of ODSP can mean the difference between being able to pay rent or becoming homeless, affording groceries, or accessing medical treatment to assist one's recovery and return to work.

Social Assistance Rates Should be Increased Annually and Align with Poverty Measures

Social Assistance rates need to be drastically increased so that recipients can afford daily basics, like food, shelter, and medical expenses. OW and ODSP recipients live well below the poverty line. The poverty line for a family of four in Ottawa is \$39,701.³ Yet, a family of this size on ODSP receives a maximum of \$22,644 annually.⁴ On OW, a family of this size receives a maximum of \$15,000.⁵

OW and ODSP rates have been stagnant for decades.⁶ Unlike Federal income supports, like Old Age Security, OW and ODSP rates do not increase with inflation. Instead, rates are increased at the discretion of the provincial government.

In 2017, the MCSS conducted comprehensive research and recommended raising social assistance rates to a Minimum Income Standard to allow recipients to afford basic necessities.⁷ We urge the provincial government to revisit that proposal.

The Government Should Engage in Meaningful Consultation

As the Ministry undertakes reforms to our province's social assistance system, we ask them to engage in meaningful consultations with Ontario's low income and vulnerable populations, health-care providers, and community groups and agencies.

Questions? Contact Community Legal Services of Ottawa:

South Office: (613) 733-0140 | **Downtown Office:** (613) 241-7008 | **West Office:** (613) 596-1641
Website: www.clsottawa.ca | **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/OttawaLegalClinic/>

² Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. *Taking Action: Improving the Lives of Canadians Living with Episodic Disabilities*. March 2019, 42nd Parliament, First Session. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HUMA/Reports/RP10367115/humarp15/humarp15-e.pdf>

³ Statistics Canada. *Low income cut-offs (LICOs) before and after tax by community and family size*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110024101>.

⁴ Income Security Advocacy Centre. *OW and ODSP Rates and the OCB 2018*. September 10, 2018. <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/ow-and-odsp-rates-and-the-ocb-2018-les-taux-dot-du-posph-et-de-la-poe-2018/>. Note this figure does not include Child Benefits.

⁵ Ibid. Note this figure does not include Child Benefits.

⁶ Maytree. *Welfare in Canada. Ontario*. November 2019. <https://maytree.com/welfare-in-canada/ontario/>

⁷ Government of Ontario. *Income Security: A Roadmap for Change*, p. 5. October 2017. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/income-security-roadmap-change>