
What Health Care Providers Need to Know – and Do – about the Proposed Change to the ODSP Definition of Disability

On November 22, 2018, the Ontario government announced its intention to change the definition of disability in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) to “align more closely with federal government guidelines.” If it goes through, this change threatens the health and well-being of many of your most vulnerable patients.

How ODSP and federal definitions of disability are different

To qualify for ODSP now, a person must have a physical or mental impairment that is continuous or recurrent and expected to last one year or more; and that impairment must impact one or more areas of function (personal care, community function, or workplace function).

To qualify for the federal Canada Pension Plan-Disability (CPP-D) program, as one important example, a person must have a “severe and prolonged” mental or physical disability due to a medical condition. This means the person can’t work at all or on a regular basis, and the disability is likely to last a long time, or is likely to result in death. All other federal disability-related income benefit programs are as or more restrictive.

How this will impact your patients

Changing the ODSP definition will force many low-income people with disabilities – those with episodic disabilities like depression, or time limited disabilities like most breast cancers, and people who experience the cumulative impacts of several health conditions – to rely on Ontario Works instead of ODSP. This means they will qualify for 37% less income, which will push very low-income people with disabilities into even deeper poverty, and likely homelessness. They may also be unable to access to important disability-related health benefits available through ODSP.

A significant drop in income is a major threat to your patients’ health. The evidence is clear that lower incomes are associated with higher rates of morbidity and mortality from most health conditions, increased toxic stress and decreased well-being.

How this will impact you

An increase in poverty and stress levels will result in higher demands on your time to address the health and social needs of your patients who have disabilities. Apparent savings in the income security system will take a heavy toll on health care professionals and the health care system.

What you can do

1. Help any of your patients who may qualify (i.e., they have a disability and live on low income) to apply for ODSP under the current system. The government has promised to grandparent most current ODSP recipients when the system is changed.
2. Contact your local MPP and Minister Todd Smith to share your concerns. As a health care provider, your voice is important as you are uniquely able to offer both your patients’ real-life stories and evidence-based health expertise.

Resources for your Clinic Practice:

- Refer any of your patients who have questions about their ODSP eligibility or who require assistance or advice with applying or filing an appeal to their local community legal clinic
 - Legal clinic finder tool: <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/contact/contact.asp?type=cl>
- Assess and assist those who are eligible to apply for ODSP by completing the Health Status Report and Activities of Daily Living Index sections of their applications as soon as possible
 - ODSP Health Care Professional's Guide:
https://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcsc/social/publications/HCP_Guide.pdf
- Complete medical review forms for current ODSP recipients as soon as possible when requested to do so
 - Health care professionals guide to medical reviews:
https://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/programs/social/odsp/income_Support/hcp_guide_medical_review.aspx
 - Medical review e-learning in English:
https://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/programs/social/odsp/income_support/ODSP_E-Learning/index.aspx

Resources for your Advocacy:

- Draft template letter / email to send to your MPP and Minister Todd Smith:
 - <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/social-assistance-reform/Template-Letter-or-Email-Disability-Definition-February-2019.docx>
- How to find and contact your local MPP:
 - <http://incomesecurity.org/publications/other/How-to-find-your-Ontario-Member-of-Provincial-Parliament.docx>
- How to contact Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services Todd Smith:
 - Email: todd.smithco@pc.ola.org
 - Ministry mailing address: <https://www.ola.org/en/members/all/todd-smith>
- More information: “What Changing the ODSP Definition of Disability Would Mean”:
 - <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/changing-the-odsp-definition-of-disability/>

To Stay Up-to-Date:

- Sign up here for periodic emails on this issue:
 - <http://eepurl.com/ggFLWr>
- Website:
 - <http://defenddisability.ca>

