



**October 2, 2019**

Hon. Todd Smith  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
Hepburn Block  
80 Grosvenor St., 6th Floor  
Toronto, ON M7A 1E9

AND TO:  
Constituency Office  
5503 Hwy. 62 S, Unit 4  
Belleville, ON K8N 4Z7

**Re: Social Assistance Reforms- Change in ODSP Definition of Disability**

Dear Minister Smith,

This letter is sent on behalf of *Defend Disability*, a coalition of people with lived experience of disability, health care providers, experts and other service providers. We are writing about the proposed reforms to social assistance, and in particular, your government's November, 2018 announcement that it would change the definition of disability for the purposes of eligibility to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The months following this announcement have been characterized by limited communication and engagement with Ontario residents and stakeholders, who will be deeply impacted by these reforms. As individuals and organizations working with people with disabilities every day, we continue to field calls and visits from people showing immense concern and high levels of stress about the uncertainty of their income benefits and their ability to survive, should the definition change.

**We urge you to reverse proposed changes to the definition of disability for the ODSP. Changing the definition of disability could compromise the health of people across the province and negatively impact overall wellbeing.**

While no decisive, revised definition for disability has been given, we have been told to expect updates aligning the provincial definition of disability with federal definitions, presumably the definition used for CPP Disability. Stakeholders have raised concerns with this approach, as the CPP Disability definition is currently far more restrictive; it was developed for different purposes from ODSP. The CPP Disability definition has been critiqued for perceived inadequacy in addressing temporary and episodic disabilities. Furthermore, the federal government has initiated work on modernizing its own definitions to reflect the complex ways people experience disability.<sup>i</sup> This raises concerns about alignment with definitions that may shortly be revised. Finally, the previous minister indicated that people currently on ODSP will

be “grand-parented” into a new program, although no clarity was provided on whether medical reviews of current recipients will apply the current or revised definition of disability. This lack of clarity is heightening stress.

A restricted definition means many people with disabilities living on low income who qualify today will not be eligible in a changed ODSP program.<sup>ii</sup> Restrictive reforms limiting access to ODSP will push very poor people with disabilities into deeper poverty, increase stress, lead to worse health outcomes and possible homelessness. This will put further strain on our healthcare system, social services and other government services, costing more over the long term.<sup>iii</sup>

Reducing poverty requires investments and interventions, specifically geared towards impacted populations.<sup>iv</sup> <sup>v</sup> Investments in safety net programs, such as social assistance, have a positive impact on individuals, communities, and on all of Ontario.<sup>vi</sup> Health research shows that a reduction in income inequality and poverty result in better health for everyone over the long term, resulting in cost savings and relieving pressure on an overloaded health care system. Changes making it harder for marginalized people to access the resources they need have a detrimental impact on people who need the most help. In Ontario, ODSP represents an important investment in children, seniors, people living with disabilities and chronic diseases, and other vulnerable Ontarians. A new, more restrictive definition of disability in ODSP will take supports away from people with the greatest need.

Since proposed reforms were announced last year we have called for your ministry to re-consider these changes. We call on you to keep the current provincial ODSP definition of disability, and not move to a more restrictive definition that would threaten the health and well-being of marginalized people with disabilities in Ontario.

At this critical juncture, Ontario needs programs that are responsive to the needs of the most marginalized. We will continue to advocate for healthy social assistance reform and urge you to re-consider these potentially devastating changes.

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**Endorsed by 80 organizations across Ontario:**

2-Spirited People of The 1st Nations  
Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services  
ACT – Toronto  
ACTION POSITIVE VIH/Sida  
Africans in Partnership Against AIDS (APAA)  
AIDS ACTION NOW!  
AIDS Committee of Durham Region  
AIDS Committee of North Bay and Area  
AIDS Committee of Ottawa

AIDS Committee of Windsor  
AIDS Committee of York Region  
Alliance for Healthier Communities  
Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP)  
Ancaster Community Services  
ARCH Disability Law Centre  
Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS)  
CAMH (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health)  
Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario  
Casey House  
Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic  
Colour of Poverty - Colour of Change  
Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment  
Community Advocacy & Legal Centre  
Community Legal Clinic of York Region  
Community Legal Services of Ottawa / Services juridiques communautaires d'Ottawa  
Daily Bread Food Bank  
Decent Health and Work Network  
Durham Community Legal Clinic  
Emmanuel United Church  
ERDCO (Ethno Racialized Disability Coalition ON)  
Feed Ontario  
GTA Disability Coalition  
Hamilton Community Legal Clinic  
Hamilton Food Share  
Health Justice Program  
Health Providers Against Poverty  
HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO).  
HIV/AIDS Regional Services  
HIV/AIDS Resources and Community Health (ARCH)  
Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC)  
Injured Workers Community Legal Clinic  
Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic  
Millennial Womxn in Policy  
Mission Services of Hamilton  
Mississauga Community Legal Services  
Neighbourhood Legal Services  
Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN)  
North Peel and Dufferin Community Legal Services  
North York Harvest Food Bank  
Nurse Practitioners' Association of Ontario  
ODSP Action Coalition  
OHIP for All  
Ontario AIDS Network  
Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP)

Ontario Network of Injured Workers Groups (ONIWG)  
Ontario Psychiatric Association  
Parkdale Community Legal Services  
PARN (Peterborough AIDS Resource Network)  
Positive Living Niagara  
Provincial Steering Committee on Social Assistance  
PWA (Toronto People With AIDS Foundation)  
REALIZE  
Regional HIV/AIDS Connection (RHAC)  
RNAO (Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario)  
Save Your Skin Foundation  
St. Michael's Hospital Academic Family Health Team  
St. Stephen's Community House  
Street Health  
The Centre for Independent Living in Toronto (CILT)  
The Inn of the Good Shepherd  
The Mississauga Food Bank  
The Teresa Group  
Welcome Inn Community Centre  
Wellesley Institute  
West Scarborough Community Legal Services  
Willowdale Community Legal Services  
Women and HIV / AIDS Initiative (WHA1)  
Working for Change  
Yonge Street Mission  
YWCA Toronto

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<sup>i</sup> Department of Department of Public Works and Government Services. (2019) *Government Response To The Fiftieth Report Of The Standing Committee On Human Resources, Skills And Social Development And The Status Of Persons With Disabilities*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/HUMA/report-15/response-8512-421-537>

<sup>ii</sup> Income Security Advocacy Centre, (2018). *Defining Disability: What plans to change the ODSP definition would mean to people with disabilities in Ontario*. Retrieved from: <http://incomesecurity.org/public-education/changing-the-odsp-definition-of-disability/>

<sup>iii</sup> Dutton, D.J., Forest, Pierre-Gerlier, Kneebobe, Ronald D., Zwicker, J. (2018). *Effect of provincial spending on social services and health care on health outcomes in Canada: an observational longitudinal study*. CMAJ 190 (3) E66-E71. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.170132>

<sup>iv</sup> Tiessen, Kaylie, (2016). *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: Ontario's Social Assistance Poverty Gap*. Retrieved from: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/ontarios-social-assistance-poverty-gap>

<sup>v</sup> Government of Canada (2018). *Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/campaigns/poverty-reduction.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association. *Policy Papers on Equity: Strategies for Reducing Poverty in Ontario*. Retrieved from: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/strategies-for-reducing-poverty-in-ontario/>