

Over 80 organizations urge the government to rethink plans to restrict social assistance for people with disabilities

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Today, organizations from across Ontario have written to the provincial government to halt planned changes to the disability definition used to assess eligibility for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), a social assistance program for low-income Ontarians with disabilities. Over 80 organizations including health care providers, legal clinics, disability charities and people with lived experience have united and signed the letter.

The Defend Disability coalition is calling on the Minister for Children, Community and Social Services Todd Smith, to retain the existing definition of disability instead of aligning it with the more restrictive definitions used by the federal government. Members of the coalition have been fielding 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.

It is widely speculated that the province is planning to move to a definition more closely aligned to the Canada Pension Plan – Disability (CPP-D) program, which often does not provide benefits for people with significant episodic disabilities.

A restricted definition means many people with disabilities living on low income who qualify today will not be eligible for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). “Social assistance rates for both OW and ODSP are alarmingly low, but those on ODSP currently receive slightly more. This extra cash is essential for people with disabilities to manage their condition. If people are prevented from accessing this extra support the health of people in need will go from bad to worse,” says Andrea Hatala, co-chair of the ODSP Coalition.

Despite the government announcing its social assistance review over a year ago, little has been shared with stakeholders on their plans and there is widespread concern among the community. The months since then have been characterized by limited communication and engagement with those who will be impacted by these reforms.

“We’ve been told that people already receiving ODSP will be “grand-parented” into a new program, but we don’t know if current recipients will face the existing or future definition of disability when their case is periodically reviewed. This lack of clarity is heightening stress,” says Michaela Beder- a Psychiatrist with Health Providers Against Poverty (HPAP), an alliance of health care providers working to eliminate poverty and reduce health inequities.

For more information please visit defenddisability.ca