

Ontario's Social Assistance "Modernization": Concerns and Considerations

The Government of Ontario recently released [Recovery & Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation](#), which includes a number of changes to Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Their stated goal is to “modernize the system so those who rely on social assistance can get the help they need.” That said, advocates are concerned about a series of policy gaps that could put social assistance recipients at risk.

To start the transformation, the government put forward [Bill 276](#), which is the first proposed change to the *Ontario Works Act* since it was established 23 years ago. This Act establishes OW program eligibility, appeals procedures and administration. It is critical that any changes to OW reflect the perspectives of people with disabilities. Here is a summary of gaps in Bill 276 and the proposed social assistance modernization.

Life Stabilization is Not Adequately Addressed

The province's vision for social assistance and Bill 276 both mention life stabilization supports, which refer to services like housing, child care, and mental health supports. Although access to these supports is critical, there are three concerns that need to be addressed:

- People's lives cannot be stabilized without increasing social assistance rates, which are currently frozen at \$733 per month for a single individual on OW. Clients cannot afford their most basic needs, such as food and shelter, when they are living more than 50% below the poverty line.
- Under Bill 276, clients will be required to “participate in prescribed employment and life stabilization assistance activities.” This may allow the service delivery agent to compel clients to participate in life stabilization activities or risk losing their benefits. It is critical that the province clarify in the associated regulations that clients must choose to participate in life stabilization activities and that they will not face a loss of benefits.
- There is no clear plan to show how local service delivery agents will be able to coordinate life stabilization services that are notoriously in short supply, such as affordable housing, counselling and robust mental health services. Adding names to years-long waiting lists will not stabilize lives. The province needs to invest appropriately in these vital services to ensure adequate access.

Delivery Partners Lack Clarity and Resources

Currently, the province administers ODSP and municipalities administer OW. The province plans to centralize and automate eligibility and financial benefits at the provincial level and download OW and ODSP service provision to the municipalities. Given Ontario's diversity, it is unclear how maintaining consistency across municipalities will be balanced with local responsiveness. Other challenges include:

- Local governments may be forced to absorb the cost of certain benefits or services within their existing budgets. For example, OW caseworkers, who are now paid for by municipalities, may be tasked with supporting ODSP clients as well. This could mean an expansion of the municipal caseload and new skills training, without a clear funding commitment for these responsibilities.

- Bill 276 allows the province to assign a service delivery partner to more than one location, risking a service delivery model that is less locally appropriate and locally informed. For example, the City of Toronto could be assigned management of all clients in Peel.
- Once the transformation is complete, clients will access income supports through the province, life stabilization supports through municipalities and employment supports through a new provider that could be a private corporation, as is currently being piloted in Peel region. The province has not set out a clear plan for integrating these three essential pillars of support or demonstrated how this will result in a more streamlined process for the client or delivery partner.

Digitizing and Centralizing Services May Exclude Vulnerable Populations

The government proposes a centralized intake system in which certain cases will be automated and those with more complex eligibility will be referred to local offices for assessment. This transformation will increasingly rely on the use of digital services. This may lead to significant barriers for clients and applicants:

- Despite recent investments, many rural communities lack adequate broadband coverage and [the cost of data is on the rise](#). This is also an issue in urban centres; [52% of low-income households in Toronto](#) lack adequate internet access. Social assistance rates have never been adjusted to account for digital access. Without first correcting this technological deficit, some clients may lose access to essential benefits and services, which puts their financial security, health and wellbeing at risk.
- While centralizing intake may result in faster access to a cheque for certain individuals, it could also be less responsive to individual needs and create linguistic and literacy barriers. Digital technology is not automatically neutral; potential biases need to be addressed to ensure equitable access.

Next Steps

As the government considers its plans for social assistance transformation and Bill 276, it is imperative that the diverse voices and perspectives of OW and ODSP clients are centred in decision making. We call on the Government of Ontario to clarify and respond to the concerns outlined above to ensure that the social assistance transformation enshrines dignity, self-determination, and financial stability for clients, with particular attention to the needs of people living with disabilities.

About Defend Disability

Formed in 2018, Defend Disability is an advocacy group composed of people with lived experience of disability and poverty, frontline health providers, social policy experts, legal practitioners, health-specific NGOs, community agencies and anti-poverty and disability rights advocates, defending the rights and dignity of people living with disabilities. For more information, visit Defenddisability.ca.