

October 5, 2022

VIA EMAIL ([MinisterMCCSS@ontario.ca](mailto:MinisterMCCSS@ontario.ca))



The Honourable Merrilee Fullerton, MPP  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
438 University Avenue, 7th Floor  
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Dear Minister Fullerton,

On behalf of Defend Disability, congratulations on your re-appointment as Minister of Children, Community and Social Services. We look forward to working with you to raise people living with disabilities out of poverty.

As you know, we are an advocacy group composed of people with lived experience of disability and poverty and interdisciplinary experts including frontline health providers, policy analysts, legal practitioners, and health-specific anti-poverty and disability rights advocates. We advocate for adequate and affordable housing, healthcare, social and income supports, accommodating workplaces and food security.

We are writing to you today to urge you and your government to address an urgent need. We understand that a 5% increase to ODSP and indexation to inflation is an important and genuine first step. We are asking that you go further than currently planned with new increases to Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefit rates. We believe that you should also extend increases to Ontario Works (OW). The purpose of this letter is to explain why we believe further action is needed immediately.

**ODSP rates are badly eroded**

The 5% increase to ODSP benefit rates is a positive step in the right direction. In addition, your government's extension of the LIFT non-refundable tax credit will help low-income individuals and families who have taxable income and qualify. However, more needs to be done.

These investments do not address the fact that ODSP rates have been eroded by inflation. In 1995, the ODSP single rate was \$930 a month. If that rate had kept up with inflation since that year, the rate would now be \$1,621 a month, 32% higher than the current rate of \$1,228.

The challenge posed by the current rates is clear when they are compared to other groups. Low-income seniors receive \$518 more per month overall than an ODSP client and child benefit recipients have a higher threshold than ODSP clients before clawback. Even if people are able to work on ODSP, they remain trapped in poverty because of low benefit rates and high clawbacks.

### **There is a life-threatening crisis for ODSP recipients**

Many in the disability community and media have expressed and reported concerns about the disturbing rise of people who rely on social assistance rates turning to the Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) program. For those who cannot work due to their disabilities, their lives have become so threadbare that drastic options appear necessary. This should be deeply concerning. Social assistance programs are meant to provide adequate income to individuals and families in need of basic life necessities. When social assistance rates are so low that a person feels that death is a more viable alternative to trying to survive on them, our systems are failing.

### **OW rates also require investment**

We are also concerned that there has been no announcement to increase the OW benefit rates. In 1995, OW rates were reduced by 21.6% resulting in a single rate of \$520 per month. Even if that reduced rate had been indexed, the rate would now be \$907 per month, 24% higher than the current single rate of \$733 per month. Again, we see that benefit levels are declining in real terms.

OW rates have eroded to a point that a person cannot realistically pay for the basic necessities of housing and food. There is no jurisdiction in Ontario where those needs can be met at the current benefit rates. It also leaves aside critical needs including non-OHIP covered medical supplies, digital access and transportation. Lack of access to these services prevents any meaningful life stabilization and the ability to successfully seek and maintain employment. Many people who rely on OW live with disabilities or acquire a disability while trying to survive on benefit rates that leave them in destitution.

### **Higher rate increases are necessary and achievable**

Defend Disability, along with many other organizations across the province, have called for the Ontario government to immediately increase ODSP and OW rates and index both to inflation. An effective plan would raise those rates to at least reach the poverty line, which is roughly double the current rates. We recognize that a single increase of that size is unlikely, but a more substantial increase, of at least 10%, to both OW and ODSP, would be a sound next step, followed by scheduled above-inflation increases in future years to bring people with disabilities out of poverty.

An immediate 10% increase is economically manageable in the current context. As the caseload statistics show, ODSP caseloads are 2.5% lower and OW caseloads are 14% lower than the caseloads at the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020. With the near \$800 million in savings to social assistance costs during the pandemic, and an expected cost of \$1 billion for a 10% increase, a 10% increase for both OW and ODSP is well within range.

We strongly believe that those savings should be reinvested back into the social assistance programs to better peoples' lives with higher benefit rates and stronger disability supports. It is unclear how many people benefited from investments to the now-ended Social Service Relief Fund, and people with disabilities cannot wait for the Canada Disability Benefit, which is conceivable years away from being implemented.

Further, as Feed Ontario outlined in 2019, the cost of not addressing poverty in terms of loss of tax revenues, and increased health and justice system costs, is between \$27.1 - \$33 billion per year (<https://feedontario.ca/research/cost-of-poverty-2019/>). For cost effectiveness and to provide dignity for people who live with disabilities and in poverty, we ask that you do more immediately.

Members of Defend Disability would be happy to meet with you to further discuss our concerns and how we can work with you to implement progressive policy. We appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to hearing from you.

Congratulations, again, on your re-appointment. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Defend Disability  
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