

**HEALTH  
PROVIDERS  
AGAINST  
POVERTY**

**November 22, 2018**

**For Immediate Release:**

This afternoon, the Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services Lisa MacLeod announced the Conservative government's plan to reform social assistance in Ontario. Major changes include:

1. A plan to improve employment supports, with a greater focus on outcomes.
2. A change to earnings allowances: for ODSP, a discontinuation of monthly income reporting requirements, with an increased annual earnings exemption from \$2400 to \$6000 per year for ODSP. For OW, a continuation of monthly income reporting, with an exemption increase from \$200/month to \$300/month (\$2400 to \$3600 per year). Both programs will clawback 75% of all income after the exemption limit, an increase from the current 50% clawback.
3. A partnership with the Ministry of Health to offer mental health and addictions supports for those on Ontario Works.
4. Priority access to supportive housing and childcare supports, with more details forthcoming.
5. A reorientation of front line case workers away from policing clients, and towards working with clients on individual action plans.
6. A change of the definition of "disability" for the ODSP program, to a likely more restrictive definition, in line with federal government guidelines.

These changes will be rolled out over the next year and a half, with pilot projects starting in the coming months.

Many of these changes, if implemented properly, will provide new support to those living on social assistance, and could be a step in the right direction towards lifting people out of poverty. While we are encouraged by some of these initial announcements, we await further details on the nature and feasibility of these programs.

There is value in investing in job supports, and this is a necessary piece of poverty reduction. Unfortunately, this government has dismantled worker protections, cut paid sick days, and frozen the minimum wage, making employment a more dangerous and ineffective pathway to income security.

Expanding the amount of income a client can earn while on social assistance could allow them to re-enter the workforce on their terms and reduce the punitive nature of our social assistance system. The increase in the clawback, however, will mean that clients will be cut off at a lower level of income under the new system than the old. This will result in a disincentive to work, as people struggle to maintain the supports social assistance provides.

We are encouraged that the ministry has recognized possible barriers to income security such as mental health, inadequate housing, and unmet childcare needs. Interventions in these areas can certainly help to break the cycles of poverty we see today. If we reorient front line staff towards more focused intake assessments and action planning, it is crucial that this is done cooperatively with the client to understand their barriers and identify their needs to truly support them, and not as a way to further punish and restrict their services.

Health Providers Against Poverty (HPAP) is extremely concerned with the proposed adjustment to the definition of disability for the Ontario Disability Support Program. If this new

definition is similar to what is used by the Canada Pension Plan Disability program, this will very significantly restrict eligibility to disability supports in our province, notably for those individuals struggling with mental illness. The positive changes discussed above will mean very little if Ontarians are unable to access them.

Discussion of previous cuts to social assistance rates and the cancellation of the basic income pilot was noticeably absent from the announcements today. Reducing OW and ODSP rate increases to only 1.5% will keep clients in deep poverty. It is below the rate of inflation and is simply not enough. As healthcare providers, we know that income is the single most important social factor contributing to the health of Ontarians. If our patients live in poverty, it makes it harder for us to do our job to keep them healthy, leading to shorter life expectancies, higher rates of mental illness, and more chronic disease such as diabetes and cancer. Over [800 hard-working healthcare providers and 30 prominent organizations](#) in our province recently raised the alarm about the serious health implications of these low social assistance rates, and of the great scientific loss of prematurely ending the basic income pilot. We are disappointed to see this lack of income adequacy and are concerned about the toll it will continue to take on the health of our patients and our already overburdened healthcare system.

While the announcements today included some encouraging reforms for those on social assistance, we remain concerned about this government's plan for welfare reform. Health Providers Against Poverty Ontario calls for the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services to:

1. Reverse the decision to change the definition of disability for the Ontario Disability Support Program and ensure all current recipients of ODSP remain on ODSP, and if they are due for medical review, that their medical review be based on the current ODSP definition of disability.
2. Ensure that the investments and supports announced today are implemented cooperatively with clients, with a focus on understanding their needs and barriers to income security.
3. Ensure the new system is truly client-centered, meaning nobody sees a reduction or elimination of already inadequate benefits due to inability to comply with system-imposed rules. The focus should be support and encouragement, rather than policing and coercion.
4. Allow individuals to build their own cushions for remaining out of poverty, by allowing them to keep their retirement savings, in RRSPs and TFSAs, intact while receiving social assistance.
5. Ensure any computerized decisions to reduce or restrict benefits are personally reviewed to avoid vulnerable individuals from losing essential benefits without due process.
6. Restore the previously planned 3% increase in social assistance rates, recognizing this is only a small step towards bringing people out of deep poverty.
7. Resume the basic income pilot to its completion.

Health Providers Against Poverty would welcome the opportunity to work with the government, through participation in any consultations that will be done, to continue the important work of welfare reform and income security for all.

Health Providers Against Poverty Ontario

For Media Inquiries: [hpagainstopoverty@gmail.com](mailto:hpagainstopoverty@gmail.com) or @HPAP\_Ontario on Twitter.