



INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE
Centre d'action pour la sécurité du revenu

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VIA EMAIL (todd.smithco@pc.ola.org)

June 3, 2021

Honourable Todd Smith

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

Dear Minister Smith:

RE: Immediate deferral of overpayment collection for social assistance recipients

The Income Security Advocacy Centre is a community legal clinic with a mandate to advance the rights and interests of low-income Ontarians. We write this open letter to request an immediate deferral of collection of all social assistance overpayments during the pandemic.

Under Ontario's social assistance system, a single person receives only \$733 per month from Ontario Works (OW)ⁱ or \$1,169 if they are a person living with a disability and qualify for the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).ⁱⁱ It is well-documented that these programs are inadequately fundedⁱⁱⁱ and many recipients live in poverty.^{iv}

The ongoing pandemic and emergency measures have put unprecedented pressure on social assistance recipients. Deferral of overpayments is consistent with the program's objectives of accountability to the province's taxpayers. It is also consistent with the program's objectives of serving the needs of Ontario's poorest and most vulnerable. This includes people with disabilities, many of whom have plunged deeper into debt, have increased costs due to the pandemic, have difficulty accessing services due to lockdown measures and whose physical and mental health is deteriorating.

As a result of the pandemic, there are three reasons that an immediate and emergency deferral of collection of all social assistance overpayments is necessary.

1. **First, COVID-19 and lockdown measures have had a devastating effect on the physical and mental health of social assistance recipients.** Social assistance recipients are reporting worse physical health and those with pre-existing mental and physical illness are experiencing severe deterioration of their mental health as a result of pandemic.^{v,vi} For many ODSP recipients who are immunocompromised, doctors have told them to isolate because they are at

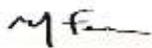
greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and at risk of poorer health outcomes from COVID-19. As a result, people with disabilities and chronic health conditions have increased anxiety, stress and despair associated with concerns about becoming infected, COVID-19-induced financial hardship, and increased social isolation as a result of adhering to strict protective measures.^{vii} During the third wave, these fears have been shown to be well-founded, as the growth of COVID-19 variants is nearly 44 per cent in groups with the lowest income level.^{viii}

2. **Second, social assistance recipients experience profound and increased hurdles in access to services, food and housing during the pandemic.** With the economic downturn and pandemic related lockdown, access to grocery stores, libraries, drop in centers and food charities is more complicated or unavailable. This is a particularly difficult situation for immunocompromised people, a group overrepresented among ODSP recipients. ODSP recipients' overall health and functionality have worsened since the pandemic due to disruptions to healthcare and community support services and pandemic restrictions. Regular medical appointments, physiotherapy, homecare, rehabilitation, medical testing unrelated to COVID-19, and counselling services have been disrupted.^{ix} In addition, the pandemic has meant the reduction of informal care, such as friends and family driving to appointments and helping with household services and personal care. Given ODSP recipients' dependence on treatment and service to manage and treat the effects of their disabilities, ODSP recipients are struggling with serious illnesses in isolation, and their overall function has suffered.
3. **Third, the pandemic has caused the financial situation of social assistance recipients to worsen, as a result of increased costs of living through the pandemic.** These include housing costs based on average market rents, utility costs, the increased cost of a nutritious food basket and groceries,^x transportation, essential communication devices including telephone and internet,^{xi} personal protective equipment, delivery services, and extra costs that people with disabilities experience based on their specific needs. While pandemic income support and payment deferral programs have been rolled out for some Ontarians, such as mortgage deferral programs and federal supports, social assistance recipients have had limited access to important programs such as the Federal Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which provided \$2000 monthly. In a recent study, over half of OW/ODSP recipients reported they were falling behind on their bills since the beginning of the pandemic.^{xii} At the same time, more than a third of Canadians with disabilities reported losing their job due to COVID-19, while 54% said they had less disposable income to meet some of their most essential needs.^{xiii} While stores are closed, many are not able to access basic goods because they do not have a credit card and/or they are not able to effectively manage online services. Bargain shopping between stores has become difficult, if not impossible. Going forward, social assistance recipients will continue to have less disposable income because the cost of basic needs will continue to increase as a result of the pandemic.^{xiv}

Social assistance is a safety net for people who fall on difficult times. Never has that help been more imperative than it is now, during a global pandemic. Yet, at a time when support from social assistance is most needed, the program has doubled the rate of overpayment recovery in many cases. The current prescribed 10% rate of recovery of most new overpayments has compounded and exacerbated the hardship recipients are already facing due to the pandemic. We share your concerns that many social assistance recipients are falling even further below the poverty line, living in substandard housing or worse, experiencing homelessness, while living with increased food insecurity and in poor health.

We urge you to take immediate action and ensure that the most vulnerable Ontarians are not left behind. During the ongoing pandemic, immediate and emergency deferral of overpayments is consistent with the program's objectives of accountability to the province's taxpayers and serving the needs of Ontario's poorest and most vulnerable people with disabilities. **We call on your Ministry to immediately defer collection of all social assistance overpayments until the pandemic is fully over.** Deferral of collection of social assistance overpayments is an immediate, simple and effective way to provide a lifeline to the grim reality of low income and people with disabilities who are unable to meet their needs.

Yours very truly,
INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE



Melinda Ferlisi
Executive Director

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ⁱ [Ontario Works Act \(1997\)](https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/97o25b). O. Reg 134/93, s. 41, 42. Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/97o25b>.

ⁱⁱ [Ontario Disability Support Program Act \(1997\)](https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/97o25b). O. Reg. 222/98, s.30, 31. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/97o25b>; *Ontario Works Act*

ⁱⁱⁱ See Laidley, Jennefer and Hannah Aldridge (November 2020). *Welfare in Canada*, 2019. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2019.pdf, p. 57.

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- ^{iv} The Market Basket Measure “is a measure of low income based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living. It includes the costs of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other expenses.” See Statistics Canada (November 27, 2015). *Market Basket Measure (2011 base)*. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75f0002m/2013002/mbm-mpc-eng.htm>
- ^{iv} In Toronto, OW recipients live at 54% of the Deep Poverty Line (75% MBM) and ODSP recipients live at 86% of the Deep Poverty Line (75% MBM). Both of these numbers are well below the poverty line. See Daily Bread Food Bank (2020). *Who’s Hungry 2020 Beyond COVID-19: Building A Future Without Poverty*. Daily Bread Food Bank. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Whos-Hungry-Report-2020.pdf>, p. 15.
- ^v Ferdosi, Mohammad et al. (2021). “COVID and Physical and Mental Health.” *COVID Economic and Social Effects Study CESES*. McMaster University. Retrieved May 16, 2021, from <https://labourstudies.mcmaster.ca/research/impact-of-covid-19/factsheet-6-health-and-covid-march-2021.pdf>.
- ^{vi} Pettinicchio, David, Michelle Maroto, Lei Chai, and Martin Lukk (2021, February 21). [Findings from an online survey on the mental health effects of COVID-19 on Canadians with disabilities and chronic health conditions](#), *Disability and Health Journal*. Retrieved May 18, 2021, from 101085, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2021.101085>.
- ^{vii} Pettinicchio, David, Michelle Maroto, Lei Chai, and Martin Lukk (2021, February 21). [Findings from an online survey on the mental health effects of COVID-19 on Canadians with disabilities and chronic health conditions](#), *Disability and Health Journal*. Retrieved May 18, 2021, from 101085, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2021.101085>.
- ^{viii} Chagla, Zain, Huiting Ma, Beate Sander, Stefan D. Baral, and Sharmistha Mishra (2021, May 8). [Characterizing the disproportionate burden of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern among essential workers in the Greater Toronto Area, Canada](#), *medRxiv*. Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.03.22.21254127>.
- ^{ix} Statistics Canada. “StatCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada, The changes in health and well-being of Canadians with long-term conditions or disabilities since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.” Retrieved May 17, 2021, from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00082-eng.htm>.
- ^x Daily Bread Food Bank (2020). *Who’s Hungry 2020 Beyond COVID-19: Building A Future Without Poverty*. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Whos-Hungry-Report-2020.pdf>, p. 15.
- ^{xi} In Ontario, 14% of foodbank users named phone/internet costs as the reason to miss a meal. Feed Ontario (2020). *Hunger Report 2020: The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Bank Use in Ontario*. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Hunger-Report-2020-Food-Bank-Digital.pdf>, p. 14.
- ^{xii} Ferdosi, Mohammad et al. (2021). “Financial Well Being and COVID” *COVID Economic and Social Effects Study CESES*. McMaster University. Retrieved May 16, 2021 from <https://labourstudies.mcmaster.ca/research/impact-of-covid-19/financial-well-being-covid>.
- ^{xiii} Statistics Canada. “StatCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada, The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian families of children with disabilities.” Retrieved May 17, 2021, from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00066-eng.htm>.
- ^{xiv} Food price increases are expected to be between 3% to 5% with the highest increase up to 6.5% for meat and vegetables. See Dalhousie University, University of Guelph, University of Saskatchewan and University of British Columbia. *Canada’s Food Price Report 11th Edition 2021*. Retrieved February 11, 2021, from [https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agri-food/Food%20Price%20Report%202021%20-%20EN%20\(December%202021\).pdf](https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agri-food/Food%20Price%20Report%202021%20-%20EN%20(December%202021).pdf), p. 4.