

April 7, 2020

Hon. Todd Smith
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

Income Security in the Time of COVID-19

Dear Minister Smith,

We are an umbrella group of low-income Ontarians, health care providers, and other organizations. We call on you to ensure the most vulnerable members of our Province have meaningful income security during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused illness, deaths and immense economic disruption and undermined the income security of many in Ontario. While federal and provincial governments have taken positive steps to provide additional income support during the pandemic, many low-income Ontarians are still falling through the cracks. If we are to weather this storm together, we must ensure that nobody in Ontario is left behind.

We ask for the following changes that will help low-income Ontarians, whose vulnerability to ill health during this emergency has worsened. We urge you not to wait any longer. The income support to our most vulnerable population is needed now.

Raise the Social Assistance Rates

First, social assistance rates should be immediately increased. These rates are far below the poverty line, and are less than the cost of food and housing alone. In the past year, the rates were not increased to keep up with inflation and are insufficient for coping with additional needs during a pandemic.

A single person in financial need, for instance, can receive up to a total of \$733 per month from Ontario Works. If that person qualifies as a person with a disability, they can receive up to \$1,169 from the Ontario Disability Support Program. These rates are far below the poverty line of \$1,767 per month, which contributes to food insecurity, poor health, and the current homelessness crisis – a recipe for disaster during COVID-19.

Raising the rates would also lift up many Ontarians affected by the pandemic who do not currently qualify for income support. As a result of COVID-19, many people will struggle to get by when their incomes fall dramatically to hover just above the current

inadequate rates. With a rate increase, these individuals and families who may not be eligible for federal emergency benefits could become eligible for social assistance.

Although Ontario has announced the availability of additional funds for discretionary benefits, this is simply not enough. It requires social assistance recipients to individually request overworked caseworkers for an unknown and entirely discretionary amount of additional funds to cover specific expenses like cleaning supplies. It is too uncertain, hard-to-access, and limited to be of any meaningful benefit to low-income Ontarians.

Substantially raising the rates, by contrast, is a broad-reaching, transparent, and long-term solution. It is the right thing to do ensure that everyone is able to feed and clothe themselves and live with health and basic human dignity.

Exempt Federal Benefits from Clawback

Second, earning exemptions for social assistance should be expanded. Currently, any income received from sources other than employment is generally deducted dollar-for-dollar from social assistance benefits. This prevents low income Ontarians from fully benefitting from Employment Insurance (EI) or the newly announced Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) at this critical time. We ask that these sources of income be exempt from clawback.

Federal income support programs are meant to benefit all Canadians who are affected by a global pandemic. The clawback effectively benefits Ontario's coffers. The Ontario government should not deprive low-income Ontarians from much-needed federal benefits. Doing so would blunt Canada's effort to inject money into our struggling national economy and hurt those most vulnerable to the pandemic.

We urge that all federal earnings replacement programs be immediately exempt from clawback. Certain other federal benefits, like the Canada Child Benefit, are already exempt. Expanding exemptions to EI and CERB would ensure that social assistance recipients who lose their employment can partake like all other Canadians in the assistance offered by our federal government to meet extraordinary expenses.

We appreciate that these are difficult times and are looking forward to your action on these issues.

Sincerely,

List of signatories:

1. Access2all
2. ACORN Canada
3. Action-Logement
4. Advancement of Women Halton
5. Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario

6. Agincourt Community Services Association
7. Alliance for Healthier Communities
8. Anglican Diocese of Niagara
9. ARCH Disability Law Centre
10. Assaulted Women's and Children's Counselor/Advocate Program
11. Banff Avenue Community House
12. Campaign 2000
13. Campaign Against the Cuts to Social Assistance
14. Canadian Buddhist Civil Liberties Association
15. Canadian Buddhist Healthcare Providers
16. Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) Ontario Council
17. Canadian Mental Health Association York Region and South Simcoe
18. Caregivers Action Centre
19. Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation
20. Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic
21. Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre
22. Citizens for Public Justice
23. City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)
24. Clinique juridique francophone d'Ottawa
25. CMHA (Canadian Mental Health Association) Ontario Division
26. CMHA Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk Branch
27. CMHA Champlain East
28. CMHA Cochrane-Timiskaming Branch
29. CMHA Durham Branch
30. CMHA Fort Frances Branch
31. CMHA Grey Bruce Branch
32. CMHA Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge Branch
33. CMHA Halton Region
34. CMHA Hamilton Branch
35. CMHA Kenora Branch
36. CMHA Lambton Kent Branch
37. CMHA Middlesex Branch
38. CMHA Muskoka-Parry Sound
39. CMHA Niagara Branch
40. CMHA Ottawa Branch
41. CMHA Oxford
42. CMHA Peel Branch
43. CMHA Sault Ste. Marie Branch
44. CMHA Simcoe County Branch
45. CMHA Sudbury-Manitoulin Branch
46. CMHA Thunder Bay Branch
47. CMHA Toronto
48. CMHA Waterloo Wellington
49. CMHA Windsor-Essex Branch
50. CMHA York and South Simcoe Branch
51. Collaborative Network to End Exploitation

52. Community Advocacy & Legal Centre
53. Community Food Centres Canada
54. Community Legal Assistance Sarnia
55. Community Legal Clinic - Brant, Haldmand, Norfolk
56. Community Legal Clinic of York Region
57. Community Legal Services of Ottawa
58. COSTI Immigrant Services
59. CUPE Ontario
60. Daily Bread Food Bank
61. Davenport Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre
62. Defend Disability
63. Downsview Community Legal Services
64. Durham Community Legal Clinic
65. EBO Financial Education Centre
66. Enrichment Centre for Mental Health, Belleville
67. Faith in the City
68. Family Service Toronto
69. Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada
70. Good Jobs for All Coalition
71. Guineans United For Status
72. Hamilton Community Legal Clinic
73. Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
74. Health Providers Against Poverty Ontario
75. HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario
76. Houselink Community Homes
77. Income Security Advocacy Centre
78. Jane Finch Community Legal Services
79. Jewish Family Services Ottawa
80. Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul
81. Kingston Community Legal Clinic
82. Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic
83. Labour Community Services
84. Lake Country Community Legal Clinic
85. Lanark County Mental Health
86. Lowertown Community Resource Centre
87. Midwives Collective of Toronto
88. Millennial Womxn in Policy
89. Mississauga Community Legal Services
90. National Coalition Against Poverty Ontario Chapter
91. Naturopathic Doctors for Environmental and Social Trust
92. Neighbourhood Legal Services
93. Neighbourhood Legal Services (London & Middlesex) Inc.
94. Nepean, Rideau and Osgoode Community Resource Centre
95. North Peel & Dufferin Community Legal Services
96. North York Harvest Food Bank

97. OCASI - Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
98. ODSP Action Coalition
99. OHIP for All
100. Older Women's Network
101. Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses
102. Ontario Coalition Against Poverty
103. Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care
104. Ontario Public Health Association
105. Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
106. Open Policy
107. Ottawa Community Food Partnership
108. Ottawa Labour Council
109. Overdose Prevention Ottawa
110. PARC (Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre)
111. Poverty Roundtable Hastings & Prince Edward
112. PROMPT Muskoka's Anti-poverty Group
113. Provincial Council of Women of Ontario
114. Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)
115. Save Your Skin Foundation
116. Scarborough Community Legal Services
117. Schizophrenia Society of Ontario
118. Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services
119. Shelter and Housing Justice Network
120. SKETCH Working Arts
121. Social Assistance Action Committee
122. Social Assistance Coalition of Scarborough (SACS)
123. Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton
124. South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario
125. South Etobicoke Community Legal Services
126. Spinal Cord Injury Ontario
127. Stand Up for Health
128. Street Health
129. Sudbury Community Legal Clinic
130. The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination
131. The Help Centre
132. The Neighbourhood Organization
133. The Office of Ottawa City Councillor Catherine McKenney
134. The Office of Ottawa City Councillor Shawn Menard
135. The Office of Ottawa City Councillor Theresa Kavanagh
136. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
137. The Stop Community Food Centre
138. Voices from the Street
139. West Neighbourhood House
140. West Scarborough Community Legal Services
141. West Toronto Community Legal Services
142. Willowdale Community Legal Services

143. Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
144. Working for Change
145. York North Lyme Disease Support Group
146. YWCA Cambridge
147. YWCA Hamilton
148. YWCA Kitchener-Waterloo
149. YWCA Sudbury
150. YWCA Toronto

[List updated April 27, 2020]