

## Questionnaire Response: Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC)

### 1. Income Adequacy:

**Will your party commit to making sure that the incomes people get when they're on ODSP are enough to afford all the regular costs of living, in addition to long-term needs and the costs of having a disability? What specific steps will you take to make ODSP incomes adequate?**

The Ontario Liberal Party has made a major commitment to transforming social assistance guided by the work of the Commission to Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, the first comprehensive review of social assistance in the province in 20 years.

Our ongoing reform of social assistance is guided by four key objectives:

- Motivate and support people to be successful in the workforce.
- Provide adequate assistance.
- Deliver modern, responsive services.
- Ensure confidence in the system.

The 2014 Wynne Budget proposed to increase our investment in social assistance by continuing to lift the lowest rates and increasing support for individuals with disabilities.

It also planned to simplify employment benefits to provide greater flexibility to meet individual needs, so that we can remove barriers to employment and provide greater support.

Taken together, the first two years of social assistance reform mean:

- People receiving social assistance get more support.
- Increases are targeted to those with the lowest rates, singles without children receiving Ontario Works. They would get a lift of \$50 a month in basic support, taking us halfway to the \$100 lift recommended by the review commission.
- All social assistance clients will have access to a simple, flexible employment benefit that helps with their costs.
- People can earn more without reducing their assistance and can get help from Ontario Works without spending down all of their assets. These changes introduced in the 2013 budget allow earnings of up to \$200 a month with no reduction, and allow singles receiving Ontario Works to retain savings up to \$2500.

Our 2014 Budget also proposed to assist people living in remote northern communities, particularly First Nations, who can face disproportionately high costs for basic necessities like groceries. In addition to our social assistance rate increases, we planned to replace the existing Northern Allowance provided through Ontario Works and ODSP with a Remote Communities Allowance.

The Remote Communities Allowance would represent a \$50 per month increase over the current Northern Allowance for the first person, and a \$25 per month increase for each additional family member. This is an increase of more than 30 per cent for a single individual.

The Commission also said we should do some work to develop an agreed method of determining and setting "adequate" social assistance rates. Right now, there is no agreement on what "adequate" means. We want to come up with a definition of adequacy that people think is fair, and a way of calculating it so that increases to social assistance rates will be more predictable and based on evidence. Ontario Liberals have started working on this already and it's one of the items we'll pursue if given another mandate to govern the province.

Ontario Liberals are proud of the progress we have made and we look forward to continuing to engage with clients, partners, and other stakeholders. Our partners will help us in implementing our most recent changes and further develop our ongoing plan for reform.

**Will your party end the freeze on rate increases for family members of people with disabilities on ODSP?**

We are committed to following the path of transformation which includes targeting rate increases to those in greatest need, supporting success in the workplace, and working toward adequacy for all.

**2. A Dedicated Program for People with Disabilities**

**Will your party commit to maintaining a separate income support program designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities?**

Yes.



After the report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance we heard from many people who are concerned about the possibility of Ontario Works and ODSP being merged into one program. In some cases, they were responding to irresponsible rumours that our plan is focused on cuts – bringing everyone down to the lowest common denominator and forcing everybody to look for work, regardless of their disability.

Those unfounded rumours were causing needless anxiety for vulnerable people. It never was our plan. It never will be. Ontario Liberals are focused on moving toward adequacy for all, and removing obstacles for those who want and are able to work.

Having looked at the idea of a merger of these two programs, our decision was not to go forward with that recommendation. Otherwise put, the Wynne government will maintain a separate support program to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Rather than merging the programs, we will instead focus on making both programs work better at supporting people and helping them find jobs. Ontario Liberals will work with social assistance clients, our staff, our municipal partners, employers, and others regarding ways to provide a seamless and effective service experience.

### **3. Supports for Employment and Social Inclusion:**

#### **What will your party do to support the employment goals of people with disabilities?**

The Ontario Liberal Party is committed to supporting the 1.65 million people in our communities who have a physical, mental, sensory or learning disability -- 63 per cent of whom are aged 15 to 64 — the cohort most likely to be participating in the labour force. We are working to address the challenges they face in securing employment.

For those who also receive social assistance, one part of the solution is to reform social assistance to remove barriers and simplify access to employment. We are committed to do this, consistent with recommendations of the Commission to Review Social Assistance in Ontario.

For example, we have introduced an earnings exemption of \$200 a month. Our 2014 Budget proposed to replace seven separate employment benefits with a single, more flexible benefit program. This would make it easier for clients to

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know what help is available and give caseworkers more flexibility to better meet the unique needs of individual clients.

We will also collaborate with businesses and community employers to correct myths and misconceptions about people with disabilities, address stereotyping and foster partnerships to establish inclusive workplaces. This will be coupled with talent development initiatives that focus on educational attainment, skills training and early experiences with the labour market for people with disabilities, particularly through experiential learning. We will partner with business and commit \$30 million over two years to help more people with disabilities achieve their maximum employment potential.

Our supports and programs that promote hiring people with disabilities include:

- The Partnership Council on Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities, composed of corporate leaders and accessibility change-maker.
- Valuing Ability Campaign: This targeted outreach and marketing initiative will increase awareness of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, and its standards among small and medium-sized enterprises, improve compliance, and highlight tools and resources available to recruit and retain people with disabilities.

**Will your party make eligibility for income supports conditional on whether or not a person works or takes training?**

No. Our approach is to support people with disabilities to achieve the success they desire in the workplace to the extent they are able.

**Will your party create a Social Inclusion Allowance within ODSP and make it available to every ODSP recipient in the province?**

The Social Placement benefit within social assistance helps participants, who are young adults with a developmental disability who want to increase their independence and participation in the community, find employment in community service in public or not-for-profit organizations.

The program is intended to provide recipients with the opportunity to gain valuable skills and work experience to better help them with future employment.

In addition, participants of the program also have access to pools of funds to **Liberal Party**

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help with transportation costs, training costs, and special clothing or equipment. Our proposed consolidation of seven employment benefits into one larger pool will make it easier for clients to access the supports they need to participate in our communities.

We know that we must all do our part to make our communities more inclusive and help people with a developmental disability lead more independent lives. We are always looking at new ways to better promote independence, encourage employment and increase fairness. That is why as part of our proposed \$810 million new investment for developmental services, we will fund projects that promote innovation and support inclusion and employment for people with a developmental disability.

#### **4. Access to ODSP:**

##### **What will your party do to improve access to ODSP?**

As noted above, two of the four objectives guiding our transformation of social assistance are:

- Deliver modern, responsive services.
- Ensure confidence in the system.

The first objective requires that we improve many aspects of customer service. As one example of our commitment to this area, we have made a major investment in replacing legacy computer software with a modern social assistance management system that will deliver improved customer service.

In the first phase of this effort, we introduced online applications, making it unnecessary for many clients to visit an office in order to complete an application. This is a boon to many clients with mobility or other challenges, such as visually impaired clients who may use assistive technology to navigate the Web. Since April 2011 more than 15,000 ODSP applications have been submitted online.

In the second phase, clients will have easy self-serve access to a wide range of information about their cases, and caseworkers will have much improved tools that let them spend less time on administration and more on working effectively with clients.



The second objective, “Ensure confidence in the system,” requires that we continue to increase the transparency and accountability of the system. We are committed to continuing our efforts on this path.

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