

Ontario

[Components of welfare incomes](#)

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[Adequacy of welfare incomes](#)

Components of welfare incomes

Households that qualify for basic social assistance payments also qualify for other financial support including:

- GST/HST credit
- Provincial/territorial tax credits or benefits
- Federal and provincial/territorial child benefits (for households with children)
- Recurring additional social assistance payments (for example, an annual back-to-school allowance)

Together, these combine with basic social assistance payments to form the total welfare income of a household. Households may receive less if they have income from other sources, while some households may receive more if they have special health- or disability-related needs.

The table below shows the value and components of welfare incomes for four household types living in Toronto in 2017.

	Single person considered employable	Single person with a disability	Single parent, one child	Couple, two children
Basic social assistance	\$8,517	\$13,628	\$11,652	\$14,535
Additional SA benefits				
Federal child benefits			\$6,400	\$10,800
Provincial child benefits			\$1,367	\$2,734
GST credit	\$278	\$364	\$702	\$848
Provincial tax credits/benefits	\$666	\$691	\$1,015	\$1,628
Total 2017 income	\$9,461	\$14,682	\$21,136	\$30,545

In Ontario, all of the example households received Ontario Works (OW) except the single person with a disability, who received Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits. Basic social assistance rates increased by 2 per cent in September 2017 for ODSP recipients, and by 2 per cent in October 2017 for OW recipients.

Source: <https://maytree.com/welfare-in-canada/ontario/>

While none of the household types received additional social assistance benefits, they all benefited from the Ontario Trillium Benefit, a provincial tax credit. Households with children also received the Ontario Child Benefit which, in July 2017, increased from \$113 to \$114.83 per month per child.

Total welfare incomes in Ontario ranged from \$9,461 for a single person considered employable to \$30,545 for a couple with two children.

Changes to welfare incomes

There was only one substantive change that affected welfare incomes in Ontario in 2017. This was the first full year that the Canada Child Benefit was paid, resulting in higher welfare incomes for the two household types with children.

The graphs below show how the total welfare incomes for each of the four illustrative household types have changed over time. The values are in constant 2017 dollars, taking into account the effect of inflation.

- In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the welfare incomes of a single person considered employable and a single person with a disability saw regular increases.
- The welfare incomes of single persons considered employable dropped substantially in 1995, due to a cut of 21.6 per cent to benefit rates. For the next 13 years, rates were frozen and continued to erode in value as prices increased. Since 2009, welfare incomes have been gradually increasing, and in 2017, a single person considered employable received up to \$9,461. But this remains notably below the levels of the early 1990s.
- Single persons with disabilities also saw the value of their welfare incomes erode throughout the 1990s to the late 2000s. In 2017, the maximum welfare income for single persons with disabilities stood at \$14,682.
- Welfare incomes for households with children mirrored the pattern of singles, showing early increases followed by a sharp decrease in 1995, a continuing downward trend for the next decade, and then gradual increases.
- The maximum welfare incomes of households with children started to rise in 2015, largely as a result of changes to federal child benefits.
- In 2017, a single parent with a two-year-old child received a maximum of \$21,136 in welfare income. A couple with two children aged 10 and 15 received \$30,545.

Adequacy of welfare incomes

The adequacy of a household's total welfare income can be assessed by comparing it to a set threshold of low income. In Canada there are [three commonly used measures](#):

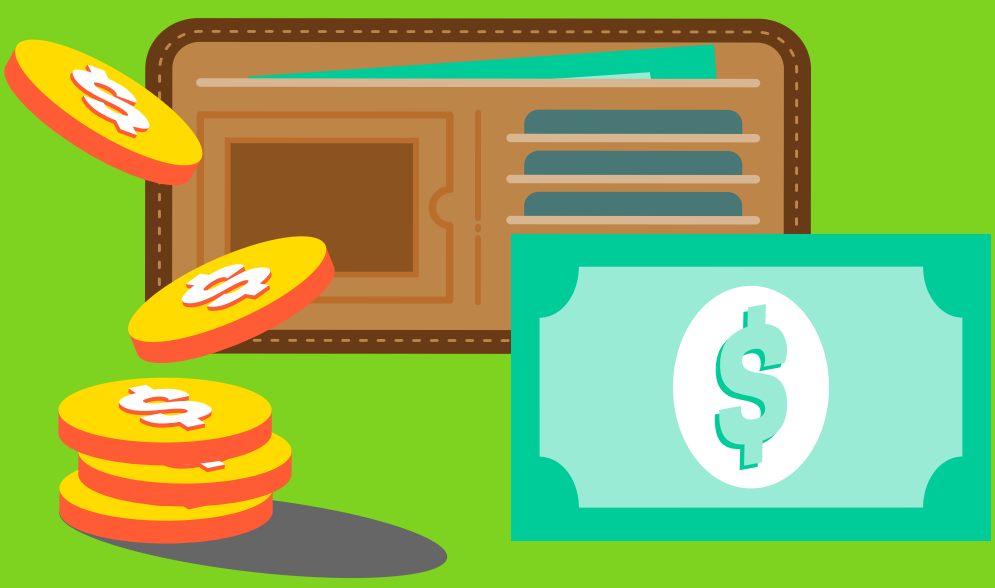
1. The Market Based Measure of poverty (MBM), which the National Poverty Strategy set as the official poverty measure, identifies households whose disposable income is less than the cost of a basket of goods and services that represent a basic standard of living.
2. The Low Income Measure of poverty (LIM) identifies households whose income is substantially below what is typical in society (less than half of the median income).
3. The Low Income Cut-Off measure (LICO) identifies households that are likely to spend a disproportionately large share of their income on the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.

The table below shows how welfare incomes in Ontario for the four household types compared to the three low income thresholds (after tax). The LICO and MBM thresholds are for Toronto, the largest city in Ontario.

	Single person considered employable	Single person with a disability	Single parent, one child	Couple, two children
Total welfare income	\$9,461	\$14,682	\$21,136	\$30,545
<i>MBM</i>				
MBM threshold (Toronto)	\$21,069	\$21,069	\$29,796	\$42,138
Welfare income minus MBM threshold	-\$11,609	-\$6,387	-\$8,660	- \$11,593
Welfare income as % of MBM	45%	70%	71%	72%
<i>LIM</i>				
LIM threshold (Canada-wide)	\$23,020	\$23,020	\$32,555	\$46,039
Welfare income minus LIM threshold	-\$13,559	-\$8,337	- \$11,419	- \$15,494
Welfare income as % of LIM	41%	64%	65%	66%
<i>LICO</i>				

LICO threshold (Toronto)	\$20,998	\$20,998	\$25,555	\$39,701
Welfare income minus LICO threshold	-\$11,538	-\$6,316	-\$4,419	-\$9,156
Welfare income as % of LICO	45%	70%	83%	77%

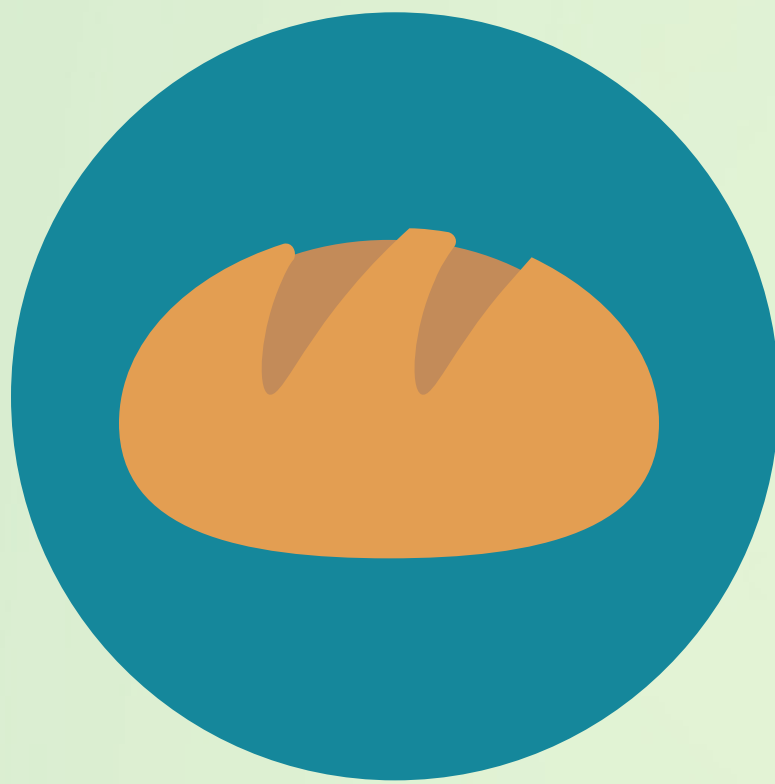
For each household type the maximum welfare income fell below all of the low income measures. As a proportion the biggest gap was for single adults considered employable — their welfare income was 45 per cent or less of the low income thresholds. The smallest gap was for the single parent with one child, ranging between 65 and 83 per cent of the low income thresholds.



Income Security in Ontario



Current social assistance rates in Ontario are far too low to pay for basic necessities like food, housing, transportation, and clothing.



1997

Real income from welfare decreased sharply and continued in a downward trajectory for the next decade.

Although social assistance rates started to rise, they did not keep up with inflation over the next decade.

2005

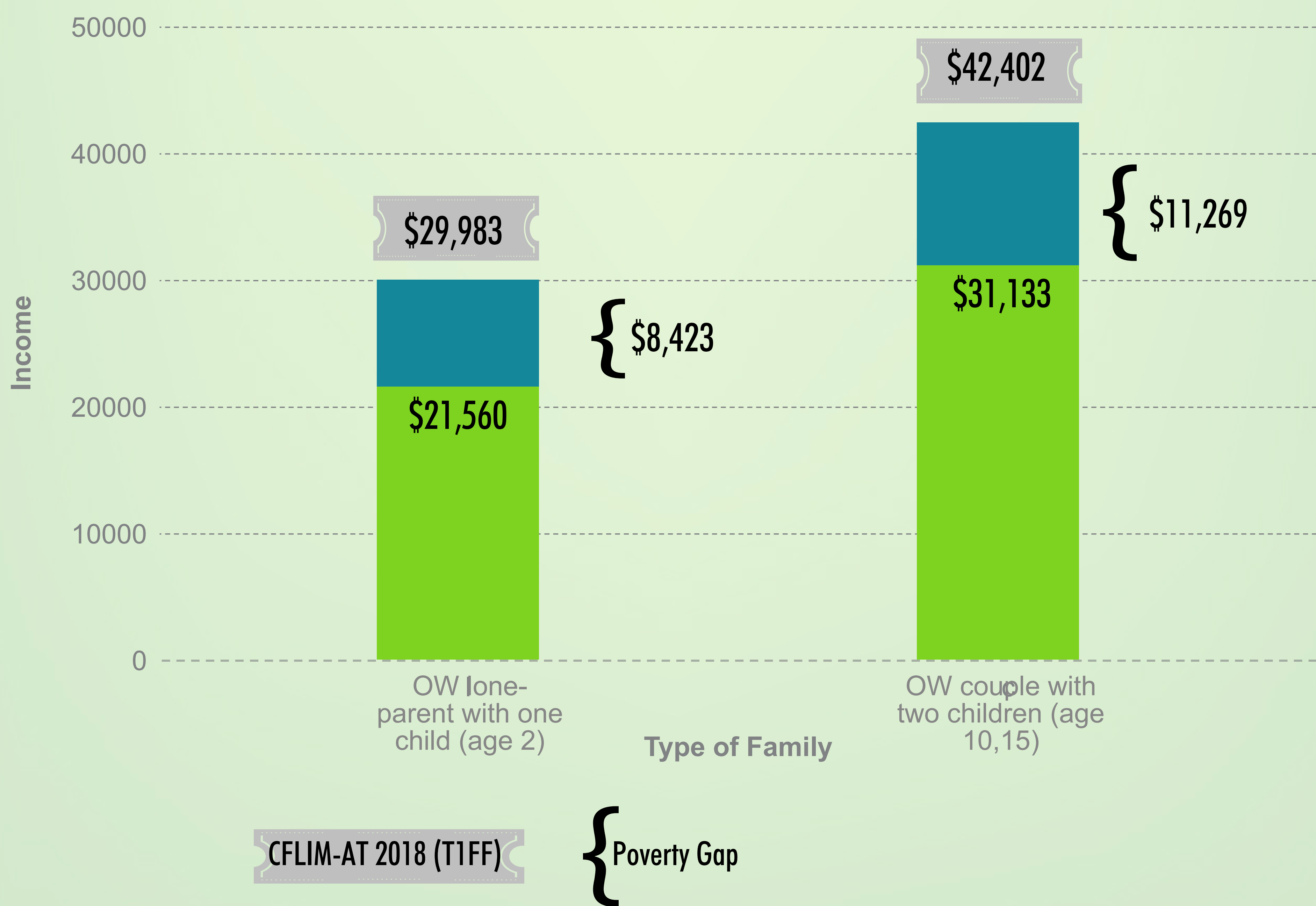
2007

Income for families with children started to rise due to the Ontario Child Benefit.

Incomes for families with children got another bump from the Canada Child Benefit, but welfare income remained stagnant.

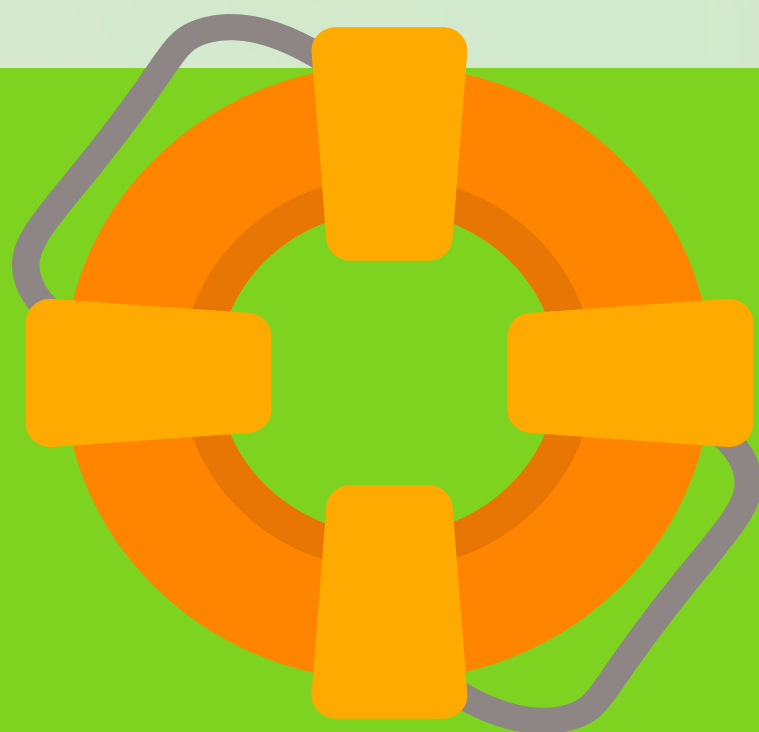
2015

Depth of Poverty for Families in Ontario on OW, 2018



Notes:
(1) Total income includes OW Basic Needs and Maximum Shelter amounts, the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB), Canada Child Benefit (CCB), the Ontario Trillium Benefit, and the G/HST credit. In order to receive child benefits and tax credits, families must have filed their prior years' tax returns. Amounts are best estimates.
(2) Statistics Canada. (2018). Table: 11-10-0017-01. After-tax low income status of census families based on Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT), by family type and family composition, 2016. Please refer to pg. 4-5 in Campaign 2000's national report card, *Bold Ambitions for Child and Family Poverty Eradication*, for more information about Statistic Canada's methodology change and the CFLIM-AT.

Recommendations for a strong social safety net



Significant increases to Ontario Works + Ontario Disability Support Program rates



Ensure all children have access to Ontario Child Benefit and Canada Child Benefit*



Create good jobs with fair wages



Increase the Ontario Child Benefit by \$100 per child in 2019



Families need stable, sufficient incomes to thrive and help lift them out of poverty with dignity and respect because all families deserve strong beginnings

*Access for Indigenous Peoples, people with precarious immigration status, and all those who do not file tax returns.

For more information about sources, visit <https://bit.ly/2KgrMVV>

BUSINESS

07/31/2018 15:29 EDT | Updated 08/29/2018 14:12 EDT

What Is Ontario's Basic Income Pilot Project?

The province planned to give cheques to 4,000 people for three years, with no strings attached.

•

By Emma Paling

BRENT LEWIN/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Basic income, sometimes called guaranteed income or minimum income, is a fixed income that people receive

Ontario's new Progressive Conservative government announced Tuesday that it will scrap the province's basic income pilot project.

The previous Liberal government had launched it to give away free money in the hopes it would make recipients healthier and encourage them to get more education.

The program launched in April 2017 and reached full enrollment with 4,000 participants a year later. Residents of a range of cities and towns — Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Lindsay, Brantford and Brant County — were eligible. Basic income, sometimes called guaranteed income or minimum income, is a fixed income that people receive from the government. Ontario's project is not a universal basic income because it only includes people below a certain income level. Theoretically, a universal basic income would go to every resident, whether they earn \$0 or \$100,000.

How it works

Residents were invited to apply if they were between 18 and 64 years old, had lived in one of the five target areas for at least a year, and lived on less than \$34,000 individually or \$48,000 as a couple.

Single participants get up to \$16,989 a year and couples receive \$24,027. People who are working will see that amount reduced by 50 per cent of their income.

So a person who earns \$20,000 annually would get topped up with \$6,989, bringing their total income to \$26,989. A couple who earns \$35,000 together would get \$6,527, bringing their total income to \$41,527.

The program aims to provide enough money for people to meet their household and health costs.

Why it's different from welfare

Ontario's current social assistance program, Ontario Works, is means-tested, which means that government workers examine every detail of a person's finances to determine their eligibility.

project_a_23492670/

A Thunder Bay mother who's now on basic income told HuffPost Canada that it's less invasive than Ontario Works. Previously, if her parents gave her \$40 or she received a scholarship at school, she'd have to call a case worker and report it, and that amount would be clawed back from her payments. Now, Sherry Mendowegan can accept gifts and awards without worrying that her money to live on will be reduced.

She also receives twice as much money on basic income as she did on Ontario Works.

Welfare programs are designed to tide people over until they find work. Ontario's basic income pilot aims to raise people to a living wage. The province says that 70 per cent of participants have a job of some kind.

This story is part of HuffPost Canada's No Strings Attached project, which follows Thunder Bay's Sherry Mendowegan, Lindsay's Segura family and Hamilton's Jessie Golem on their journeys with the Ontario basic income pilot project and its aftermath. Through them, we will examine the debate over the potential for basic income in a future where precarious work is increasingly common.

The Case for a Guaranteed Income

Lifting People from Poverty: Fairly, Efficiently, & Effectively

The Canadian Welfare System vs Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI)

Canada's current welfare system is complex, intrusive, and inefficient. And inadequate benefit levels trap people in poverty.

A Guaranteed Livable Income (also known as a basic income) would automatically top up the incomes of people living in poverty using direct, automatic payments via the existing tax system.

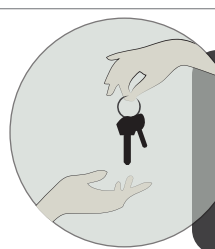
Mary's only option is to apply for welfare.



Mary is a single mother of a young boy. She lost her job last year, has been unable to find work, and has used up all of her Employment Insurance.

A GLI would provide her with a far better option than welfare.

Onerous Criteria vs Minimal Criteria



Before qualifying for welfare, Mary must be completely destitute. She has to liquidate most of her assets, including her vehicle and savings.

If Mary falls on hard times, a GLI would help her temporarily weather the storm with an automatic income top-up while keeping the productive assets needed to leave – and stay off – social assistance.



assets a GLI recipient would be able to keep while still qualifying for assistance

- house
- RRSPs & other savings
- vehicle

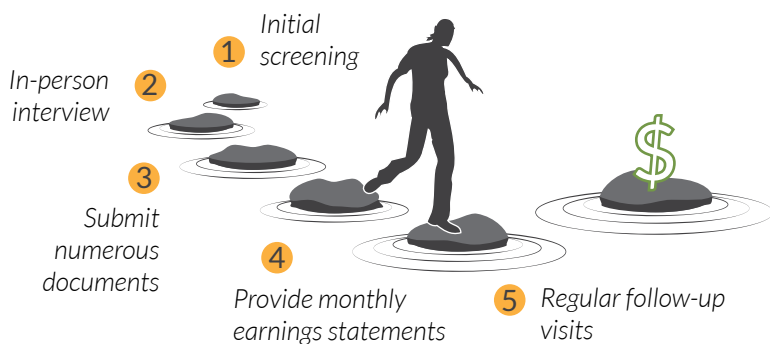
Burdensome Administration vs Administered through Tax System



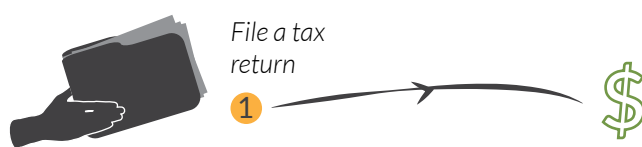
To keep her benefits, Mary has to report regularly in person to a caseworker. She's required to continuously justify her need for social assistance while proving she's looking for work.

Because a GLI would be administered through the tax system, there would be no need for the bureaucracy that oversees the current welfare system. No application, no ongoing monitoring: Mary simply has to fill out a tax return.

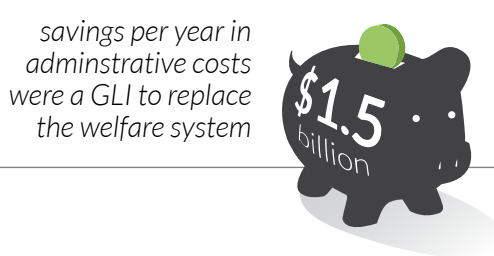
Steps required to get and continue receiving welfare:



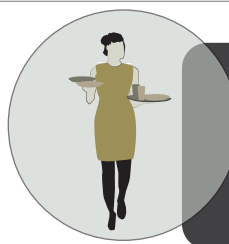
Steps required to receive GLI assistance:



With the complex criteria for qualifying and ongoing monitoring, the system to administer **welfare saps** an incredible amount of time and resources.

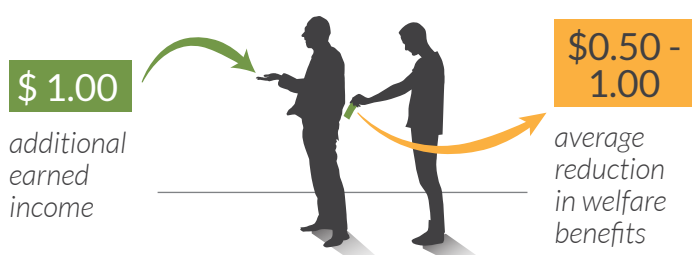


Disincentives to Work vs Incentives to Work



Mary found a part-time job. But because she's earning extra income, her benefits get clawed back significantly.

A GLI encourages Mary to work by giving her the security of an income guarantee – without fear of being worse off by working. She would pay regular tax rates for all income above the poverty line.



In nearly half of poor households in Canada, at least one person has a job.



Getting off of welfare can be extremely difficult. Extra income can mean cuts to:

- social assistance benefits
- subsidized housing
- prescription drugs

And it leads to work-related costs like:

- payroll taxes
- transportation costs
- childcare



A GLI would allow people to look for better jobs or upgrade their education and training.



A GLI would recognize the significant contributions of those not in the labour force, but whose work still brings economic and social value.



Compared to not working at all, people are often **worse off accepting low-paying employment.**

And for those unable to work or to find work, a GLI would **provide a more dignified life.**

Inadequate Rates vs Enough to Live

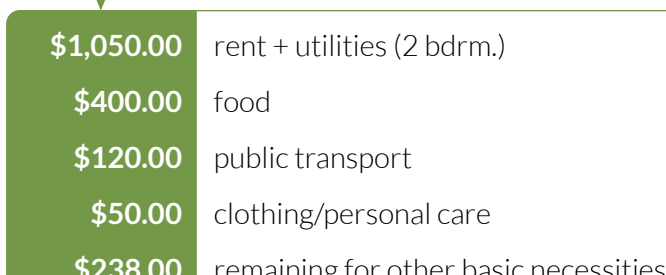
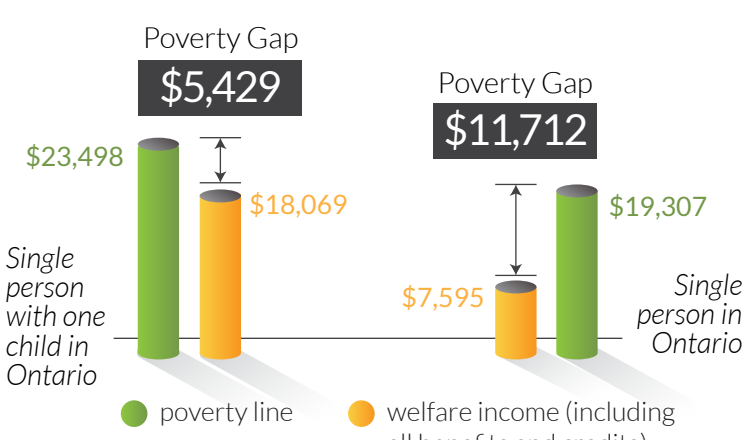


Mary's social assistance isn't enough to provide for her and her son. She's forced to choose between basic necessities.

With a GLI, Mary's income would be enough to ensure she and her son don't have to live below the poverty line. She'd be able to meet her basic needs and those of her son.

No matter how poverty is measured, there's no denying that welfare **rates don't come close to meeting basic needs.**

Amount per month needed for a single person and child to live at the poverty line (\$23,498/yr.)

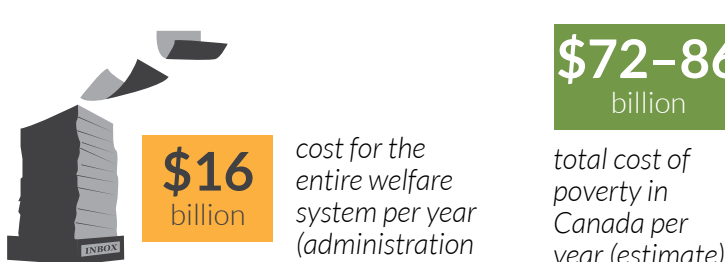
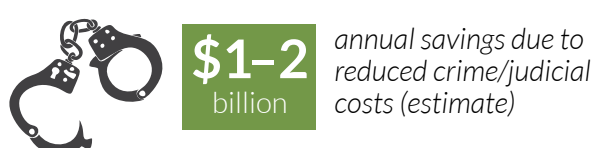


\$1,858 per month is still not much, especially in a larger urban centre, but it's at least enough to ensure an adult and child can get by.

Ineffective vs Effective

Welfare traps millions of people in poverty and takes a significant social and economic toll on society as a whole.

A Guaranteed Livable Income would effectively eliminate poverty, while significantly reducing its many health and social costs.



And putting more income in the pockets of low income earners, who spend their money on necessities, **will boost local economies.**

ONTARIO 360 – POVERTY – TRANSITION BRIEFING

Reforming Ontario's income security programs to reduce poverty and expand opportunity

Issue

Ontario's income security system is failing to meet the needs of many Ontarians with low incomes, contributing to increased poverty and lost opportunities. The incoming government faces decisions on the recommendations made by expert working groups in the Income Security Roadmap.¹

Overview: Income security in Ontario

The provincial government is responsible for a wide range of policies and programs aimed at boosting people's incomes to prevent and reduce poverty. Together with federal programs and contributory programs like CPP and EI, Ontarians receive about \$66 billion annually from income security programs. About one quarter of that comes in provincial programs and tax credits such as social assistance (\$8.5 billion), and the Ontario Child Benefit (\$1.7 billion).²

These programs represent a substantial portion of Ontario's budget and play a critical role in reducing and alleviating poverty for a large number of Ontario households. However, both active policy decisions and neglect have left Ontario's income security policy framework ineffective and inadequate. The current government appointed a trio of expert groups to provide advice to move forward, which produced a detailed ten-year roadmap for reform. While Budget 2018 included some initial measures in the form of modest short-term increases to rates, a commitment to a simplified flat-rate structure, and changes to earnings exemptions, it is largely up to the incoming government to act on the working groups' advice.

This briefing note outlines the core challenges with the current system that merit attention from the incoming government and highlights near-term and longer-term responses.

¹ "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change." Report submitted by the Income Security Reform Working Group, the First Nations Income Security Reform Working Group, and the Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security Reform. Available at: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/income-security-roadmap-change>.

² Ibid.

PROJECT PRINCIPALS

Sean Speer
Project Director,
Ontario 360

Peter Loewen
Director,
School of Public Policy
& Governance

Rudyard Griffiths
Project Chair,
Ontario 360

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The need for reform

The challenges with the current income security system relate to both the design and the delivery of the programs, which combine to ensure that public policies and investments are failing to provide income security for lower-income Ontarians.

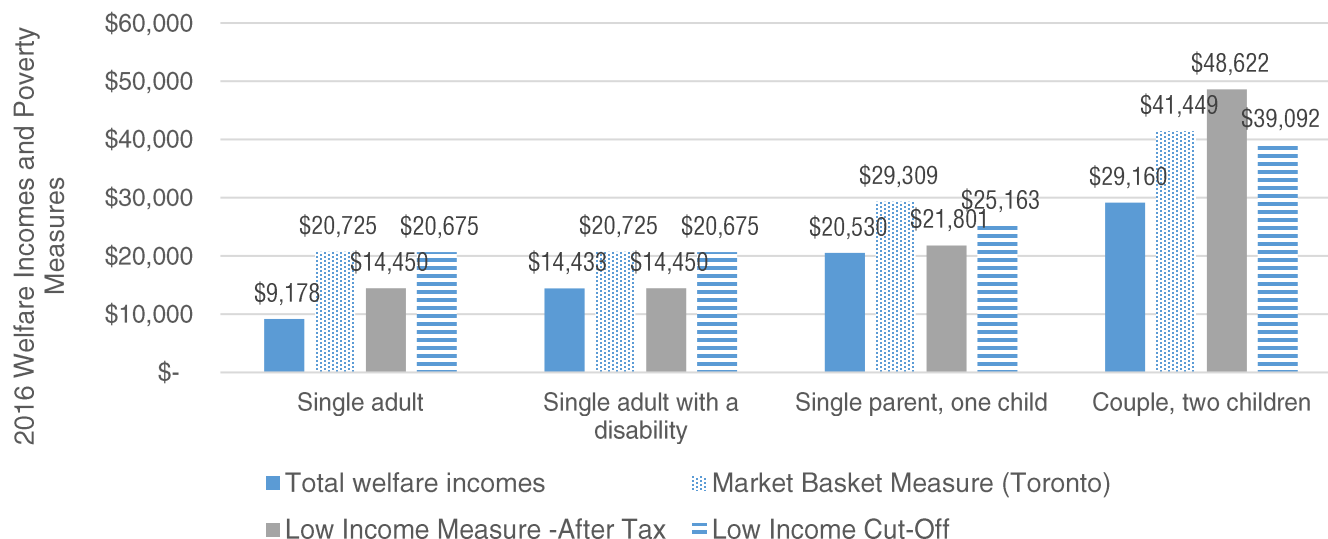
The current system is designed around policing people's lives instead of improving them

- To receive assistance, people applying for Ontario Works have to sign onerous “participation agreements” with detailed requirements about how they search for jobs, or face losing their assistance.
- These rules do not contribute to reducing poverty. They are time consuming for people living in poverty and front-line workers. They cause people who need assistance to lose their benefits for arbitrary reasons or to avoid applying in the first place.
- As people begin to earn more, the income security system acts as a counterweight rather than a boost to their progress. With every dollar earned, people lose 50 cents of social assistance at the same time that other benefits (for example, child benefits) might be clawed back. The loss of medical and drug coverage once people no longer qualify for social assistance is for many a significant risk of financial insecurity.

Current levels of assistance leave people in deep poverty

- By a range of measures, current levels of assistance provided to people in poverty in Ontario fall well short of adequacy.
- When you look at the combination of social assistance with other basic building blocks of the income security system, people are left in deep poverty, in particular single adults.

Ontario's Income Security System and Poverty³



- One cause of this gap is that rates are not set to adjust based on need or inflation by default but are dependent on political decision-making.

The income security system does not account for differences in cost of living throughout the province

- The design of the income security system is not sensitive to significant differences in the cost of living throughout the province.
- People living in poverty in expensive housing markets like Toronto or in remote areas with very high cost of living are not as well-served by the income security system as people in similar situations elsewhere in the province.

The federal-provincial child benefit system over the past 20 years shows how investment in income security can make a substantial positive difference. This transformation shifted income support for children in low-income families out of social assistance to a separate income-tested program. It simplified the system significantly for both families and governments and has been effective

³ Source: Anne Tweddle, Ken Battle and Sherri Torjman. *Welfare in Canada 2016*.
https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2016.pdf.

in reducing child poverty, in large part by ensuring that support was not contingent on complying with a complex set of rules.

But despite longstanding and broad consensus on the need for reform, very little change has followed calls for major transformations by a number of independent commissions in recent years, including the Task Force for Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults in 2006, the Drummond Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services in 2012, and the Lankin-Sheikh Commission on the Review of Social Assistance in the same year. With a new detailed ten-year roadmap for reform at its disposal, the incoming government has the opportunity to repair the long-neglected income security system.

How to move forward

To move forward in response to the advice and recommendations of the working groups, the incoming government should set both a near- and longer-term agenda for reform to address the shortcomings of the current system.

Near-term actions

- **Move to a flat-rate benefit for social assistance that combines the current basic needs and shelter amounts** into a single rate adjusted for household size. This reform, recommended in the Roadmap (and proposed in Budget 2018), would help to improve the adequacy of the income security system for those not receiving maximum shelter benefits (such as people who are homeless) and would make it much simpler for low-income Ontarians, for front-line workers, and for government.
- Building on the federal commitment of funding to provinces for a Canada Housing Benefit, **create a new housing benefit that is not tied to social assistance eligibility**, that would be available to low-income renters facing housing affordability pressures.
 - This benefit would make the income security system more sensitive to differences in cost of living.
 - Moving assistance for housing costs outside of the bundle of social assistance would also improve the overall design of the income security system by reducing the “welfare wall” effect that makes qualifying for social assistance an “all or nothing” bargain.

- While the social housing system ensures housing affordability for approximately 200,000 Ontario households, there are nearly as many households on waitlists for units. A housing benefit that supports Ontarians in housing need directly could provide support to those on the waitlists and provide more choice to those families.
- As the government develops the third Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, expected in 2019, **include targets and measures that focus on adult poverty alongside continued commitments on child poverty.**

Longer-term decisions

- **Expand health benefits for people with a low income so that they are no longer tied to social assistance.** Building on the Roadmap recommendations, shift access to extended health services currently provided to people receiving Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support program to a new low-income health benefit that is not tied to social assistance eligibility.
- **Reform how income security is delivered to people.** Building on lessons from the Basic Income Pilot, reform access to the income security system, moving away from a system where officials make decisions about people's lives and worthiness to a system that empowers the individuals themselves.
- **Set a new goal for adequacy, taking into account the system as a whole.** Develop a clear pathway to ensure that the income security system as a whole provides adequate support to those experiencing poverty in Ontario, taking into account the combined effects of federal and provincial income security programs.

Noah Zon is Director of Policy and Research at Maytree

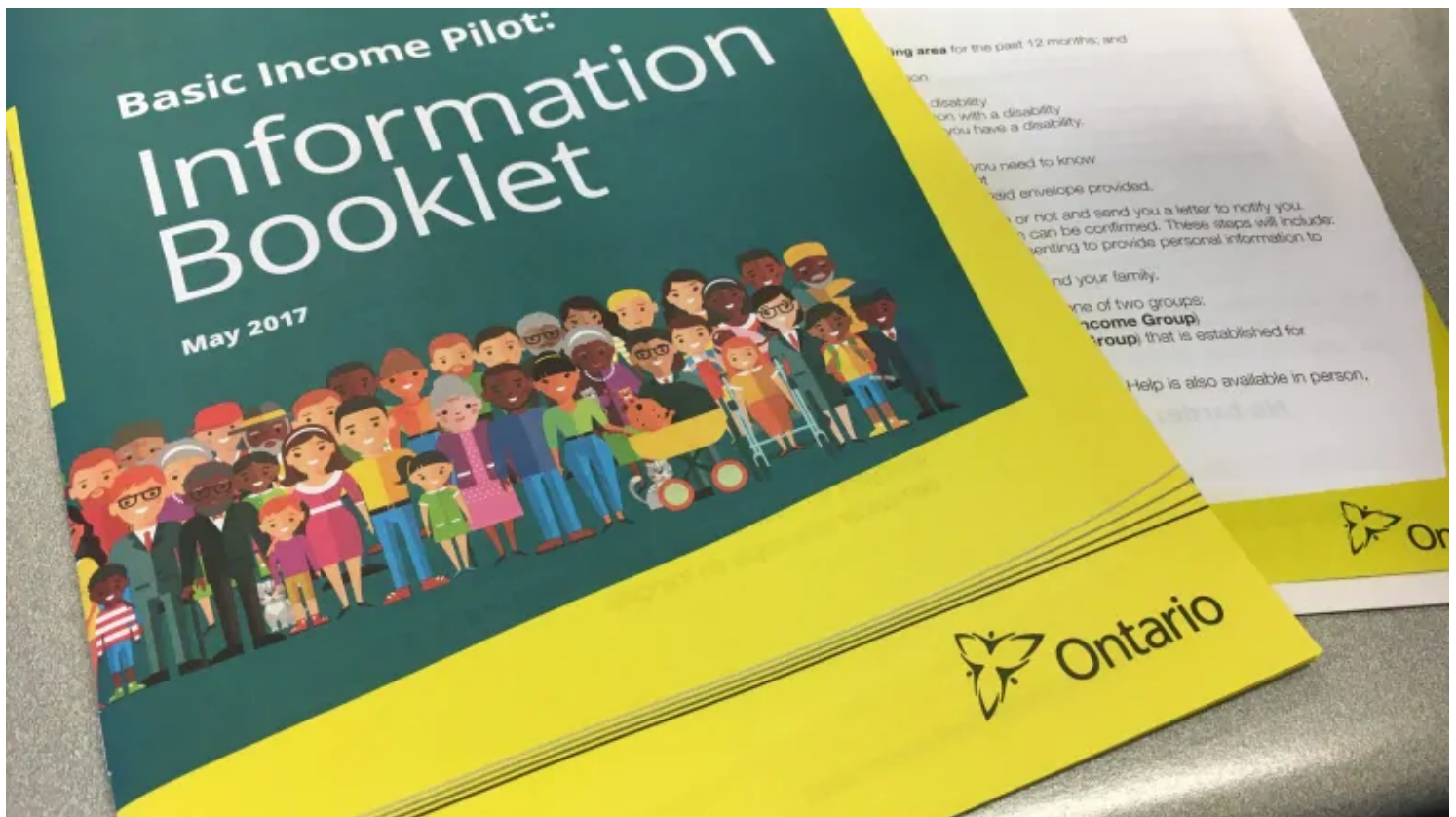


Ontario's basic income pilot to end March 2019



Project launched by former Liberal government was aimed at lifting people out of poverty

The Canadian Press · Posted: Aug 31, 2018 5:46 PM ET | Last Updated: August 31, 2018



Ontario's basic-income pilot project will end on March 31, 2019, the province says. (Matt Prokopchuk/CBC)

Thousands of people participating in Ontario's basic income pilot will receive their last payment on March 31, 2019, the province says, but an anti-poverty activist says the six-month wind down will still hurt many who were depending on the program.

After pulling the plug on the pilot last month, the Progressive Conservative government said Friday the final payments to the 4,000 low-income recipients in several cities will be made on that date.

- [Ontario minister admits Ford government broke election promise by scrapping basic income project](#)
- [Abrupt cancellation of basic income pilot could make vulnerable people less healthy](#)

The clarification comes after Social Services Minister Lisa MacLeod denied reports that the payments would end in August, stressing there would be a "lengthy and compassionate runway" to end the program aimed at lifting people out of poverty that was launched by the former Liberal government.

"We have a broken social service system," MacLeod said in a statement. "A research project that helps less than 4,000 people is not the answer and provides no hope to nearly two million Ontarians who are trapped in a cycle of poverty."

Program was 'failing,' social services minister says

Along with the cancellation of the pilot, Ontario promised to complete a review of the province's social assistance programs by Nov. 8.

The basic income pilot project was set to run for three years, providing payments to 4,000 low-income people in communities including Hamilton, Brantford, Thunder Bay and Lindsay. Single participants receive up to \$16,989 a year while couples receive up to \$24,027, less 50 per cent of any earned income.





Social Services Minister Lisa MacLeod said the program was 'failing' — a claim experts have disputed. (Chris Young/Canadian Press)

The Tories had promised during the spring election to preserve the \$150-million pilot, but MacLeod later said it would reverse course because the program was "failing" — a claim experts have disputed.

Tom Cooper of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction said the six-month wind down will not be enough time for many people.

"It still leaves many basic income participants in impossible situations," he said. "Many have signed one year lease agreements with landlords and they can't get out of those leases and they can't afford their new rent. There's many people who plan to go back to school in September. Whether that will still be a reality for them with a longer wind down is questionable."

- [Basic income advocates boarding a bus to protest at Queen's Park](#)
- [Scrapping basic income pilot 'horrific,' former Tory senator says](#)

Cooper said the government has only now extended the wind down because it was under pressure.

"While it seems that this might be a little bit longer wind down than initially feared, I think that's only because there was so much pressure on them and there was very little compassion shown by the government in the early days," he said.



Social Assistance Summaries

Ontario

2017

Published April 2018



About Social Assistance Summaries

What is Social Assistance Summaries?

Social Assistance Summaries uses data provided by provincial and territorial government officials to track the number of social assistance recipients across Canada. It also includes a brief description of the social assistance programs in each jurisdiction.

This resource was established by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy to maintain data previously published in the *Social Assistance Statistical Report* by the federal government. In 2018, Maytree assumed responsibility for updating the series.

Who can claim social assistance?

Eligibility for social assistance is determined on the basis of a needs test. This test takes into account the household's basic needs and its financial resources, which include both assets and income. The needs test assesses whether there is a shortfall between available financial resources and the legislated amounts for basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing, household, and personal needs). Additional amounts may be paid on a discretionary basis for special needs based on each household's circumstances.

Where does the data come from?

Every year provincial and territorial government officials provide us with an update of the social assistance case and recipient numbers. (Some jurisdictions also publish this information online.) They can provide this data as a calendar year average, a fiscal year average or as point-in-time data for March 31.

Data from before 2014 comes from two federal government reports: the *Social Assistance Statistical Report: 2008* and the *Social Assistance Statistical Report: 2009-13*. When the federal data did not reconcile with provincial/territorial figures, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy worked with jurisdictional representatives to present data in the format most often used by their governments.



What is the difference between cases and beneficiaries?

Cases are equivalent to an individual or family: the person who applied for benefits, their partner, and any dependent children count as a single case.

Beneficiaries or recipients refer to the total number of people who benefit from a single social assistance claim, i.e., the individual claimant plus their partner, and any dependent children within their household.

How does each jurisdiction vary in its reporting?

Each jurisdiction uses its own methodology for tracking and reporting social assistance caseloads. For example, some provinces include households that receive a partial benefit or top-up from social assistance while others do not; some include First Nations living on reserve while others do not.

Can I compare the data for different jurisdictions?

Comparisons between jurisdictions can be misleading because each jurisdiction has different eligibility criteria for social assistance and different methods for recording social assistance data. For example, the numbers will be lower for jurisdictions that count only households in receipt of full benefits.

The data is also affected by how federal programs interact with provincial/territorial benefits. For example, a higher take-up of related income security programs such as Employment Insurance typically reduces social assistance caseloads.



Why does the number of claims change from year to year?

There are two main reasons why the social assistance caseloads change from year to year. One reason is a change in the social and economic situation in an area. For example, a rise in unemployment is likely to result in a rise in social assistance claims. The other reason is a change in the way that social assistance programs operate. For example, people are ineligible for social assistance if their savings are above a certain threshold; if a jurisdiction increases this threshold, more people would be eligible and the number of claimants is likely to increase. Similarly, changes to eligibility for federal benefits can also have a knock-on effect on provincial/territorial caseloads.

Ontario's social assistance program

Social assistance is the income program of last resort. It is intended for those who have exhausted all other means of financial support. Every province and territory has its own social assistance program(s) and no two are the same.

In Ontario, social assistance is composed of two programs:

1. Ontario Works (OW), which provides income and employment assistance to people in financial need
2. Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which is intended to help people with disabilities and their families live as independently as possible, and to reduce or eliminate disability-related barriers to employment

Both Ontario Works and ODSP provide income and employment supports, as well as a range of benefits.

Ontario Works

Ontario Works income assistance includes an amount for shelter and basic needs such as food and clothing. In addition, employment assistance helps clients find, prepare for, and maintain a job.

Ontario Disability Support Program

ODSP provides income support and employment supports to eligible individuals with disabilities and their families. ODSP income support helps with the cost of basic needs as well as providing certain health-related and employment related benefits.

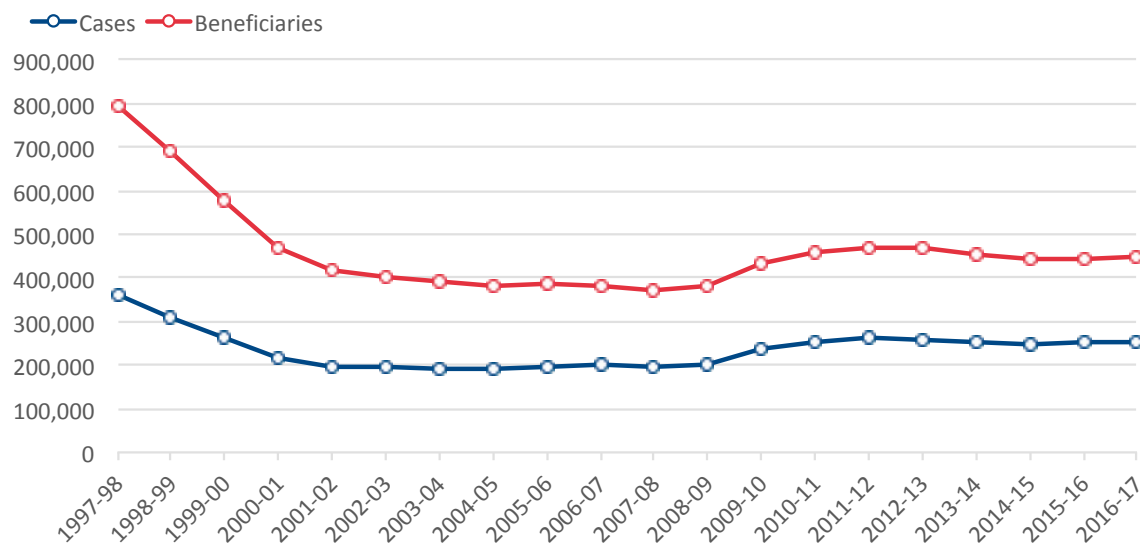
ODSP includes employment supports – a voluntary program that provides employment assistance to help people with disabilities prepare for, find, and keep a job. Individuals do not have to receive ODSP income support to be eligible for employment supports.

How many people claim social assistance?

On average, there were 598,000 cases (families and single adults) in Ontario's social assistance programs during 2016/17. Around 40 per cent (252,000) received Ontario Works and 60 per cent (346,000) received ODSP. The number of cases of both forms of social assistance was slightly higher than in 2015/16.

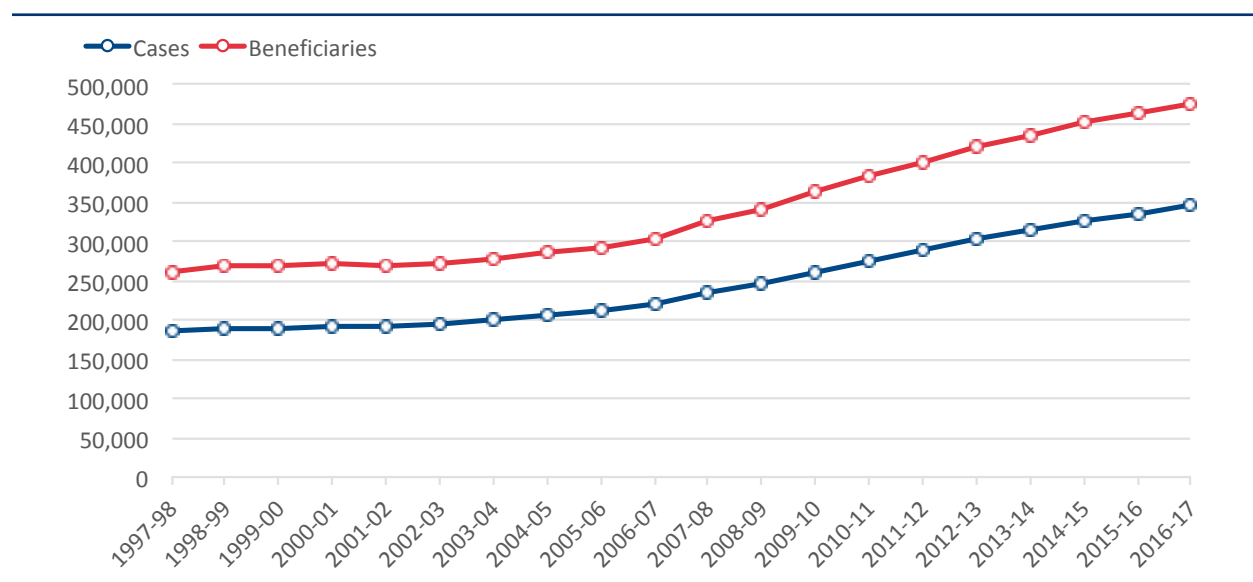
Ontario Works

After increasing in the late-2000s/early-2010s the number of families or individuals receiving Ontario Works has been reasonably flat in recent years at 252,000 in 2016/17. This is about half the level of the mid-1990s peak. The number of beneficiaries (the number of individual claimants, their partners, and dependent children) has followed a similar pattern over time and stood at 447,000 in 2016/17.



Ontario Disability Support Program

In 2016/17, there was an average of 346,000 cases in the Ontario Disability Support Program, and 476,000 beneficiaries. Both numbers have been steadily rising since the early-2000s.



Year	Ontario Works		ODSP		Total	
	Cases	Beneficiaries	Cases	Beneficiaries	Cases	Beneficiaries
1997-98	362,334	796,109	185,479	261,737	547,813	1,057,846
1998-99	310,493	690,608	189,392	268,159	499,884	958,767
1999-00	262,439	577,620	189,536	268,286	451,975	845,907
2000-01	215,618	469,494	191,885	271,144	407,503	740,637
2001-02	196,596	419,493	192,048	270,558	388,644	690,051
2002-03	195,137	404,067	194,140	271,740	389,277	675,807
2003-04	192,096	389,754	200,087	278,393	392,183	668,148
2004-05	191,723	380,670	205,880	285,231	397,603	665,901
2005-06	198,377	386,801	212,058	292,622	410,435	679,423
2006-07	199,242	383,068	221,718	305,202	420,960	688,270
2007-08	194,920	371,876	235,672	325,552	430,592	697,428
2008-09	202,181	380,442	247,476	342,149	449,657	722,591
2009-10	237,634	435,721	261,509	362,594	499,143	798,315
2010-11	251,280	457,774	276,191	383,341	527,471	841,115
2011-12	260,766	471,154	289,676	402,307	550,441	873,461
2012-13	259,819	468,074	302,733	420,128	562,552	888,202
2013-14	252,767	454,520	314,033	435,052	566,800	889,572
2014-15	246,903	442,942	326,293	451,576	573,196	894,518
2015-16	250,640	445,466	335,933	463,889	586,573	909,355
2016-17	252,247	447,408	346,070	475,637	598,317	923,044

Data notes

- The data reflects the average number of cases and beneficiaries over the fiscal year (April 1 to March 31)
- The numbers do not include First Nations living on reserves

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ACHIEVING INCOME ADEQUACY

OBJECTIVE: Adopt a definition of income adequacy, initially set as the Low-Income Measure used by Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, and make a public commitment to achieve that goal over 10 years.



A critical element in solving poverty is making sure people have enough income to afford the modern necessities of life—the things that are needed to be emotionally and physically healthy and connected to the world. For this to happen, all components of the income security system need to work in concert to ensure a Minimum Income Standard for every person and family, through wide-ranging supports available to all low-income people and programs that make sure no one is left behind.

SETTING A GOAL FOR INCOME ADEQUACY

Recommendation 1: Adopt a Minimum Income Standard in Ontario to be achieved over the next 10 years through a combination of supports across the income security system.

It is critical that income adequacy be defined. Without an accepted definition of adequacy, it is hard to know where people stand, determine the depth of their deprivation or measure their progress. Defining adequacy by setting a provincial Minimum Income Standard that can be achieved over time will provide a measurable and transparent objective for the income security system. The intent is that this standard be used to compare against the sum of income supports available to individuals from all programs, not just social assistance or other specific programs. The standard needs to account for the cost of living in different



areas, including remote areas. In seeking an adequate standard of living, the focus is on a full package of reforms that support social and economic inclusion.

Achieving this goal of adequacy requires a broad income support lens that includes the range of municipal, provincial and federal programs to which people have access, including child tax benefits, housing supports, refundable tax credits, social assistance and core health benefits.

Looking at what is available to individuals from social assistance and tax benefits, against the current Market Basket Measure⁷⁴, shows just how far many people are from being able to buy the goods and services needed to achieve even an adequate standard of living. As will be discussed later, the Market Basket Measure needs revisions to provide a completely accurate comparison of the costs of living. The figure on the following page provides a starting point for this comparison.

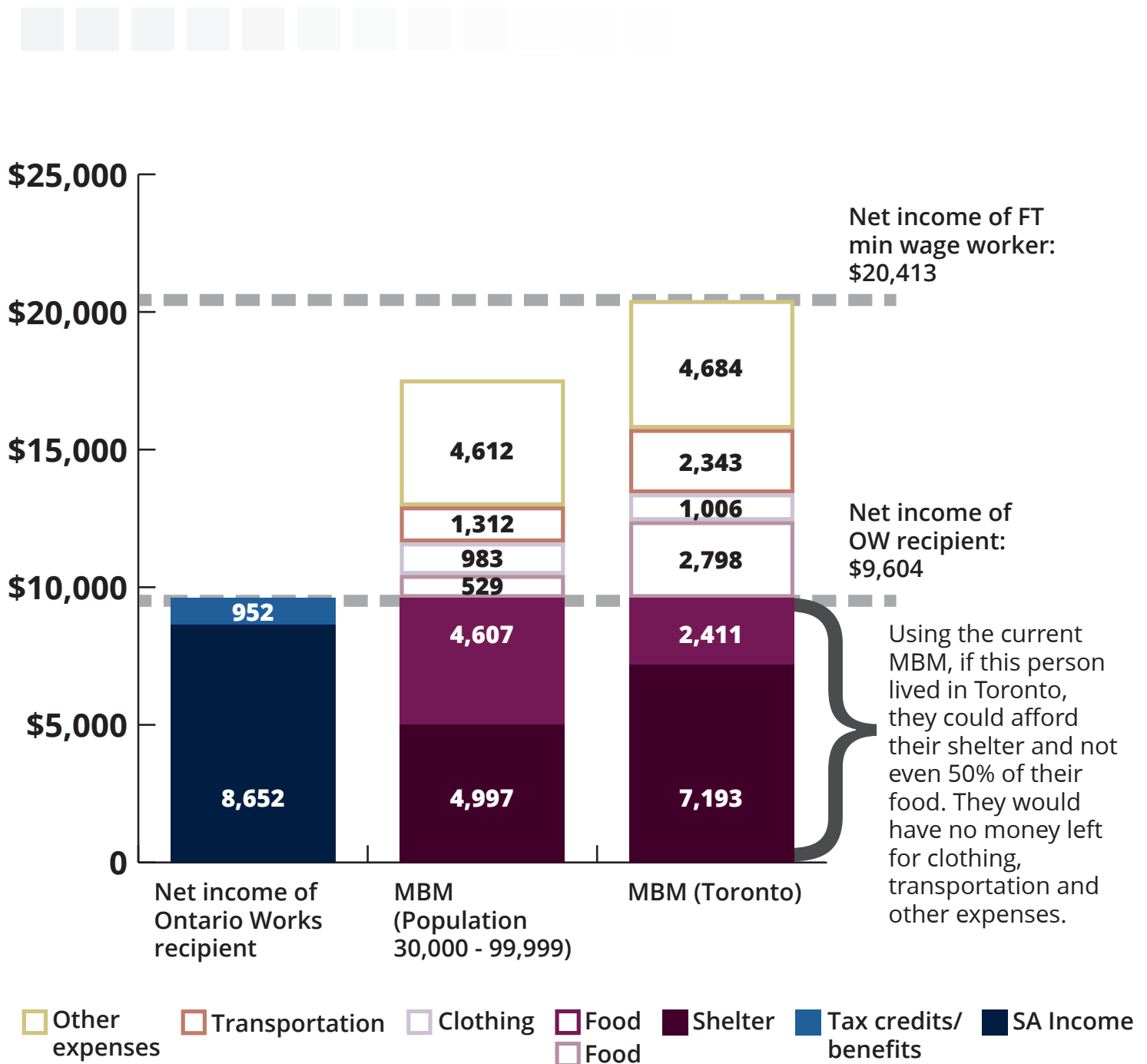


When you do not have enough income to afford even the most necessary essentials of life, like a home or a meal or a way to get around in your community, it is almost impossible to improve your circumstances. You will likely find that your health worsens, you become increasingly detached from the world of work, and social isolation and stigma deepen.

It is long past time for investments to be made so that all individuals, particularly those in deepest poverty, have more to live on and a better chance to participate in their communities.

74 The current Market Basket Measure was developed in 2012. It is based on the cost of a specific basket of goods that represent a basic standard of living. It has been criticized for not being regularly updated (e.g., it does not include a smart phone or data plan as a basic necessity, which it has increasingly become), and the price of some goods, in particular shelter, has been questioned. It also does not include remote regions in its design

COMPARISON OF THE NET INCOME OF A SINGLE INDIVIDUAL ON ONTARIO WORKS AND THE MARKET BASKET MEASURE (MBM)



DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1

The Province should publicly commit to a Minimum Income Standard that will be achieved over a 10-year period (by 2027–28).

- The Minimum Income Standard should initially be established at the Low-Income Measure currently used by Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (LIM-50 linked to a base year of 2012), plus an additional 30% for persons with a disability, in recognition of the additional cost of living with a disability. See **Appendix B** for the PRS LIM level for different family sizes.

1.2

Begin work immediately to define a made-in-Ontario Market Basket Measure that would include a modern basket of goods, with prices reflecting true costs, and adjusted for all regions in the province, including the remote north. The measure will be used in evaluating progress towards the Minimum Income Standard, and potentially revising or replacing the PRS LIM as the measure used to set the standard. The made-in-Ontario Market Basket Measure could also be used to guide and evaluate investment decisions over the long term.

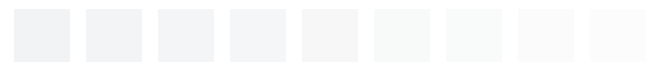
1.3

Implement the recommendations in the Roadmap to move toward adequacy in the income security system by 2027–28.



ENGAGING THE WHOLE INCOME SECURITY SYSTEM

OBJECTIVE: Leverage the whole income security system, current and future, so that programs work together to help all low-income people achieve social and economic inclusion.



Providing supports outside of social assistance allows for the targeting of programs to those who need them—whether they are experiencing housing affordability challenges, are raising children or have high health costs. By introducing new programs, or expanding on current successful programs, we can ensure a broad low-income population is supported, whether or not they are receiving social assistance. Evidence shows that this approach works, and the intention is to build upon the success of children's benefits and Healthy Smiles Ontario in reaching more of those in need, and also build on the expected impact of the recently announced pharmacare program for children and youth age 24 and under that will be implemented in 2018. By phasing in changes over 10 years it is possible to make a renewed commitment to the low-income population that can be built upon in the future. The following recommendations aim to do just that. However, there are other actions needed that go beyond the income security system. For example, federal, provincial and municipal governments along with private partners must work harder to bring down the cost of transportation and increase access to public transportation, and address food security issues so people have access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

Some First Nations people do not currently qualify for some of the income tax-based programs. In other cases, First Nations people qualify but have barriers to access and enrolment because they do not normally access the tax system. It is important to put measures in place and alter programs as needed to ensure that First Nations have access to these benefits and are in fact receiving them⁷⁵.

75 Indian Act (1876). Section 87: Taxation, found online at <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-5/page-12.html#h-35>, on July 21, 2017



ONTARIO HOUSING BENEFIT

Recommendation 2: Introduce a housing benefit to assist all low-income people with the high cost of housing, whether or not they receive social assistance, so they are not forced to choose between a home and other necessities.

It is recognized that more housing is needed for low-income people. Ontario's housing crisis is too big to be fixed by construction and repair alone. While there is no one solution to this complex issue, there clearly must be initiatives beyond the supply side that assist people directly with the housing costs they face right now.



Housing is an enormous financial pressure facing many people. While housing is clearly a necessity, a safe and affordable place to live is out of reach altogether for many individuals and families.

The government has made a good start in responding to these needs through a Portable Housing Benefit that provides ongoing assistance to approximately 1,000 survivors of domestic violence each year. However, from a broader income security perspective, this work needs to be complemented by the introduction of a universal, income-tested portable housing benefit as one way to put more money in people's hands to deal with high housing costs, and bring them closer to the goal of income adequacy.

Providing households with direct financial help with the cost of housing will begin to improve the well-being of a large number of Ontario households and take an important step towards eliminating deep core housing need in the near-term.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) considers a household to be in core housing need if “its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable.” Households that would have to spend 50% or more are sometimes described as being in deep core housing need.



There are important points to consider in the design of a portable housing benefit:

- Housing costs and availability vary greatly across geographic areas and between regional boundaries. A portable housing benefit needs to be responsive to these variations in order to best target resources to people who are most in need.
- To be most effective and efficient, the housing benefit must be easy to apply for and offer reasonable stability. The tax system as a mechanism for delivering the benefit is the most clearly efficient option. However, it raises issues with respect to responsiveness that must be addressed, including sudden, severe changes in housing need (e.g., a catastrophic change in income, fleeing domestic or family violence), and meeting the needs of people who do not file taxes or who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. No matter how it is delivered, there must be a clear and easy-to-use process that can be used to maximize access to this important benefit.
- Once implemented, the impact of a housing benefit must be understood overall, and different populations must inform any adjustments that may be needed to the initial design to make sure the benefit is producing the intended results.



- People must be able to access a straight-forward and effective process for resolving disputes, regardless of the delivery mechanism used.
- People in core housing may either rent or own their homes. In some communities, like those in rural settings, there is no robust rental market to speak of and home ownership may be the only available option. While housing prices in these communities may be relatively more affordable than in large urban centres, affordability is still a challenge when other costs like electricity, energy and property taxes are factored in. While a portable housing benefit is believed to be a viable tool to help renters, it may not be the best solution for addressing the needs of home owners. As such, further work is needed in the housing sector to explore approaches to supporting home ownership where most appropriate.
- The housing benefit should not exclude First Nations people living in poverty in First Nations communities (on-reserve). Lack of access to adequate housing on-reserve is a critical issue. Ontario must work with First Nations and the federal government to provide the benefit (or a functional alternative) in a way that includes First Nations.

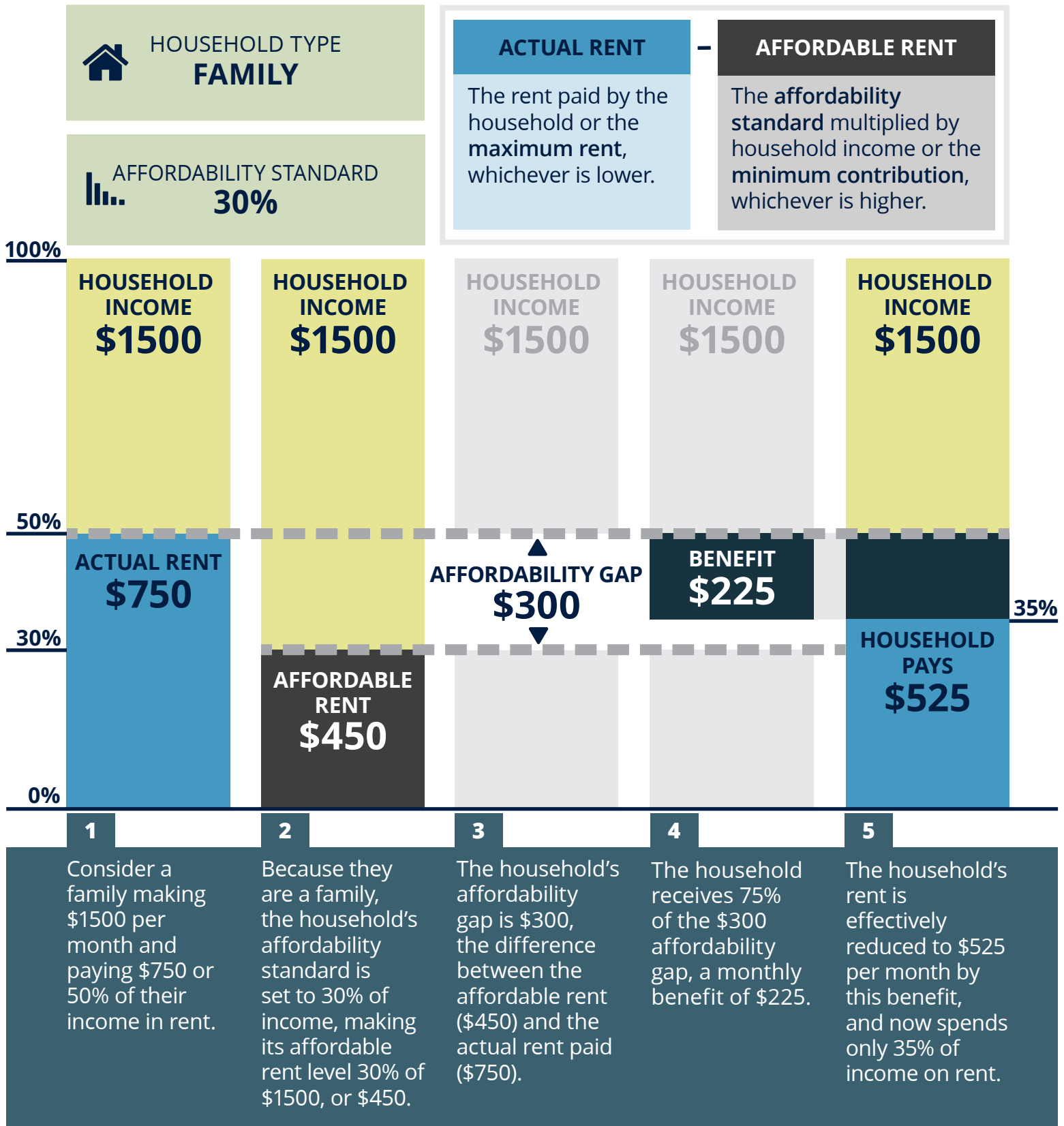
Based on these considerations, it is recommended that the Province start with a portable housing benefit for renters that fills some portion of the difference (i.e., “the gap”) between household income, how much is expected to be spent on rent and the actual housing cost. The importance of moving quickly to provide some relief to those in deep core housing need is seen as paramount. As such, there is value in introducing the benefit even if it starts out at a very modest level.

HOW THE PROPOSED PORTABLE HOUSING BENEFIT WORKS

This illustration describes the proposed Ontario Housing Benefit using an example of how the benefit would work for a specific household.



$$\text{MONTHLY BENEFIT} = \text{GAP COVERAGE} * \text{AFFORDABILITY GAP}$$





"I've been waiting for housing for five years and they tell me it's another 10 years wait. All the money I get goes to rent."

~ Anonymous⁷⁶

It is important to remember that housing is not a provincial issue alone. The federal government has consulted on a National Housing Strategy and recently committed several billion dollars over 10 years to affordable housing. In addition, the federal Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA) recent report *Breaking the Cycle: A Study on Poverty Reduction* includes several recommendations intended to address housing issues including, in partnership with provinces and territories, the creation of a national portable housing benefit.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1

Confirm the design and implementation details for a universal, income-tested portable housing benefit for people who rent their homes.

2.2

Implement the portable housing benefit in 2019–20 at a modest “gap coverage” of 25%, with the gap defined as the difference between the actual cost of housing and a minimum household contribution given household income.

⁷⁶ Respondent to Who's Hungry, the Daily Bread Food Bank Annual Report on Hunger in Toronto, 2016

2.3

Increase gap coverage to 35% in 2020–21 and continue to increase gap coverage, reaching 75% by or before 2027–28.

2.4

First Nations need to be meaningfully included in the housing benefit and may need modifications or an alternate benefit to ensure it works in the reserve context.

INCOME SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

Recommendation 3: Continue to move income support for children outside of social assistance so all low-income families can benefit fully, regardless of income source. Ensure supports are sensitive to the needs of children and youth who are at greater risk.

The Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) has shown that providing financial help with the cost of raising children through a universal, income-tested benefit that does not distinguish between the family's source(s) of income reaches more people in need in a way that is easy, reliable and does not create any risk of stigma.

It is time for Ontario to take the last steps in its journey towards merging income support for children under age 18 into the OCB. With the transformation of the social assistance structure ([see A Transformed Social Assistance Structure, page 112](#)), distinct supplements for children will be necessary in the first three years. This is because the current social assistance rates still include amounts for children but the new flat rate will not. In order for parents not to be worse off, they will need a supplement on a transitional basis. Looking ahead, there will be an opportunity to attach the remaining supplement to the OCB in a way that targets extra support to the lowest-income families.

While the OCB works well for most children, there are issues with respect to access to the benefit for families with precarious immigration status, and for those who have catastrophic in-year income changes. It is important that these issues are addressed by the federal government to ensure equitable access to this important benefit.



Children who are being cared for by someone other than their parent(s) are often coping with upheaval and emotional trauma. Making sure caregivers in these situations have better access to responsive financial help is critical to restoring some stability in children's lives. While the current Temporary Care Assistance (TCA) program in social assistance provides financial assistance for children in these situations, it must be renamed, made more effective and better aligned with support available to foster parents.

Local delivery partners need clear flexibility to determine where the TCA is best accessed. This might be through an Ontario Works office, which is the case today, or it might be through family services workers or other community partners. Both Ontario Works providers and family services workers should be offered regular learning and development opportunities to promote access to this benefit in Indigenous and other communities.

Policy was recently clarified to make clear that families receiving social assistance should continue to receive income support pertaining to their children in situations where TCA is being provided or where a child is temporarily removed from the home and placed in the care of kin, an alternative caregiver or a Children's Aid Society. This is a positive step towards better supporting family reunification through greater income adequacy. It also recognizes that systemic racism in the child protection system has resulted in Indigenous children being removed from their homes because they are struggling financially.

Young adults who have been living in the child protection system are particularly vulnerable when they make the transition from crown wardship to adulthood. A consistent message from youth aging out of care, supported by extensive research and analysis over many years, is that these young persons are a particularly at-risk group who are disproportionately represented within social assistance. A recent study has found that unemployment and underemployment is higher among youth who age out of care than among their peers and others from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence also suggests that the majority of youth who age out of care are living in poverty⁷⁷.

77 "Exploring Youth Outcomes After Age-Out of Care" by Jane Kovarikova, Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, April 24, 2017

Children's Aid Societies should be held to a high standard of trust when they take on the permanent care of a child and undertake to act in the child's best interests. This includes an expectation that every effort be made to make the transition to adulthood a successful one. The Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 raises the age of protection from 16 to 18 years. This means that many youth will transition at a later and more mature age, when the chances of success are greater. In addition, the legislation requires that Children's Aid Societies continue to offer care and support, including connecting youth to education, housing and employment programs, to individuals beyond their 18th birthday. Income security reform can build on these positive steps by ensuring these young adults are a priority in the transformation of social assistance programs, and by requiring Children's Aid Societies to place funds from the federal Children's Special Allowance (CSA) into a savings programs, an approach already used with the Ontario Child Benefit Equivalent (OCBE).

With the government's history of treatment of Indigenous children, and with the recent Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision on discrimination against First Nations children on-reserve, steps must be taken to ensure that history does not repeat itself. History has shown us that Indigenous children have been taken away from their families and communities and placed within Residential Schools (church-operated boarding schools) to be taught a way of life different to their own. Indigenous children have also been mistreated within the child welfare field where prevention programs have been underfunded on-reserve and children have been too often removed from their homes and placed in non-Indigenous homes.

In First Nations communities, child care resources are needed when parents are involved in initiatives that will support children's paths to well-being.





When a child is in the care of a Children's Aid Society (CAS), Canada Child Benefit payments to the parent(s) cease and the CAS can apply for the Children's Special Allowance (CSA)—these payments are equivalent to the federal child benefit and must be used exclusively towards the needs of the child in respect of whom it is paid. There is no requirement for the CAS to save any of these funds to support the youth when transitioning from care. A payment similar to the CSA is made in respect of the provincial child benefit; this is called the Ontario Child Benefit Equivalent (OCBE). For youth 15 years and older who have been in the care of the CAS for 12 or more consecutive months, the OCBE funds must be put into a savings program to be given to the youth when transitioning from care.

While it is positive to continue to move child benefits out of social assistance, more work needs to be done to ensure that First Nations are not excluded. When benefits are no longer provided through social assistance, they are typically provided through the tax system, and require the recipient to complete an annual tax return. Many First Nations people are not in the practice of completing tax returns, because in many cases if their income is earned on a reserve it is exempt from tax. Plus, if a person is receiving social assistance, they may not realize the benefit or necessity of completing a tax return. A recent review by the Toronto Star found that about half of eligible First Nations recipients of the Canada Child Benefit were not receiving this benefit because they did not know about it and had not filed a tax return to receive it⁷⁸. The OCB is equally affected by this problem. Consistent and culturally appropriate outreach needs to be available in First Nations communities, with learning and development for appropriate staff and assistance available in the completion of tax returns, to ensure that all eligible children are receiving the benefits they are supposed to receive.

78 Toronto Star, "Indigenous children on reserves miss out on child benefit", July 20, 2017. Please see: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/07/20/indigenous-children-on-reserves-miss-out-on-child-benefit.html>

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1

Provide bridging child supplements within social assistance to ensure families are not worse off during the transition, as the social assistance structure is transformed to include flat rates.

3.2

Re-brand the Temporary Care Assistance program to focus on child well-being, increase the amount of income support provided to better align with foster care levels, and provide clear flexibility for Ontario Works Administrators to determine where it is best accessed.

3.3

Shift the remaining amounts paid in respect of children's essential needs in social assistance to the Ontario Child Benefit as a supplement targeted to the lowest-income families.

3.4

Require Children's Aid Societies to place Children's Special Allowance payments into a savings program for youth in care 15 years and older so the funds can be disbursed to the youth when transitioning from care.

3.5

Provide support to all low-income people, including those living in First Nations communities, to ensure that benefits paid through the tax system are accessed and equitably received.



WORKING INCOME TAX BENEFIT

Recommendation 4: Work with the federal government to enhance the effectiveness of the Working Income Tax Benefit so that it plays a greater role in contributing to income adequacy for low-income workers in Ontario.

The federal Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB) is a refundable tax credit provided to eligible low-income workers. It has two stated policy objectives:

1. Help low-income individuals transition from social assistance to employment, and
2. Provide additional encouragement to low-income workers to strengthen their participation in the labour market.

While the WITB can play an important role in Ontario's income security system, its significance has decreased over time because the program has remained relatively static despite changes in other areas of the income security landscape. It is also too modest to play a significant role in supplementing the earnings of low-income workers.

In 2016, it took a single individual without children approximately 624 hours of work throughout the year (or 12 hours of work per week) at the minimum wage to have enough earnings to reach the maximum WITB. After net income of about \$11,675, the amount of the benefit began to decline, tapering out after net income of about \$18,529. Although the WITB will be increased to help offset the cost of additional contributions made by low-income workers to the Canada Pension Plan enhancement, much more could be done to assist individuals as they gain a stronger foothold in the labour market. The bottom line is that despite the stated objectives of the WITB, it does not assist many individuals to exit social assistance.

As further changes that affect the income security system are anticipated (e.g., the proposed changes to the social assistance rate structure as noted in this Roadmap and the recently proposed minimum wage increases in Ontario),

the need for action on the WITB becomes even more important. Ontario should work with the federal government, consistent with the recommendations of the previously mentioned HUMA report, to enhance the WITB so that it better meets its objectives in the context of today's labour market. Such changes will help ensure that the WITB remains an important part of the income security system.

In addition, it may be difficult for some First Nations people to access the WITB. This is because individuals are required to file their income tax returns, as well as fill out the WITB Schedule, to receive the benefit. To help First Nations people better access income supports like the WITB, outreach and support about the benefits available through the tax system is required. Alternative ways of delivering the WITB also need to be considered.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1

The federal government enhance the WITB so that it better reflects the realities faced by low-income workers in Ontario. This should include examining:

- The level of earnings at which an individual begins receiving the WITB and how the WITB is adjusted when earnings increase, including the threshold at which the WITB begins to be reduced.
- The overall amount of support provided through the WITB.
- The net income at which individuals are no longer eligible to receive the WITB.
- Outreach, support and any alternative delivery required to ensure that the WITB is accessible to First Nations individuals.



CORE HEALTH BENEFITS

Recommendation 5: Make essential health benefits available to all low-income people, beginning with ensuring those in deepest poverty have access to the services they need.

Getting a prescription for medication to address a medical problem is of no use if the cost of the prescription means it goes unfilled. Finding a job or having the confidence and self-esteem to engage with peers and the community is difficult for someone who has had to have their teeth removed and can't afford dentures. Not being able to afford eyeglasses or hearing devices can lead to isolation and an inability to take part in the community or the workforce. Being unable to afford the cost of travelling to see a health care professional creates a barrier to diagnosis and treatment.

These are among the many reasons why the provincial government has put in place programs like Healthy Smiles Ontario and the Ontario Drug Benefit Program. These programs respectively provide access to dental care for children and youth and prescription drug coverage to seniors, children and youth aged 24 and under, and people receiving social assistance. It is also why some municipalities find money in their budgets to cover dentures, and why social assistance programs provide help with medical transportation costs.

Unfortunately, thousands of people who are surviving on low or even moderate incomes still have limited or no access to health services like dental or vision care. Some individuals and families fear leaving social assistance and the security they feel from having access to health benefits that are only available in social assistance. Steps need to be taken to introduce new health benefits so that all low-income individuals and families are able to access the health services and products they need to be healthy, confident and well-positioned to actively engage in their communities and employment.

First Nations, whether living on- or off-reserve and regardless of their Indian Act status, must have equal access to all existing and new benefits that Ontario's health care system provides. Discrimination must be avoided in all cases, and when a child is affected, Jordan's Principle should be honoured to avoid any denial, delay or disruption in service due to jurisdictional questions.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1

Expand access to mandatory core health benefits to all adults receiving Ontario Works and adult children in families receiving ODSP, and add coverage for dentures (including initial and follow-up fittings) for all social assistance recipients.

5.2

Expand existing and introduce new core health benefits for all low-income adults over the next 10 years starting with the expansion of prescription drug coverage to adults 25 to 65, followed by:

- Expanding Healthy Smiles Ontario to adults age 18 to 65 and adding dentures as part of the benefit.
- Designing and implementing a new vision and hearing benefit for low-income individuals and families.
- Expanding access to medical transportation benefits.

5.3

Review the Assistive Devices Program to ensure the program is maximizing its reach to low-income people, both in terms of the list of devices that are covered and the maximum coverage.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Recommendation 6: Procedural fairness should be embedded in all aspects of the income security system through adequate policies, procedures, practices and timely appeal mechanisms.



A key strength of Ontario's current social assistance programs is clear rights of appeal to the Social Benefits Tribunal (the Tribunal)—a process that is accessible, fair, transparent and, for the most part, timely. Interim benefits are available while waiting for a decision so that people are not put at greater risk when there is a dispute over their eligibility for benefits. It is also important to note that court decisions have made it clear that, when interpreting social assistance legislation, a broad and liberal approach is necessary and that any ambiguity should be resolved in favour of the person seeking benefits. The Tribunal applies this approach by taking a holistic view of the individual's circumstances. For example, the Tribunal can consider hardship and fairness in ordering that an overpayment not be recovered.

While tax-delivered benefits like the Canada Child Benefit and OCB have positively enhanced Ontario's income security safety net, there needs to be a better process to resolve disputes for benefits delivered through the tax system. The Canada Revenue Agency objection process is cumbersome and difficult to understand. Tax court is not an easily accessible appeal process, nor does the court have the jurisdiction to offer important remedies such as overpayment forgiveness or emergency relief regardless of the circumstances. This is particularly challenging for people who may be reliant on the benefit income to pay rent and buy food or are victims of fraud or abuse.

As child benefits are now a larger proportion of low-income family budgets, and tax-system delivery is considered for possible future benefits ([see Ontario Housing Benefit, page 74](#)), it is critical that low-income people who rely on these income benefits for essential needs have access to a fair, transparent and efficient appeal process.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATION

6.1

Request a research body such as the Law Commission of Ontario or an academic institution review the existing appeal process for tax-delivered benefits and develop recommendations for enhanced or new mechanisms that support fair, transparent and efficient access to those benefits and appeal processes.

AN ASSURED INCOME FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The next section of the Roadmap, “Transforming Social Assistance”, includes recommendations for better supporting people with disabilities. The two main recommendations are:

Recommendation 9: Maintain and strengthen ODSP as a distinct program for people with disabilities. Ensure that both ODSP and Ontario Works are well equipped to support people with disabilities in meeting individual goals for social and economic inclusion.

Recommendation 10: Co-design an “assured income” approach for people with disabilities.

The co-design process will involve people with disabilities, advocates and front-line workers in developing an income-tested assured income approach to deliver financial support to people with disabilities. In the new model, front-line ODSP workers will have an important role in supporting people’s goals and aspirations, whether for education, employment or community involvement.

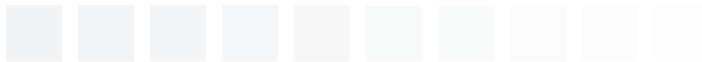
Assured income will be a departure from viewing financial support to people with disabilities as a type of “welfare” with the stigma that often accompanies it. It will provide often lifelong eligibility to benefits that people can access when they need them, recognizing the need to move safely into employment and back to the program as circumstances change.





TRANSFORMING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

OBJECTIVE: Transform social assistance programs to be simpler and eliminate coercive rules and policies. Create an explicit focus on helping people overcome barriers to moving out of poverty and fully participating in society.



Income security reform will not succeed without transformation in Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. The overall legislative framework, structure and certain assumptions underpinning these programs are not working effectively with other elements of the income security system. It is time to re-think aspects of these programs so they do a much better job of helping people move out of poverty and participate in society.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Recommendation 7: Fundamentally change the legislative framework for social assistance programs to set the foundation for a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving.

Individuals accessing and staff administering Ontario Works and ODSP adhere to a set of rules that are enshrined in legislation, regulation and policy directives (referred to as the legislative framework). This legislative framework sets the tone and expectations for what rules must be followed, and how. In social assistance, the end result is an emphasis on eligibility verification and technical, often inflexible, approaches to people that often put benefits at risk.

The current legislative framework clearly emphasizes the wrong priorities. It enshrines:

- Ontario Works as a “temporary program” that belies the reality that for many individuals it is the primary safety net.

- Employment as the only desirable goal within Ontario Works, failing to recognize the barriers people are facing and the crucial importance of other outcomes related to health, well-being and social inclusion that are necessary to finding success in the job market or being connected in one's community.
- A focus on compliance and verification with a rigorous series of reporting requirements. These requirements are specific, and if not met often result in form letters enforcing real or perceived threats about the imminent cancellation or reduction of assistance. The Ontario Works legislation establishes a program that:
 - Recognizes individual responsibility and promotes self-reliance through employment
 - Provides temporary financial assistance to those most in need while they satisfy obligations to become and stay employed

The financial eligibility rules in both Ontario Works and ODSP need to change. While eligibility rules and administration are necessary, it is critical that the legislative framework establish broader goals and promote a culture of respect, collaboration, support and autonomy, as opposed to one of constant surveillance and threatened sanctions. This requires a completely new framework for Ontario Works early in the implementation of the Roadmap that goes beyond simple amendments, as well as regulation changes under both programs to reduce unnecessary and ineffective rules.

The new legislative framework will also require explicit recognition of the authority of First Nations to determine rules that do not work well in their communities. This will allow for a unified and clear sense of direction, appropriately adjusted for the unique needs of individual First Nations communities, and provide a fresh start for those currently accessing the program and people who need help in the future ([See pages 129-147 for further discussion and recommendations](#)). First Nations communities will have the autonomy and flexibility to opt out of the legislative framework or portions of it, to exercise their self-determination and implement their own model(s) using a humanistic community-based approach.



DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1

Develop and introduce new legislation to govern and re-brand the current Ontario Works program. As a starting point for legislative change, draft and publicly consult on a new purpose statement in the first year of reform that explicitly recognizes and supports:

- Individual choice and well-being.
- Diverse needs and a goal of social and economic inclusion for all.

7.2

Identify and amend regulations under both the Ontario Works Act and the Ontario Disability Support Program Act before new Ontario Works legislation is introduced in order to jump-start and reinforce a positive culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving.

7.3

Provide First Nations with the opportunity to develop and implement their own community-based models of Income Assistance under provincial legislation.



Jump-starting a positive culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving can happen by amending regulations that create additional barriers and reinforce the negative idea that people needing help must be closely monitored so they do not “take advantage” of programs. Three examples are:

- *The rule that gives front-line workers the authority to count any resources that may become available to a person to reduce or disqualify them from assistance if they are not satisfied the right efforts are being made.*
- *The rule that prevents a single person attending post-secondary school from receiving Ontario Works even if they do not qualify for student assistance.*
- *The rule that says the Director “shall” cancel benefits for non-compliance with a condition of eligibility.*

A CULTURE OF TRUST, COLLABORATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Recommendation 8: Introduce an approach to serving people receiving Ontario Works and ODSP that promotes a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving as a priority—one that uses a trauma-informed lens and supports good quality of life outcomes for people in all communities, including Indigenous people.





People need to feel they have personal choice in their lives, that their abilities are respected and put to work. We need to ask people as they enter [the system] what they feel they need to learn in order to be independent, and help [them] with those items⁷⁹.

Services need to be designed to support people to find solutions and recognize the trauma of poverty, the impact of historical harm, the reality of employment instability and the importance of early, active and collaborative support.



“Nobody wants to know you, you can’t go get a job, you can’t get an apartment, you don’t always look as though you’re in the best of health or condition. People in general just don’t want anything to do with you. They can see homelessness on you. They can see broken. That’s all they see, a broken individual.”

~ Jason, a single man who found himself (with his cat Garfield) homeless after moving back home to Ontario when his job prospects did not work out (in western Canada)⁸⁰.

For this to happen, Ontario needs to have an income security system that puts people first—a system where services are purposefully designed to support easy access to financial help, as well as knowledgeable and well trained staff. It must be a system that does not include rules premised on ill-conceived or outdated notions about the motivations of those who have lost their jobs, are facing crises, or who have a long-term and profound experience of poverty, discrimination and stigma. Both the people who access services and those who work with them each and every day must be supported through positive and practical approaches to program design and delivery. The end result must be a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving.

79 Capponi, P. A Different Kind of Revolving Door. This piece is excerpted here: <https://hopeisinfectious.blog/2017/04/>

80 Miller, Tim. The Price of Poverty. The Intelligencer. May 31 2017

For urban Indigenous communities, achieving a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving means building meaningful relationships that respect Indigenous experiences and ways of being. This is at the heart of inclusion—an important foundation on which stronger steps towards reconciliation can be taken. Inclusion towards reconciliation must also recognize the unique history and cultures of Indigenous peoples and the diversity across communities. Inclusion requires government to develop policies and programs that are responsive to the priorities of urban Indigenous communities, ensuring the voices of these communities are heard and reflected in the system. This understanding of inclusion is crucial to building respectful, meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples. In this way, urban Indigenous communities, government and service providers can engage in more collaborative relationships that work towards achieving an improved quality of life for community members through reconciliation.

For First Nations communities, the need to implement new models based on culture and self-identification will restore a sense of pride and self-acceptance, allowing First Nations people to feel proud about being who they are again by targeting stigmas and removing discriminatory public policies.

Accessing social assistance should not be seen as a personal failure. It should not be frustrating or stigmatizing or so difficult that just getting help becomes a full-time job on its own.



Front-line workers are the first to say that their time and energy are guided by the punitive rules that they are expected to enforce. Shifting the current emphasis will focus their efforts on the resolution of barriers to social and economic inclusion and building the relationship of trust necessary to support better results for people.

The reality is that people accessing both Ontario Works and ODSP present with significant and multiple barriers to social and economic inclusion, such as addictions, violence, mental health, or challenges faced by young adults transitioning from programs aimed at children and youth.

Recent experience in private-sector disability claims shows that an engaged, problem-solving approach that takes a broader lens is more beneficial than



focussing primarily on eligibility for claim-related benefits. This approach has two key features. The first is timely intervention to quickly reinforce the person's self-perception as an independent individual with workforce attachment. The second is to engage the individual in planning and active problem-solving for every issue that may present a barrier to work. The intent is to build the person's confidence by making progress towards practical goals. This approach relies upon ongoing contact between the employer and the employee, a practice strongly recommended by the Institute for Work and Health, among others⁸¹. This approach has resulted in disability absence that is 15% to 40% shorter than approaches where the intervention is introduced late, is less collaborative, and is narrowly focussed on medical and functional issues alone. While the private-sector experience is with people who have been recently employed, it can be instructive in helping people to remain confident and engaged in meeting their goals as part of a transformed social assistance culture.

The principles underlying such an approach can inform how services should be focussed within Ontario Works and ODSP. The end result should be a common, positive and supportive experience regardless of which door a person enters first—in other words, the end result will be a single view of “case management” across the two programs.

An important part of moving forward with this approach is allowing for a degree of flexibility so that individuals can pursue innovative or entrepreneurial goals in their plan. Case collaborators should be able to support groups of individuals who make an informed choice to collectively establish a new business or other venture as part of their life and employment objectives, something that is not easily accommodated now. Regulation and directive changes are needed to clearly support these choices.

Supportive tools, resources and professional development should be co-designed with experts, including people with lived experience, to ensure they are as inclusive and meaningful as possible to those with a diverse set of experiences. This includes working with Indigenous partners to reflect and include the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples, as well as experts in legal advocacy, domestic violence and abuse, and mental health and addictions.

81 Please see: https://www.iwh.on.ca/system/files/documents/working_together_2008.pdf; http://www.rtwknowledge.org/article_print.php?article_id=65

Supporting people to achieve better outcomes means embedding a new individualized approach in the system that is built on three pillars of high-impact interaction: trust, holistic needs assessment and shared responsibility.

The reality is that when people first touch programs like social assistance they have likely experienced trauma of some nature. Any touch that is not positive is harmful. In addition, the more time that passes without active support, the more damage that is caused.



Fundamentally changing the current culture is critical to the overall transformation of social assistance and how it works to actually help people. The starting point must be a comprehensive upfront assessment, using a trauma-informed lens and complemented if necessary by information from health professionals that will help identify strengths, needs and barriers as early as possible. Such an assessment is integral to the development of a support plan that is clear, realistic and based on the person's most immediate needs, such as finding housing, escaping an unsafe environment or getting critical mental health or addiction treatment. It can also put people on the most appropriate pathway as soon as possible, including consistent and effective help in applying to the disability support program.

Creating the environment where front-line workers support individuals in creating a tangible plan that reflects personal goals and promotes autonomy has many benefits. It results in more productive use of staff time, improved job satisfaction and better outcomes for individuals and families. A key to this positive environment is a robust and timely process of referrals, so that individuals can access the supports they need to achieve their plan.

This fundamental cultural shift can only be successful if:

- The legislative framework is amended to endorse, support and require the change, including a clear role in helping people achieve broader social inclusion goals.



- People are able to access services and supports in a place where they feel safe and comfortable, as well as heard and understood by staff sensitive to people's diverse backgrounds and experiences. For Indigenous peoples this must mean the ability to access supports in the location of their choice, whether within their First Nations community, a local Indigenous Friendship Centre or other Indigenous agency where there is a range of connected and culturally relevant services and supports.
- Financial penalties that have been shown to be ineffective and counter-productive are eliminated and policies that create barriers to safety and well-being are changed.



Currently, there are a number of financial penalties that can be applied against an individual. Today, a condition of eligibility for Ontario Works and for non-disabled individuals receiving ODSP is that they develop a “participation agreement” that outlines activities they will undertake to get employment-ready or find a job. Not signing a participation agreement, or not upholding the commitments contained within it, can result in assistance being suspended, reduced or cancelled. Similar penalties can occur when a person does not provide a specific piece of information within a certain number of days regardless of whether the information is truly critical. While front-line workers often stop these automated penalties or take steps to reach out to people to probe what is happening, a stronger and more consistent service expectation needs to be put in place, one that reflects current best practices in the duty to accommodate. Penalties rely on negative reinforcement that is shown to be ineffective and counter-productive, commonly leading to stress and anxiety, and creating a real risk of pushing individuals further into poverty.



Currently, there are rules within Ontario Works and ODSP that undermine the safety, independence and well-being of individuals, opening them up to vulnerability and control. This may include parents who are trying to have their children returned by a Children's Aid Society or a woman who is trying to escape domestic violence who receives social assistance as a joint payment with her partner. In the same way, a person receiving ODSP who requires a trustee may be at a greater risk of abuse (financial, physical, emotional, etc.), if there are not appropriate checks and balances to assess the suitability of the trustee.

Analysis of policies needs to occur to ensure that they do not increase vulnerability or compromise the safety of women fleeing violence, children, people with disabilities, Indigenous people and all others who access the system for support.

- Holistic assessments are carried out, resulting in plans that reflect achievable goals identified by individuals, working collaboratively with their worker.
- There are clear performance expectations for front-line workers, and a transparent process for individuals to raise concerns.
- Investments are made in more front-line workers and they are provided with regular and ongoing professional development to do their job. This includes having the right knowledge, skills, tools and resources to complete meaningful assessments, collaboratively develop individualized support plans and exercise good discretionary judgment.
- Concrete action is taken to reduce the administrative burden on both front-line workers and people getting help so more time can be spent on building and fostering a positive and collaborative relationship. Creating this time requires:



- A simpler social assistance structure that greatly reduces reporting requirements, meaning there are fewer rules that staff must learn, apply and monitor and that individuals and families must worry about and respond to
 - A collaborative approach that does not rely on financial penalties to enforce behaviour and undermine the ability of front-line workers to develop an individualized plan
 - Modernized delivery and more online, easy-to-use services, while recognizing that technology solutions must be directly aligned to the new paradigm and that such solutions will not work for everyone
 - A different approach to program integrity and accountability that focusses on system-level risks rather than individual “policing”
-
- The new approach is based on clear and reasonable accountability, understanding that individuals drive their own plans with assistance and support from their workers. In concert with the other changes needed to shift the culture, workers will follow through on the new approach to planning and assessment and make connections to the needed resources. In collaboration with their workers, individuals will identify elements of their plan and steps to achieve them.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1

Position front-line workers as case collaborators whose primary role is to act as supportive problem-solvers and human services system navigators in a way that allows people to share information without fear of reprisals. This includes working with individuals in both individual and group settings.

8.2

Introduce a comprehensive assessment tool to identify needs for, and barriers to, social and economic inclusion that uses an equity and trauma-informed approach to connect people to appropriate supports.

8.3

Use pilots to test the comprehensive assessment tool and the case collaborator role with an initial focus on people seeking to access ODSP through Ontario Works, long-term social assistance recipients, youth and persons with disabilities.

8.4

Eliminate financial and eligibility penalties related to employment efforts and rigid reporting requirements to support a new person-centred approach, promote trust and respect between front-line workers and people accessing help, and place a firm emphasis on problem-solving and addressing urgent needs first (e.g., risk of homelessness). This includes revising policies that create barriers to safety and well-being (e.g., fleeing an unsafe home).

8.5

Ensure front-line workers have the necessary skills and knowledge to act as case collaborators through:

- Mandatory professional development and learning, including skills in social work (i.e., anti-racism, contemporary professional development and anti-oppressive practice), and Indigenous cultural safety training and awareness.
- Provincially set and governed quality standards and controls tied to staff performance plans.



8.6

Regularly situate Ontario Works and ODSP case collaborators in Indigenous service delivery offices to improve cultural awareness and understanding and support better inter-agency relationships.

8.7

Clearly recognize Indigenous peoples' right to choose service in their preferred location.

8.8

Ensure staffing at all levels reflects the diversity of Ontario, and model truly inclusive offices that are welcoming spaces and reflect the multitude of cultures and communities served across the province, including the diversity within and across Indigenous communities.

8.9

Continuously review and adjust the service approach, professional development and tools and resources based on feedback from partners and people accessing programs.

8.10

Establish a First Nations–developed and implemented program based on self-identification, self-worth and true reconciliation leading to life stabilization.

8.11

Conduct analyses on current and proposed policies and services to ensure they do not increase vulnerability or undermine safety of those receiving support. This should include a culture- and gender-based analysis to ensure safety of Indigenous women.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Recommendation 9: Maintain and strengthen ODSP as a distinct program for people with disabilities. Ensure that both ODSP and Ontario Works are well equipped to support people with disabilities with meeting individual goals for social and economic inclusion.

As concepts about disability change, the challenge is to evolve income support programs for people with disabilities in Ontario, including within First Nations communities, to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: promoting an adequate standard of living and full social and economic inclusion, while recognizing continuing attitudinal and environmental barriers to participation as equal members of society.

“States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions, and shall take appropriate steps to safeguard and promote the realization of this right without discrimination on the basis of disability.”

~ Article 28, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁸²

The majority of households with people receiving social assistance include one or more people living with disabilities. By definition, everyone on ODSP has a substantial physical or mental impairment. Many Ontario Works recipients also have disabilities. In fact, most people on ODSP entered through Ontario Works. The shift to a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving, as envisioned in the previous two sections of the Roadmap, will help to identify disability issues at an early stage and provide responsive support, no matter which door people use to enter social assistance.

⁸² United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities



We note that ODSP has many positive features, including its definition of disability. There are challenges, however, in gaining access to the program, the level and type of ongoing case support, and the financial eligibility needs-testing and rules.

A DISTINCT PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities often face lifelong barriers. Depending on the nature of their disability, they may move in and out of the labour market at different points, or may be unable to work at all. As long as income supports for people with disabilities are not fully met by federal programs, private plans or employer-funded workplace injury plans, Ontario needs a distinct income support program. For many people, especially those who are born with disabilities or acquire them early in life, it is their “first resort” for income support.

To remove the barrier of jurisdiction and to ensure that First Nations individuals in receipt of ODSP do not have delays in their reporting and payment schedules, allowing First Nations to administer and deliver ODSP on their own lands should finally be considered. First Nations people are significantly under-represented in ODSP, because the program is difficult to access and not available through local staff. Local administration and delivery are crucial to overcoming these barriers.

DEFINITION OF DISABILITY

The definition of disability contained in the ODSP legislation works well. The definition considers disability in the context of the whole person. It recognizes that people with disabilities want to and may be able to work, with support, and that the ability to work is not necessarily tied to the apparent severity of the disability. The definition also has the advantage of being well understood with the benefit of 20 years of experience and case law interpreting it.

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

- 4 (1)** A person is a person with a disability for the purposes of this Part if,
- (a)** the person has a substantial physical or mental impairment that is continuous or recurrent and expected to last one year or more;
 - (b)** the direct and cumulative effect of the impairment on the person's ability to attend to his or her personal care, function in the community and function in a workplace, results in a substantial restriction in one or more of these activities of daily living; and
 - (c)** the impairment and its likely duration and the restriction in the person's activities of daily living have been verified by a person with the prescribed qualifications. 1997, c. 25, Sched. B, s. 4 (1).

~ Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997

ODSP APPLICATION PROCESS

Many vulnerable persons find the ODSP application process to be a barrier to access. There is a need to simplify the process and provide support to people in navigating it.

We believe that government must be responsible for ensuring that applicants receive the support and accommodation they may need to navigate the ODSP application process. We acknowledge that many community groups have stepped in to provide this service. While these efforts are commended and have a place in the community fabric, a local approach alone may mean that individuals in some areas of the province may not have the same level of access.

We encourage the ministry to continue working with stakeholders (including those with lived experience of disability and the ODSP program, health professionals and advocates) to ensure the disability support application and adjudication process is



as simple and streamlined as possible, and that individuals are accommodated in the process. The Disability Adjudication Working Group⁸³ is well placed to consider identified areas for improving ODSP adjudication, and we suggest that Ontario Works and ODSP caseworkers also be involved. Priority areas include:

- Making the adjudication process more transparent.
- Improving the quality of decision-making through improved hiring and training and better internal processes.
- Ensuring equitable access for Indigenous peoples.
- Reviewing administrative and legal processes.

Improving the quality of disability adjudication will have the added benefit of reducing the number of unnecessary appeals.

Medical review is currently a mechanism in place to determine whether those who received ODSP for a condition that is likely to improve within a specified time frame have in fact improved or whether they continue to be eligible. The ministry, in partnership with the Disability Adjudication Working Group, recently simplified the medical review process by introducing a new form, which will be easier for ODSP recipients and health care professionals to complete. This is a positive step in improving the medical review process.

CASEWORKER SUPPORT

Ontario Works includes many people with disabilities, including some who will, and others who will not, make the transition to ODSP. It is essential for both ODSP and Ontario Works to be well equipped to support and accommodate

83 The purpose of the Disability Adjudication Working Group is to provide advice and recommendations to help the Ministry of Community and Social Services to renew ODSP disability adjudication. Members include health care professionals, legal providers and advocacy/support agencies

people with disabilities. The proposed legislative framework and rebranding of Ontario Works will reflect the view that anyone who comes in the door—whether for short-term assistance or for help on the way to receiving longer-term support under ODSP—must have access to the holistic wraparound services they need.

The person-centred and supportive case management approach, which forms part of the proposed culture shift, is critically important for both programs. In ODSP, for example, many people currently have limited contact with their caseworkers unless they initiate it. This is largely due to the high volume of files assigned to each caseworker.

People with disabilities have ambitions and aspirations. Caseworkers should provide supports to people to help realize those aspirations. Those supports might include assistance in accessing post-secondary education, employment supports, or support to engage in volunteer opportunities that connect people with their communities, whether or not those activities lead to employment.



DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1

Recognize the continued need for a distinct income support program for people with disabilities.

9.2

Retain the current ODSP definition of disability.

9.3

Continue work with the Disability Adjudication Working Group to streamline and improve the ODSP application and adjudication process.



9.4

Provide provincial-level assistance and accommodation for people who need help with the ODSP application process, building on lessons learned from community groups.

9.5

Include specific review with First Nations and urban Indigenous service delivery partners to ensure that the assistance and accommodation reflect the unique experience of Indigenous people.

9.6

Ensure that both ODSP and Ontario Works accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities as part of the person-centred, collaborative approach to support individual goals and aspirations.

ASSURED INCOME APPROACH FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Recommendation 10: Use an inclusive process to design an “assured income” approach for people with disabilities.

ODSP provides long-term financial support as many recipients, due to the nature of their disabilities, often face lifelong barriers to working. However, the approach to financial eligibility rules for people on ODSP is as restrictive and punitive as it is for Ontario Works. Non-compliance with the complex web of eligibility rules frequently puts monthly benefits at risk even where it is clear the person remains eligible.



A report on the “welfareization” of disability in Ontario identified “severe restrictions on the level of assets that recipients may obtain and keep, strict rules that vary benefits based on cohabitation and sharing of accommodation, a cap on the level of gifts that a recipient may receive, and a deduction of most other income sources from benefits at a 100% claw back rate...Each of these rules reinforces systemic stigmatization of recipients by disallowing recipients to improve their situations in ways that most Canadians would take for granted (e.g., saving money, moving in with someone else to reduce expenses, or obtaining help from a family member)”⁸⁴.

Rather than having the same financial needs-testing model for both programs, ODSP recipients need an “assured income” model that is less restrictive, more transparent, and makes it safe to go in and out of the workforce without fear of delayed income reconciliation or loss of disability designation.

An assured income program for persons with disabilities would better reflect the needs of individuals, many of whom have lifelong barriers to social inclusion and employment.

Stable income alone is not sufficient to support people’s full social and economic inclusion. Even with an assured income approach, it will be essential for recipients to continue to have ongoing access to an ODSP case collaborator and an individualized support plan to help connect them to other services they may need. Even after income adequacy is reached, there will be individuals who have extraordinarily high costs, which means extra financial help must remain available for needs such as medical travel. This would include supports now available through Mandatory Special Necessities (medical travel, surgical and incontinence supplies) as well as supports developed to promote people’s personal and career goals.

84 By John Stapleton for the Metcalf Foundation, The “Welfareization” of Disability: What are the factors causing this trend?, December 2013, <http://metcalffoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Welfareization-of-Disability-Incomes-in-Ontario.pdf> [accessed July 7, 2017]



Because moving to an assured income model will be a major change in the way financial support is delivered, it must be co-designed with people across a broad range of disabilities (e.g., mobility, chronic pain, mental health, developmental, chronic and episodic). This is an important practice that is rooted in the disability rights movement call for “nothing about us without us”. Experienced advocates and caseworkers should also be part of the co-designed process.

Many disability advocates have recommended that the benefit unit for disability income supports should be individualized, and not include spousal income to determine eligibility. But for some families that may prove to be a risk. The co-design process should examine the impact to persons with disabilities of changing the benefit unit from family to individual.

Unknown variables that may affect the new model include costing, successful implementation of other Roadmap elements, and whether the federal government will respond to calls from disability communities to implement a national disability income support program.

While the specifics of the new assured income mechanism for financial support will depend on the co-design process, we have identified desirable features in the recommendations below.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1

Co-design an “assured income” mechanism for delivering financial support to people who meet the ODSP definition of disability. Consultation with First Nations people is essential.

10.2

Include the following features in the assured income mechanism:

- Income-tested only (i.e., no asset test).
- Stacking of income benefits to reach adequacy.

- Tax-based definition of income (i.e., does not include financial help (gifts) from family or friends).
- Continued responsibility of the provincial government to determine disability, with the right of appeal to the Ontario Social Benefits Tribunal.
- Flexibility to adjust to in-year income changes.
- Safe to move into employment and back to the program.

10.3

Provide an initial Assured Income benefit at least as high as the ODSP Standard Flat Rate at the time of transition. Provide continued increases until the Minimum Income Standard is achieved in combination with other income security components ([see Setting a Goal for Income Adequacy, page 69](#)).

10.4

Ensure that people receiving the Assured Income have full access to ODSP caseworker services and support.

10.5

Provide First Nations with the ability to administer and deliver ODSP in their own communities in the same manner as Ontario Works.



A TRANSFORMED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE STRUCTURE

RATE STRUCTURE

Recommendation 11: Transform the social assistance rate structure so that all adults have access to a consistent level of support regardless of living situation (i.e., rental, ownership, board and lodge, no fixed address, rent-geared-to-income housing, government-funded facility).

The current structure of social assistance income support and benefits contributes to complexity, the culture of intrusiveness and “policing”, and the burden shouldered by people seeking help. It does not reflect how people budget in their everyday lives and assumes people living in poverty should not have choice and dignity. The structure makes it hard for people to know what supports are available and onerous for front-line workers to deliver the programs effectively.

Social assistance rates vary based on where you live, with whom you live and what your shelter costs are. This means individuals have to provide continuous proof of their actual shelter costs and living arrangements. They have to disclose if they are living with roommates or alone, if someone prepares their food for them, and if they are in social housing. If they live with someone who is unrelated, a common situation in today’s high-cost housing market, they have to demonstrate how much rent they contribute and, after three months, they may be considered spouses based on an intrusive test.



Today's social assistance programs deem people to be in a spousal relationship after just three months based on intrusive questions about their personal and financial relationship. Not only does this seem out of sync with the cost-sharing that often happens among roommates, it creates unfair barriers for low-income people entering intimate relationships because of a risk that they will become ineligible for assistance and potentially entirely reliant on the other individual. This is a particular inequity for people with disabilities as it may be restrict them from exercising their own personal independence.

If you have no housing costs because you are homeless or are temporarily living with friends or family, you get no support for shelter costs, making it enormously difficult to secure housing at all. If you are an adult who chooses to live with your parents, you go through a confusing test of "independence" that undermines personal preferences about family unity and assumes there are other housing choices in the community, a significant problem in First Nations and rural or remote communities.

Simplifying the rate structure in Ontario Works and ODSP will have multiple transformative benefits:

- It will improve equity and income adequacy for some of the most vulnerable people such as those with no fixed address.
- It will free up front-line staff time so they can focus on building positive relationships with individuals to help them solve problems and connect to the supports they need.
- It will reduce the intrusive and complex nature of the current rules that require people, for example, to prove how much rent they pay each month.



This flat-rate structure would apply to all adults, with a higher standard flat rate for people with disabilities, including but not limited to those who rent in the private market, live in social housing or a boarding arrangement, own their own home or have no fixed address.

Adults without disabilities living with their parents who are receiving social assistance will now be able to qualify in their own right without having to prove financial independence after the age of 24, while those ages 18 to 24 will receive a dependent rate that recognizes family-based economies of scale for youth residing at home.

Couples who are considered spouses will receive 1.5 times the relevant standard flat rate. Couples will be considered spouses when they have lived together for at least three years (to align with the Family Law Act) unless they are married or self-declare themselves to be spouses. This is a more realistic timeframe for determining a spousal relationship, resource-sharing and support obligations than the current three months. Until spousal status is confirmed, two persons residing in the same residence would be treated as two singles.

Moving to a flat-rate structure means eliminating the rent scales currently used for those receiving social assistance and living in rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing. Individuals living in RGI housing will receive the Standard Flat Rate or Standard Couple Flat Rate. Social assistance recipients living in RGI housing will pay 30% of their income, including social assistance income, towards their rent to align rental payment with non-social assistance tenants.



For some individuals, particularly those in board and lodge or without a fixed address, a shift to a flat rate will mean an immediate and significant increase in their monthly income. For example, using 2017 social assistance rates, an individual in board and lodge would go from receiving a maximum of \$594 per month from social assistance to \$721. An individual without a fixed address would go from \$337 to \$721. This is a critical shift and, along with the simplicity that comes from transforming the rate structure, is one of the reasons this change must be urgently implemented. However, it is also important that this increase in income come with an active offer of support to connect people to housing, financial empowerment programming, personal budgeting supports, counselling and other services and supports they may need to gain the greatest benefit from this transformative change. For example, programs like the Financial Empowerment and Problem-Solving program provide financial education, advocacy and services like tax filing and budgeting to low-income people in their communities, while some municipalities equip social housing workers to educate individuals in the rights and responsibilities of being a tenant.



DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1

Transform the social assistance rate structure so that:

- Single adults receive a Standard Flat Rate that does not distinguish between basic needs and shelter.
- Couples receive a Standard Couple Flat Rate equal to 1.5 of the Standard Flat Rate.
- In recognition of the additional cost of living with a disability, single adults with a disability receive a higher Standard Flat Rate – Disability and couples receive a Standard Couple Rate – Disability of 1.5 the Standard Flat Rate – Disability. Adult children aged 18–24 (without a disability) who live with their parent(s) on social assistance receive a Dependent Rate (75% of the Standard Flat Rate for the first dependent and 35% for each additional dependent). Non-disabled adult children over age 24 who live with their parent(s) receive the full Standard Flat Rate. People with disabilities will continue to qualify in their own right for ODSP at the age of 18.

11.2

Align the definition of spouse under social assistance with the Family Law Act (i.e., deemed a spouse after three years).

11.3

In moving to a Standard Flat Rate structure, eliminate the rent scales currently used for those receiving social assistance. Require municipal housing services managers to invest the increased revenues resulting from the elimination of rent-geared-to-income rent scales (due to the transformed rate structure) into local housing and homelessness priorities.

SUPPORTING EMPLOYMENT GOALS

Recommendation 12: Improve social assistance rules and redesign benefits to make it easier for people to pursue their employment goals and realize the benefits of working.

Shifting the culture of social assistance to one that promotes a culture of trust, collaboration and problem-solving, and transforming the rate structure to free up time for front-line workers to act as case collaborators and human services navigators, including with groups of individuals, is critical to supporting better quality of life outcomes.

Personalized support and a seamless system of employment and training services are keys to helping individuals identify their goals and build on their strengths and assets to achieve them. There is already work underway to better integrate employment and training services and improve the way programs work with other systems, such as education, so that individuals, including people with disabilities, can advance their employability and be successful in the job market.

For example, Employment Ontario is working to transform its employment and training services. Actions underway include a new approach to Local Employment Planning Councils, establishing the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation, and redesigning skills training programs to better match skills gaps and mismatches. At the local level, projects such as the Metrolinx Eglinton Crosstown have made a point of identifying community benefits to support employment, including local employment targets. There have also been steps made through workforce development initiatives to build a more inclusive workforce. For example, Access Talent, the recently released employment strategy for persons with disabilities, includes measures aimed at increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities and connecting businesses to new talent⁸⁵.

85 For more information please see: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/access-talent-ontarios-employment-strategy-people-disabilities?ga=2.52132143.749918405.1499867994-566627687.1499867994>



First Nations Delivery Agents of Ontario Works have been seeking designation to deliver and administer Employment Ontario employment services programming, which will assist their community members in becoming more employable and succeed in gaining and maintaining employment.

Overall, this Roadmap does not seek to duplicate the employment and training services transformation work; rather it recognizes that a transformed social assistance can play a more effective part in helping people towards employment as one positive outcome.

By being connected earlier to the supports they need to stabilize their lives—whether that is finding a safe place to live or seeking mental health or addiction counselling—individuals will be better placed to think about their employment aspirations and take steps to realize their goals. Removing counter-productive and punitive rules that cause stress, and allowing people to gain a foothold in the workforce, will also better position individuals to realize benefits of working that go beyond the financial rewards and include better health and well-being, improved confidence and self-esteem and a sense of community connectedness. There are two other ways that social assistance can do a better job in helping people to pursue their employment goals:

- Currently, people receiving social assistance have to navigate between numerous employment-related benefits, each with its own distinct rules even though the benefits seem to serve the same purpose—that is extra support to achieve one’s employment goals. Redesigning these benefits would make it simpler to get extra financial help to pursue work or training opportunities.
- Earning exemptions are not applied under Ontario Works until an individual has been in receipt of assistance for three consecutive months. This means that any earned income in the first three months is deducted dollar for dollar from the person’s monthly payments. This policy may provide a disincentive for a person to pursue employment in the first three months of assistance, which may make it more difficult for them to regain stability and confidence. Shortening this waiting period from three months to one month would allow a person to begin their journey towards employment and self-sufficiency sooner and lead to better personal outcomes.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 Redesign, using a co-design process, existing employment-related benefits (except the ODSP Work-Related Benefit) into one benefit with consideration given to whether the new benefit should be mandatory or discretionary, the level of prescription in the activities the benefit can support, and the level of support that is provided to meet a broad range of needs; and test the new benefit before province-wide roll out).

12.2 Reduce the wait period for exempting employment earnings to one month (from three months) in Ontario Works.

12.3 Designate First Nations Ontario Works delivery agents to deliver and administer the Employment Ontario employment assistance program. This will better assist their community members in becoming employable through the array of programming and benefits that are not available to them for a variety of reasons. These may include, but are not limited to, vast distances from municipalities or urban centres where Employment Ontario programs are placed, lack of services focussed on developing employability skills available through the Ontario Works program, and the recent removal of assisting programs (e.g., First Nations Job Fund).

12.4 Support case collaboration in both individual and group settings.



INCOME AND ASSETS

Recommendation 13: Modernize income and asset rules so people can maximize the income sources available to them and save for the future.

A number of factors currently contribute to eligibility for social assistance, including the level and type of income, the amount and type of assets, and the amount of time you live with someone who might be considered a “spouse”.

Being able to maximize and benefit from the full range of income available is an important step in reaching adequacy—we have heard for too long from people living in poverty who receive income from one source, only to have it “clawed back” from another source, leaving them no further ahead. For example, while employment earnings are partially exempt, Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan - Disability payments reduce social assistance income dollar for dollar.

Equally detrimental are asset policy rules that make someone spend down almost all of their savings—even if intended for retirement—before they can qualify for support. Having resilience and independence and a cushion to fall back on goes a long way to reducing stress and promoting stability.

In the 2017 Budget, the province made positive changes to the asset policy that took effect in September 2017:

In Ontario Works, asset limits increased:

- From \$2,500 to \$10,000 for single individuals.
- From \$5,000 to \$15,000 for couples.

In ODSP, asset limits increased:

- From \$5,000 to \$40,000 for single individuals.
- From \$7,500 to \$50,000 for couples.

However, there is more that can be done—in particular to support and promote effective long-term investment vehicles. As programs evolve, the approach to savings and assets will need to be reconsidered.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

13.1 Exempt as assets funds held in Tax-Free Savings Accounts and all forms of Registered Retirement Savings Plans so people do not have to deplete resources meant for their senior years.

13.2 Initially exempt 25% of Canada Pension Plan - Disability, Employment Insurance and Workplace Safety and Insurance Board payments from social assistance (i.e., social assistance would be reduced by 75 cents for every dollar of income from these sources rather than dollar for dollar).

13.3 Increase the income exemption for Canada Pension Plan - Disability, Employment Insurance and Workplace Safety and Insurance Board to the same level as the existing earnings exemption by 2022–23.

ALLOWANCES AND BENEFITS

Recommendation 14: Ensure ongoing access to targeted allowances and benefits until such a time as adequacy is achieved. Determine which extraordinary costs remain beyond the means of individuals even when adequacy is achieved and maintain those benefits.

The inadequacy of social assistance rates, compounded by income rules that don't support the "stacking" of income from multiple sources described above, means that people can find it very difficult to find the extra income to support



additional costs they may have—whether it’s the cost of a medically necessary diet, regular trips to an out-of-town specialist or traditional healer, or the additional cost of living in remote regions of the province where necessities like food, electricity and building materials are exponentially more than elsewhere in the province. Over time this has resulted in the creation of additional benefits to support unique costs.

Achieving adequacy in the broad income security system may not reduce the role that current targeted benefits play. Indeed certain benefits are crucial and need to be maintained either permanently or until such time as greater adequacy is achieved. As progress towards adequacy is made and people’s outcomes are better understood through a made-in-Ontario Market Basket Measure, these supports can be reviewed based on a concrete assessment of ongoing need. This review must be undertaken with experts, including health care professionals and people with lived experience.

For example, there may be adjustments to the kinds of conditions considered under the Special Diet Allowance, both in terms of adding some conditions to the program and/or removing others. Medical transportation is also subject to the availability of various modes of transportation within communities, so consideration will need to be given to whether that variance can be better reflected in the program. These intricacies are why a broad range of perspectives is needed in considering special-purpose allowances and benefits.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1

Retain the following special-purpose allowances/benefits and review as progress towards adequacy is made and people’s outcomes are better understood:

- Special Diet Allowance
- Mandatory Special Necessities/Medical Transportation

- Pregnancy and Breast-Feeding Nutritional Allowance
- ODSP Work-Related Benefit

14.2

Revise medical transportation rules to include and support improved access to traditional healers.

14.3

Review and introduce expanded eligibility criteria for the Remote Communities Allowance to better address the needs of northern and remote communities.

14.4

Redesign Ontario Works discretionary benefits as other recommendations are implemented (e.g., making core health benefits and help with funeral and burial costs mandatory) and consider making them available to the broader low-income population.



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Welfare changes credited as Toronto food-bank use drops in first three months of 2018

By **LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN** Social Justice Reporter

Thu., May 24, 2018

Food bank use in Toronto dipped by 16,000 visits between January and March this year, the first time in four years there has been a decrease during this time period, according to Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank.

"The most remarkable aspect of this drop is that the largest decrease is among households that rely on social assistance," said the food bank's research director, Richard Matern.



Richard Matern, research director of the Daily Bread Food Bank, where new provincial social policies have been credited for a reduction in users in the first three months of the year. (CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR)

Total visits dropped to 186,835 during the first three months of the year, a decline of 8 per cent when compared to the first quarter of 2017, according to an update report, released Thursday.

Daily Bread credits several social policy changes for the drop, including an easing of provincial welfare rules over the past year, indexing of the Canada child benefit last July, and Ontario's minimum wage boost to \$14 on Jan. 1.

It is the first time food bank use has dropped during the first quarter — the post-holiday period when visits usually spike — since 2014, when Daily Bread began compiling data in this way, he noted.

Although the report covers just the first three months of the year — full results will be released in the food bank's annual report in September — the trend shows what can happen when federal and provincial social policy measures are aligned, Matern said.

“While the economy has been strong, there have also been numerous social policy initiatives, mostly at provincial level, that may have had an important impact on those struggling with hunger and poverty,” he said. “It is something voters need to keep in mind during the provincial election.”

The latest polls indicate that the Progressive Conservatives and NDP are running neck and neck in the [June 7 election](#).

Last year, [there were 990,970 visits](#) to food banks in Toronto. While food-bank use has been trending down from a high of almost 1.2 million visits in 2010, it is still well above pre-recession levels of the mid-2000s when there were between 700,000 and 800,000 visits annually, he noted.

This year's first-quarter decrease among households receiving social assistance was particularly noteworthy because this group is more likely to be living in poverty and going without food, Matern added.

People who rely on social assistance — Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) — represented 64 per cent of food-bank users in 2017.

The drop in food-bank use among the working poor and seniors relying on old-age pensions was less dramatic, with both decreasing by just over 3 per cent.

January's minimum wage increase and introduction of automatic enrolment for the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors may have reduced food-bank visits among these groups, the report says.

Other changes that could account for the overall decrease in food bank use include:

- Full exemption of child support payments from social assistance claw-backs in early 2017 means support is no longer deducted dollar for dollar.
- A rise in the annual exemption for cash gifts to \$10,000 from \$6,000 for people on social assistance in September 2017 in recognition of the support people receive from family and friends when they are experiencing financial difficulties.
- An increase in liquid assets in early 2018 for people on social assistance to \$10,000 from \$2,500 for OW and to \$40,000 from \$5,000 for ODSP.
- The introduction of free college and university tuition for low-income students last September along with changes to the Ontario Student Loan Program (OSAP) to allow those on social assistance and studying full time to keep 100 per cent of any earnings. (About 10 per cent of food-bank users are college and university students.)
- The introduction of free prescription drugs for everyone under 25 in January 2018. (While not specifically targeted to people living in poverty, past research shows parents give up food to pay for children's needs, including prescription medication.)

Although it is difficult to attribute the decrease in food bank visits to any one change, research in Newfoundland and Labrador showed a significant decline in food insecurity — particularly among those relying on social assistance — from 2007-12 when that province enacted multi-year poverty reduction efforts including many of the recent measures adopted in Ontario, Matern said.

“There is no silver bullet to reducing poverty,” Matern said. “It is not just a strong economy or one policy or benefit.”

Ongoing reform of social assistance, more universal benefits such as prescription drugs for the working poor and seniors, affordable housing and collaboration at all levels of government are needed to reduce poverty and hunger in Ontario, he added.



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