

The Right Reverend
ANDREW J. ASBIL
Bishop of Toronto



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May 8, 2019

The Honorable Doug Ford, M.P.P.,
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building,
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford,

I am writing on behalf of Anglicans throughout the Diocese of Toronto in response to your government's inaugural budget, "Protecting What Matters Most," released on April 11, 2019. We welcome a number of commitments made by your government in this budget, especially those related to housing. However, we wish to express concern at a number of troubling measures, including cuts to social assistance, Legal Aid, and public health, as well as your government's response to the challenge of climate change.

First of all, we would like to acknowledge your government's commitment to matching the funds available from the federal government through the National Housing Strategy, which was one of the key housing asks in our pre-budget submission. In our pre-budget submission we also urged your government to prioritize non-profit, cooperative, and supportive housing providers of affordable housing. We are, therefore, glad to see that the 2019 Ontario Budget was followed up this week with the announcement of an investment of \$1 billion dollars to help sustain, repair, and grow community housing, and the launch of a new provincial Community Housing Renewal Strategy, which will create incentives for community housing providers. We also welcome the continued provision of portable housing benefits to survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking. We look forward to further details of the Community Housing Renewal Strategy and your government's Housing Action Supply Plan, as they become available.

We continue to be concerned, however, about the effect of exempting new rental construction from rent controls. Without rent controls, people living in these units will face increasing affordability pressures, pushing them into core housing need and potentially into homelessness. While this may provide an incentive for developers, we fail to see how such a measure prevents homelessness overall.

Aside from housing commitments, this budget does little to help people living on low incomes in Ontario. While the increases in earnings exemptions for social assistance recipients is welcome, as we outlined in our pre-budget submission, increasing the clawbacks above the exemption from 50%



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to 75% will penalize those who work more, undermining the goal of overcoming barriers to employment. No further increases to social assistance rates have been announced, leaving people on Ontario Works and ODSP unable to meet their basic needs even as the cost of living increases. Rather, your budget anticipates an estimated annual \$1 billion in savings from social services over 4 years, suggesting that the most vulnerable in Ontario will be left even further behind.

We also continue to be concerned about the proposed eligibility changes for ODSP, about which no details have been provided since the social assistance review announcement in November. As we mentioned in our pre-budget submission, moving to a stricter definition of disability will force many people with conditions which impair their full participation in the workforce onto the lower benefit rates of Ontario Works, resulting in worsening health outcomes for those individuals and a greater burden on our healthcare system more generally.

Some of the projected savings from social services are anticipated to come from increasing online services for social assistance clients. However, people on social assistance are the least able to afford computers and internet access. Rather, they are among the 28% of Ontarians who depend on public libraries for internet access. Your government's recently-announced 50% cut to library funding presents an even greater obstacle for these Ontarians to be able to access the services upon which they depend.

In addition, the 30% cut to the Legal Aid budget threatens the continued operation of community legal clinics, which assist the most vulnerable Ontarians in understanding and accessing their rights to housing, income supports, employment standards and other basic needs. More people will be forced to try to represent themselves, creating further backlogs – and resultant expense – in the justice system, or will go without access to justice altogether.

Moreover, the ban on using provincial Legal Aid funds for refugee and immigration cases is unconscionable. As Anglicans we are called by our faith to welcome the stranger, and our churches and clergy see many refugee claimants seeking assistance. Without representation, a significant number of refugee claimants with legitimate cases will be denied status and face deportation back to life-threatening situations.

The introduction of the LIFT and CARE tax credits are introduced as providing relief to low income workers. However, very few Ontarians will enjoy the full benefit of these measures. As the Financial Accountability Office has reported, the LIFT tax credit will only benefit 38% of minimum wage earners, and those who benefit will receive an average \$409 in 2019. By contrast, raising the minimum wage from \$14 to \$15 per hour would have benefited 1.3 million individuals, who would



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have received an average net after-tax benefit of \$810. Moreover, the LIFT tax benefit will add \$1.9 billion to the provincial deficit over five years¹. As for the CARE tax credit, the full benefits are only available to families earning below \$20,000, for whom childcare in most of Ontario will remain unaffordable, regardless of a rebate delivered at tax time the following year. The option of receiving advance payments on this tax credit would provide some help, but that option is not available until the 2021 tax year. Instead, as David MacDonald, senior economist at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives points out, the average benefit of the CARE tax credit for Ontarians who claim child care expenses is a mere \$52 per month (\$624 per year), a tiny fraction of the median monthly child care fees in Ontario's big cities and barely over one tenth of the full benefit.²

Another welcome development is the announcement of free dental services at public health centres for seniors with incomes below \$19,300 or senior couples with a combined income under \$32,200. However, this announcement is overshadowed by the cuts to public health services both in Toronto and elsewhere, which will affect pre-natal care, breakfast programs for low-income students, and other preventive health measures. In addition, as we communicated to the Minister of Health earlier this month, we strongly urge your government to restore provincial licencing and funding for the overdose prevention sites recently denied licences and funding by the province, including those at St. Stephen's Community House and Street Health in Toronto. Investing in public health is a crucial way to eliminate costly stress on our hospital system, end "hallway medicine" and protect what matters most.

Finally, while we commend your government for providing incentives for corporations to invest in clean energy equipment, and for exploring ways to expand composting and recycling programs and reduce waste, we are very concerned about the impacts this budget will have for the environment overall. Aside from the \$400 million emissions fund announced last November, this budget contains no details of any other investments to achieve its stated environmental commitments of protecting air quality, species at risk, or the Great Lakes, addressing climate change impacts or increasing conservation, and with significant cuts to the budget for Environment, Conservation and Parks, it is hard to see how these commitments can be honoured. Considering that climate change is increasing the incidence and expense of wildfires and floods, it is disheartening to see that the increased costs of fighting forest fires is not planned for in the budget, and that conservation authorities' funding for flood management has been cut by 50%.

This government's cancellation of the cap and trade program has already cost Ontario \$3 billion in lost revenue over the next four years, according to the Financial Accountability Office. On top of this lost revenue, your government is now proposing to spend taxpayers' money in fighting the federal government's carbon tax backstop and in requiring gas stations to display stickers about the

¹ <https://www.fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/LIFT-report-2019>

² <http://behindthenumbers.ca/2019/04/15/ontario-child-care-budget2019/>



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carbon tax. We respectfully submit that the money spent on fighting the federal government and printing and distributing stickers could be put to better use by further enhancing Ontario's emissions reductions, the "leadership" in which was largely due to actions of the previous provincial government, which this government has not renewed.

The 2019 Ontario Budget claims to be all about "protecting what matters most." However, aside from a few welcome developments in such things as community housing and dental health for low-income seniors, this budget contains little good news with overwhelming negative impacts on people living in poverty, on refugee claimants fleeing persecution, on public health, and on Ontario's environment. These impacts will create an even greater deficit for our province in the long term.

Anglicans in our Diocese will continue to do what we can to assist the most vulnerable members of our communities and to care for the environment as our common home. We will also continue to urge you to do your part in creating the conditions where Ontario can truly be "a place to grow" for all.

Yours sincerely,

The Rt. Rev. Andrew J. Asbil
Bishop of Toronto