



Diocese of Toronto

Anglican Church of Canada

“Building Ontario Together”

Pre-budget Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs,
Government of Ontario

From Bishop Andrew J. Asbil and the Social Justice & Advocacy Committee

Anglican Diocese of Toronto

135 Adelaide St. E., Toronto, Ontario M5C 1L8

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Introduction

The Diocese of Toronto extends over 26,000 square kilometres, from Mississauga to Brighton along Lake Ontario and from Collingwood to Haliburton along its northern border. This area includes not only the City of Toronto but 5 of the 10 largest cities in Ontario as well as suburban, small town and rural communities. The Diocese is made up of 230 congregations in 183 parishes, which serve the spiritual and physical needs of hundreds of thousands of Ontarians.

As we live out our Christian convictions, our congregations are regularly engaged in meeting immediate needs in our communities, through food and clothing banks, meal programs, Out of the Cold shelters, drop-in programs and funding of over a dozen non-profit ministry partners who provide food, shelter and supports to people in need from Peel to Peterborough. At the same time, our faith calls us to raise our voices and our influence on behalf of, and in solidarity with, the most vulnerable in our society. It is in that spirit that we make this submission today.

Your government's theme of "Building Ontario Together" resonates with our values. We have a vision for a province in which all people are able to thrive and participate in society. But the reality falls far short of this goal. A growing number of Ontarians – whether employed or on social assistance – struggle daily to meet their most basic needs for food, housing, and healthcare, much less to be able to move forward with their lives. Food bank use continues to rise in Ontario, with 510,438 people having accessed food banks over the past year.¹

While incomes at the lower end of the scale remain stagnant, housing costs continue to soar, putting more and more people at risk of homelessness. We see this not only in Toronto, where the number people experiencing homelessness has grown by thousands over the past decade and over 110,000 households are on a waiting list for affordable housing.² All around our Diocese our churches are hearing of more and more people struggling to pay their rents, more and more demand on available shelters, more and more people resorting to "couch-surfing" with friends or family members, sleeping in their cars, or in tents.

We call on your government to keep these issues in mind as you prepare the upcoming budget:

Income Security – Social Assistance

In November of 2018, your government announced several proposed changes to social assistance, including changes to the earnings exemptions and clawback rates for social assistance recipients and potentially changing the definition of disability for eligibility to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). In our 2019 pre-budget submission we advocated for maintaining a 50% clawback on earnings above the exemption limit, rather than raised to 75%. We were pleased to hear in October 2019 that the 50% clawback on earnings would be maintained, along with the Transition Child Benefit for families unable to access the Ontario Child Benefit.

However, we continue to be concerned about the future of ODSP. Aligning the disability definition used by ODSP eligibility with the definition used to determine access to federal programs would exclude many people with conditions that are shorter-term or episodic in nature, such as cancer, multiple

¹ <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Print.pdf>

² https://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/good_bad_ugly?utm_campaign=good_bad_ugly&utm_medium=email&utm_source=socialplannin

sclerosis, diabetes and depression. If people living with these conditions become ineligible for ODSP, they will be forced onto the much lower rates of Ontario Works (OW). They would fall deeper into poverty, resulting in worse health outcomes, greater risk of homelessness, and even less ability to participate in employment. Ultimately this will also represent a greater cost to our healthcare system and other social services, and a greater burden on our provincial economy.

The lack of clarity surrounding the future of ODSP eligibility has created undue stress for low-income people. Moreover, we are concerned that the recent Auditor-General's report highlighting increased ODSP caseloads will give weight to arguments to restrict access to this program. In fact, given that ODSP caseloads reflect the results of cuts to other disability programs, such as workers' compensation, and lack of access to private sector disability plans, while Ontario's population is both growing and aging, ODSP caseloads are growing more slowly than might be expected.³

The fact remains that social assistance rates are, quite simply, inadequate: not only Ontario Works (OW) but ODSP rates fall well below the poverty line.⁴ Further, the rate freeze since September 2018 means that the real income of social assistance recipients has dropped relative to inflation. We join with many agencies and organizations, including food banks, legal clinics, and health providers, in renewing the call to make a meaningful increase in social assistance rates, so that they allow recipients to meet their basic needs.⁵

Recommendations:

- **Maintain definition of disability for eligibility to ODSP.**
- **Increase social assistance rates (both OW and ODSP) so that people on social assistance are able to meet their basic needs.**

Income Security – Employment

Your government has maintained that “the best social program is a job.” We agree that a job should be a pathway out of poverty. However, for many Ontarians working at low wages and in precarious conditions, having a job – or even several jobs – is no guarantee of income security. Over the past three years, there has been a 27% increase in the number of employed people relying on food banks in Ontario.⁶ Of all Canadian provinces, Ontario has seen the greatest increase in the prevalence of workers making minimum wage, who now make up 15% of the total workforce.⁷

We were disappointed that the minimum wage was frozen at \$14/hour in 2019 and look forward to its increase to \$15 in October 2020, with subsequent annual indexation to inflation. Even \$15 an hour, however, falls below the poverty line. With nearly half of all minimum wage workers are over the age of

³ <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/01/02/odsp-needs-support-not-criticism.html>;
<http://incomesecurity.org/policy-advocacy/isac-press-release-response-to-the-auditor-generals-report-on-odsp/>

⁴ <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Print.pdf>

⁵ <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Print.pdf>,
<https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/DB-WhosHungry-2019-Final-WebLR.pdf>

⁶ <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hunger-Report-2019-Feed-Ontario-Print.pdf>

⁷ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2019003-eng.htm>

25, with the fastest growing percentage over the age of 55, this means that more Ontario households are relying on minimum wage employment than ever before.⁸

Moreover, the trend away from full-time, permanent employment toward part-time, temporary, and free-lance/contract work results in less steady income, fewer benefits, and fewer employment protections. Measures to protect precarious workers were rolled back in this government's Bill 47, "Making Ontario Open for Business Act." While reducing these protections for precarious workers might attract business, it does not create quality jobs which provide a pathway out of poverty. The loss of equal pay for different classes of workers creates an incentive for employers to create precarious, low-paid positions rather than secure, well-paid work. Shifting the onus onto workers to prove they are employees, rather than requiring employers to prove that workers are independent contractors, also places an unfair burden on the party least able to discharge that burden.

The loss of paid sick days means that workers must decide between taking care of their health and losing a day's pay, leading to loss of income, the spread of communicable diseases, and the exacerbation of injuries. By contrast, as we argued in last year's submission, providing paid sick days will reduce health care costs, protect workers, and increase productivity.

Recommendations:

- **Require employers to pay part-time, temporary and casual workers the same rate as their permanent, full-time employees doing the same work.**
- **Shift onus back onto employers to prove that a worker is not an employee but an independent contractor.**
- **Restoration of two paid personal emergency days and remove the requirement to provide a doctor's note.**

Healthcare

Income security through employment and social assistance is complemented by access to other services, including extended healthcare, including dental care. Oral health is closely linked with overall health; untreated infections of the teeth and gums can lead to cardiovascular disease, respiratory and lymphatic infections, complications of diabetes, and even death. Lack of access to dental care sends people to the emergency room and attempts to control oral pain through addictive drugs. In addition, visible dental problems create stigma and present a barrier to employment for job-seekers. While Ontario already provides free dental care for low-income children, and we welcome this government's expansion of dental coverage to low-income seniors, we call on your government to expand this benefit to all low-income people.

A major public health concern in Ontario, one which we encounter every day, is the opioid crisis. The numbers of deaths in the province from opioids climbed from 1,265 in 2017 to 1,474 in 2018 to over 900 in just the first six months of 2019⁹. In April 2019, all five members of our College of Bishops wrote to Minister of Health Christine Elliott urging her to grant provincial licensing and funding to three overdose prevention sites in Toronto which were not included in the province's list of approved Consumption and Treatment Service sites, and urging the Ministry to expand the numbers of such sites throughout the

⁸ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2019003-eng.htm>

⁹ <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids/maps>

province. We have never received a response to this letter. The three sites mentioned in the letter continue to operate with temporary exemptions from the federal government. However, they lack essential funding and are supported by donations. Meanwhile, communities such as Peterborough face an increase in opioid overdoses, but lack a consumption and treatment site where these could be managed. As the opioid crisis continues to devastate communities across Ontario, we urge this government to lift the restriction on life-saving overdose prevention sites, and to provide them with provincial funding.

Recommendations:

- **Extend dental care coverage to all low-income children and adults.**
- **Lift the restriction on overdose prevention sites and to provide them with provincial funding.**

Housing

We have been glad to see the province commit to matching federal funds through the National Housing Strategy, including investment in the repair and construction of community housing and the creation of the Canada- Ontario Housing Benefit. While this investment is welcome, housing affordability remains a concern. Rents continue to grow faster than income, not only in Toronto but across the province, while vacancy rates have been at historic lows. Ontario is desperately in need of new rental housing, yet new rental housing is explicitly exempted from rent control, as are vacant units. As a result, rental costs have soared, low-income workers can barely afford housing, and “renovictions” put existing tenants at risk of homelessness. In such conditions, providing a housing benefit only serves to enrich landlords without addressing the underlying issue of affordability.

Recommendations:

- **We urge your government to continue to invest at least 1% of its overall budget in creating and maintaining affordable housing for Ontarians.**
- **This funding should prioritize non-profit and cooperative housing providers, so as to keep housing affordable over the long term.**
- **Extend rent controls to all rental properties, including those built since November 15, 2018, and institute protection against “renovictions.”**

Environment

Climate change is a global emergency that is already having a serious effect on Ontarians, contributing to extreme weather events, damaging infrastructure, spreading pests and waterborne pathogens. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Canada’s Changing Climate Report, Canada (and other countries) must reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 in order to avoid even more catastrophic effects.¹⁰ In light of this, the provincial government’s ongoing legal challenge to the federal carbon tax both misguided and a waste of \$30 million of taxpayers’ money. These funds should be invested in carbon solutions – from planting trees to investments in renewable energy and green technology – that will create jobs, stimulate the economy and move Ontario toward a carbon-neutral future.

¹⁰ <https://changingclimate.ca/CCCR2019/>

Recommendation:

- We urge your government to drop the fight against the carbon tax and use that money to invest in real climate solutions for Ontario, so that we can do our part to become carbon-neutral by 2050.

Conclusion

What will it take to build Ontario together?

As one of Ontario's oldest religious institutions, we know the importance of building up our common life. Our parishes are hubs for our communities, strengthening bonds not only between fellow Anglicans but among our neighbours regardless of creed.

We also believe that addressing poverty, the opioid crisis, the housing crisis, and climate change are key to building the health, resilience, social cohesion, and economic viability of this province.

While addressing poverty is not inexpensive, the costs of inaction are far greater. A 2019 report estimated that poverty costs Ontario an estimated \$5 billion in justice and health care costs alone, and a further \$22.1-28 billion in lost income and tax revenue, for a total of \$27.1-33 billion.¹¹ Likewise, failing to take strong action on climate risks leads not only to greater losses from climate change impacts on health, infrastructure, agriculture and other resources, but misses the opportunity to make Ontario a leader in the growing green economy.

We urge you to develop a budget that not only mitigates these risks but invests in the potential of Ontarians, so that we can all contribute to building Ontario together.

Respectfully submitted,

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

and

The Social Justice & Advocacy Committee, Diocese of Toronto

¹¹ <https://feedontario.ca/cost-of-poverty-2019/>