

April 7, 2020

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

Income Security in the Time of COVID-19

Dear Minister Smith,

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

Background

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

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

Raise the Social Assistance Rates

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exempt Federal Benefits from Clawback

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

List of signatories:

1. Advancement of Women Halton
2. Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario
3. Agincourt Community Services Association
4. Alliance for Healthier Communities
5. Anglican Diocese of Niagara

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

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

97. Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care
98. Ontario Public Health Association
99. Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
100. Open Policy
101. Overdose Prevention Ottawa
102. PARC (Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre)
103. Poverty Roundtable Hastings & Prince Edward
104. Provincial Council of Women of Ontario
105. Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)
106. Save Your Skin Foundation
107. Scarborough Community Legal Services
108. Schizophrenia Society of Ontario
109. Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services
110. Shelter and Housing Justice Network
111. Shelter and Housing Justice Network
112. SKETCH Working Arts
113. Social Assistance Action Committee
114. Social Assistance Coalition of Scarborough (SACS)
115. Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton
116. South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario
117. Stand Up for Health
118. Street Health
119. Sudbury Community Legal Clinic
120. The Help Centre
121. The Neighbourhood Organization
122. The Office of Ottawa City Councillor Shawn Menard
123. The Office of Ottawa City Councillor Theresa Kavanagh
124. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
125. The Stop Community Food Centre
126. Voices from the Street
127. West Neighbourhood House
128. West Scarborough Community Legal Services
129. West Toronto Community Legal Services
130. Willowdale Community Legal Services
131. Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
132. Working for Change
133. York North Lyme Disease Support Group
134. YWCA Cambridge
135. YWCA Hamilton
136. YWCA Kitchener-Waterloo
137. YWCA Sudbury
138. YWCA Toronto