

The Right Reverend
ANDREW J. ASBIL

Bishop of Toronto



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April 12, 2021

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 “Ontario’s Action Plan: Protecting People’s Health and Our Economy,” the 2021 provincial budget released March 24, 2021.

I appreciate that these are challenging times to exercise leadership, with the ongoing need to protect Ontarians against the COVID-19 virus and to support our provincial economy. Many of the measures contained in the 2021 budget are welcome. However, I am deeply disappointed that several of the concerns we and other faith groups, non-profits and other advocates have raised with your government continue to go unaddressed in this budget, particularly as concerns the most basic needs of vulnerable and low-income Ontarians.

The 2021 provincial budget has two stated aims – to protect the health of Ontarians and to protect Ontario’s economy. Investments in hospitals and long-term care facilities, in the manufacture and distribution of PPE, in expanding access to mental health services, COVID tests and the rollout of vaccines, are all necessary steps in protecting the health of Ontarians. Yet the more fundamental determinants of health must also be addressed. Many working people in Ontario still lack the ability to stay home from work when sick, without losing their jobs or vital income; hundreds of thousands of Ontarians are in core housing need, at risk of losing their housing if not already homeless, and the poorest in our province continue to struggle to survive well below the poverty line. This budget does little, if anything, to address their needs.

The budget document notes that women, youth, racialized people and people with disabilities have suffered the greatest losses in employment and earnings between February 2020 and February 2021. It offers some relief in the form of targeted employment and training supports and tax credits for people in these groups, as well as an increased childcare tax credit. However, these are the same groups who are most likely to experience precarious employment. As temporary, part-time or casual employees they may legally be paid less than permanent full-time workers, and are most likely not to have paid sick leave from their employers, which keeps them economically behind as well as continuing to risk their health and that of their co-workers and families.

While Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy was renewed last December, this budget contains not one single mention of poverty in over 200 pages. Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates remain abysmally low, well below the poverty line. With no increase to social assistance rates since the fall of 2018, people in poverty are being left further and further behind, unable to afford the necessities of life. We reiterate our call to increase both OW and ODSP rates by \$100 for singles and \$200 for families and over time to bring social assistance rates in line with the Market Basket Measure.

Housing is a key determinant of health, and yet the recent budget brought little good news in terms of housing for the hundreds of thousands of Ontario households in core housing need. Many renters are at higher than ever risk of eviction, especially due to income losses during the pandemic, yet there is no mention of any rent relief measures for residential tenants in this budget. On the other hand, this budget offers extends emergency rent relief – and a temporary ban on evictions – to small businesses, as well as doubling support grants for these businesses. Surely people at risk of homelessness deserve the same support to keep a roof over their heads.

It is not clear from this budget whether the provincial government is committed to providing the operating supports for new supportive housing units being created in Toronto. These are supports that will enable vulnerable people to live with dignity and stability, and reduce the costs associated with them being unhoused or in the health care system. While some expansion of provincial funding for supportive housing was announced in December 2020, it is not clear that this funding is sufficient to meet the projected needs, nor how it fits into the 2021 budget.

Finally, there is no mention in this budget of provincial investment in creating affordable housing. A recent report from the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, released before the 2021 Budget, found that combined provincial and federal funding of housing programs in Ontario is projected to be below 2018-2019 levels until 2024-25, and that the level of provincial contribution to housing will in fact decrease over the next decade. The FAO report also found that while the number of Ontario households supported by housing programs will increase by 2027, so will the number of households in core housing need, leaving the percentage of Ontarians in core housing need unchanged. It concludes that Ontario is “highly unlikely to end chronic homelessness without new policy measures.”

The 2021 provincial budget contained some good news for the environment. New investments in public transit and the manufacturing of electric vehicles will help reduce Ontario’s greenhouse gas emissions and spur the transition to a green economy. It is also heartening to read about plans to expand the Greenbelt and to protect communities from flooding. In light of these commitments, we reiterate our call for the province to resist the use of Ministerial Zoning Orders to circumvent protections for environmentally significant areas, and to rescind such MZO’s where they have been obtained, such as in the case of the Duffins Creek wetlands complex. Wetlands like Duffins Creek play a significant role in flood prevention and mitigation for adjacent communities, which cannot be recovered if lost to development.

Protecting people’s health and the economy are laudable goals, particularly in the face of the challenge of COVID-19. However, we urge you to look beyond a narrow focus on immediate needs to address the underlying issues which have exacerbated the vulnerability of both individual Ontarians and the provincial economy. Providing paid sick days, adequate income support and affordable housing not only helps protect the physical and mental health of people in Ontario. These measures also help to strengthen the economy by ensuring people have money to spend on their everyday needs, and by supporting the creation of new housing, revitalizing our communities through the crisis of COVID-19 and beyond.

I look forward to your response to these urgent concerns affecting Ontarians.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrew Toronto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew J. Asbil
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