

July 11, 2019

Honourable Todd Smith, Minister
Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
Hepburn Block
6th Floor, 80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1E9

Re: Proposed Changes to Social Assistance

Dear Minister Smith:

The undersigned are agencies that work together as the Ottawa Coalition of Community Health and Resources Centres. Our Coalition works closely to ensure that the most vulnerable citizens of our City are afforded equitable access to high quality health and social services. We are proud to work on behalf of the Province of Ontario and the City of Ottawa to mitigate the effects of the social determinants of health, and we have established a set of services that are crafted to meet the unique needs of each neighbourhood we serve. Our centres are strategically and intentionally located in parts of the City where people face the most barriers to services and care; and we look for opportunities to leverage our resources to optimize service delivery and to make sure those most in need get to the front of the line.

Given what I have described above, it should come as no surprise that many of our clients live with financial challenges – in fact, most face multiple challenges which are exacerbated by the fact that they do not have the financial means to make changes in their lives and improve their wellbeing. For many, social assistance – through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW) – gives them a fighting chance to have their basic needs met.

As you know, then-Minister Lisa MacLeod announced on November 22, 2018 that your government would be moving to change the definition of “disability” in Ontario, using the rationale that the changes would bring them into alignment with Federal guidelines. This reasoning is, in and of itself, of profound concern given that the Federal definitions are antiquated, crafted in 1966, prior to legislative and Charter protections being put in place for people with disabilities.

If your government advances this work, it will render countless people who rely on the ODSP ineligible; and therefore required to turn to OW, when they have disabilities that preclude them from obtaining gainful employment. Further, income support from OW is 37% below what is offered by ODSP and provides a mere \$390 per month for rent. Average rents in Ottawa are \$881. The poverty line is now set at \$23,513, and a person on OW receives an annual stipend of only \$8,796 – a person forced off ODSP onto OW would be expected to earn almost \$15,000 simply to reach the poverty line – how is this possible when that person is unable to work, unless they are resigned to forego their eligibility?

Each day, community health and resource centres in Ottawa provide support to people who will be directly and negatively impacted by your government’s proposed redefining of disabilities in Ontario. When people who are struggling face the prospect of even more financial strain, it erodes their physical

and mental health, depletes their hope and increases their reliance on the social infrastructure that has been systematically fractured by inadequate investments by all levels of government.

We are collectively asking you to work with us and with the members of your caucus to ensure that our most vulnerable Ontarians are not subjected to further plight by losing access to critical supports offered by ODSP. If anything, we need to see increased supports, including augmented ODSP resources, a commitment to a real “living wage” and investments in affordable housing.

We are all committed to reducing poverty and instilling hope for a better future for the individuals and families who are forced to make choices daily about whether or not they will eat, seek medical care or live in adequate housing. We fully support the effort to end “hallway health care;” but please recognize that those who are living in the margins of society are the same people who are the high users of the health care system and, as such, are showing up in emergency rooms. The stresses that will come with your proposed changes to ODSP eligibility criteria will only exacerbate the problem.

People do not choose to live in poverty or to live with disabilities. Similarly, governments should not actively choose to remove sustaining income or exacerbate their disabilities through cutbacks or the application of red tape to prove a disability. Let us not take steps to complicate their lives further under the guise of finding efficiencies, cost savings and debt reduction.

We hope we can count on your support in convincing the government to reverse its course on this dangerous policy direction.

Sincerely,



Cameron MacLeod, Executive Director
Carlington Community Health Centre

On behalf of the Ottawa Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres:

Carlington Community Health Centre
Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre
Somerset West Community Health Centre
Orleans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre
Rideau Rockcliffe Community Resource Centre
Centre de ressources communautaires de la Basse-ville
Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre

Centretown Community Health Centre
Sandy Hill Community Health Centre
Southeast Ottawa Community Health Centre
Eastern Ottawa Community Resource Centre
Centre des services communautaires Vanier
Nepean, Rideau, Osgoode Community Resource Centre

c.c.

Hon. Lisa MacLeod, MPP for Ottawa West
Jeremy Roberts, MPP for Ottawa West-Nepean
John Fraser, MPP for Ottawa South
Nathalie Des Rosiers, MPP for Ottawa-Vanier

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton, MPP for Kanata-Carleton
Joel Harden, MPP for Ottawa Centre
Marie-France Lalonde, MPP for Ottawa Orléans
Making Voices Count