

Communications Snapshot – Expanding the Ontario Electricity Support Program

Communications Objectives

- Demonstrate the government's commitment to providing electricity rate relief to low-income households in Ontario through legislative amendments that will substantially increasing uptake of the Ontario Electricity Support program (OESP).

Context

- The *Fair Hydro Plan Act, 2017 (OFHPA)*, which encapsulates the programs and initiatives of Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan (FHP), passed legislation on May 31, 2017. The Act received Royal Assent on June 1, 2017.
- The FHP will lower electricity bills by 25% on average for residential consumers, small businesses and farms in the province.
- The 8% rebate that came into effect in January 2017 is included in the 25% savings proposed in the FHP.
- Additional savings for Ontario consumers will be available through enhancing social programs.
- The *Fair Hydro Act, 2017* will shift the costs of the OESP from ratepayers to provincial revenues, through a proclamation at a future date once the rate-base pooled funding has been depleted.
- The proposed amendments to O. Regulation 314/15 (Ontario Electricity Support Program) of the *Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998* are needed to implement changes to the OESP, under the FHP, as enacted under the OFHPA.
- The proposed amendments support the implementation strategy to increase enrolment of social assistance clients' into the OESP.
- The OESP is an income-tested, application based program that lowers electricity costs for the most vulnerable consumers, providing a rebate directly on bills. There are two scales: one with basic credits, and an enhanced credit for Indigenous people or those who use electric heat or certain electrically intensive medical devices.
- Effective May 1, 2017, Ontario increased the OESP by 50 per cent, meaning that single, low-income consumers who receive the lowest credit amount will get an increase from \$30 to \$45 per month (\$540 per year, an increase of \$180), and single, low-income consumers who qualify for the enhanced scale will see an increase from \$45 to \$68 (\$816 per year, an increase of \$276).
- ENERGY has been engaging with the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) and the Ontario Energy Board (OEB) to develop a strategy that will meet the government's objective of substantially increasing OESP uptake for social assistance clients on Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).
- This strategy will involve aligning with MCSS's delivery of OW and ODSP.

Target Audiences

- OEB and relevant social agencies
- Residential consumers and low-income electricity consumers
- Clients enrolled in OW and ODSP.

Key Messages

- Through the FHP, we are providing relief to everyone and also providing additional relief for those who are most in need of support.
- The OESP lowers electricity costs for vulnerable consumers by providing a rebate on electricity bills.
- OESP eligibility has been broadened to increase participation and provide further assistance to eligible participants.
- The government is working hard at giving timely support to those most in need.

- By aligning the delivery of social assistance programs with rate assistance from the Ontario Electricity Support Program, we are making it easier for low-income consumers to get relief on their electricity bills.

Strategic Approach

- With support from the OEB, MCSS will raise awareness of the changes to the OESP and encourage enrolment among current and future social assistance clients. This will be organized under three key activities:
 - **Raise awareness of OESP:**
 - Communication to all social assistance clients
 - Communications and supports to social assistance staff
 - **Support SA client enrolment in the OESP by:**
 - Capturing information required to enrol in OESP during the SA intake process for new grants
 - Establishing a designated team to enroll existing clients and new grants
 - **Enabling automated enrolment to OESP through a data exchange from the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS).**

Issues & Mitigation

Issue/Consideration	Mitigation Strategy	Key Message
The government is providing a little relief to all consumers, when they could instead have done more for those that needed it most.	Draw attention to OESP and other social programs that target the most vulnerable consumers.	The OESP is changing to align with other social assistance programs and offer more timely support for low-income electricity consumers.

Tactics & Rollout

	Pre-Launch	Launch	Post-Launch
Regional Rollout Examples: • MPP Template • Speeches • Media event • Op-ed, media pitch • Editorial board meeting	• n/a	• Bullets for MCSS and ENE remarks	• Bullets for MCSS and ENE remarks
Earned Examples: • News release, etc. • Remarks • Event • Calls/emails to targeted audiences • Multilingual media • Fact sheets • House Statement	• n/a	• TBC	• TBC
Digital / Social Examples: • Web content • Twitter/Facebook • Keyword / interactive web • Blogger outreach • Videos	• n/a	• Bullets for MCSS web page • FB post with link to OEB site • Tweets for MCSS and Energy accounts	• TBC

Paid <i>(must include budget)</i> Examples: • TV/radio/newspaper • Online banners/ads • Advertorial • Householder/direct mail	• n/a	• Bill insert for ODSP clients	• TBC
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Evaluation

- News media - Track the number news articles and editorials, recording their verified distribution reach, and applying a quantitative scale to denote their tone
- Social media - Record engagement, reach and tone of comments
- Correspondence - Track the number of letters and emails referring to the Fair Hydro Plan
- Provincial omnibus monthly survey – Track awareness of the FHP and gauge support or opposition of the programs