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Standing Committee on Finance
and Economic Affairs
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"Difficulties mastered are opportunities won." (Winston Churchill)

DeafBlind Ontario Services is pleased to present recommendations for the Ontario Government's 2020 Pre Budget Consultations for consideration:

- ✓ **Recommendation:** Exempt direct service intervenor salaries from the *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019*. Remove the unintended consequences of increased pressures on recruitment and retention in a sector that provides critical front-line services to a vulnerable population.
- ✓ **Recommendation:** Collaborate with fiscally focused organizations like DeafBlind Ontario Services so that they can lead the way to ensure that individuals with deafblindness can remain independent and contribute to their communities.



Executive Summary

DeafBlind Ontario Services is pleased to present recommendations for consideration to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs as part for the Ontario Government's 2020 Pre Budget Consultations for consideration.

DeafBlind Ontario Services provides accessible residential and customized support services across the province. Its holistic approach to Intervenor Services empowers people with deafblindness to achieve their goals and dreams.

The organization was encouraged to learn in *A Plan to Build Ontario Together: 2019 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review*, of the Government of Ontario's strong commitment "to protecting the most vulnerable people of Ontario, including seniors, children and youth, people with disabilities," while "proposing new strategies that meet the needs of vulnerable Ontarians."¹ This principle aligns with DeafBlind Ontario Services' dedication to work in collaboration with the Government of Ontario for a common purpose.

In this submission, DeafBlind Ontario Services shares recommendations as they continue to provide high quality, cost-effective, accessible supports and services to Ontarians with deafblindness. The organization is dedicated to working collaboratively with the Ontario Government within a period of fiscal constraints.

About DeafBlindness

Deafblindness is a combination of hearing and vision loss that is unique to each person and affects access to information, communication, and mobility. Just over **one percent** of Ontario's population or **an estimated 211,250**² individuals are deafblind. Estimates suggest that the prevalence of deafblindness rises as the population ages in Canada and in Ontario.³

Intervenors are professionally trained to act as the "eyes" and "ears" of the individual with deafblindness through the sense of touch. Professional intervenors connect the person with deafblindness to other people and their community as a communication partner. They provide visual and auditory information to individuals with deafblindness.

¹ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2019/fallstatement/pdf/2019-fallstatement.pdf>, p 99

² https://deafblindontario.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019_Stakeholders_Consultation_Report_FINAL-s_1022047.pdf

³ https://deafblindontario.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019_Stakeholders_Consultation_Report_FINAL-s_1022047.pdf



Situation: Individuals with deafblindness require the supports and services of specially trained professional direct service intervenors for the visual and auditory information they need to communicate and understand the world around them. Organizations like DeafBlind Ontario Services face increasing challenges to recruit and retain professional direct service intervenors with the new *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019* that caps salary increases to 1% per year over a 3-year period for public sector employees.

Ontarians recognize that the Government of Ontario faces the daunting task of leading the province while managing a budget deficit. To help mitigate the effects of the deficit and maintain accountability, a course of strong action must be pursued to be **fiscally responsible** while **maintaining sustainable public services**.

However, passing *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019*, created an **unintended consequence** by placing a salary cap on professional direct service intervenors, a particular category of employee that already operates within a low salary band. A cap on their salaries over a 3-year period will further erode their salary levels and create additional recruitment and retention pressures for not-for-profit organizations like DeafBlind Ontario Services who rely on government funding to serve vulnerable populations.

In 2018, DeafBlind Ontario Services engaged an external consultant to review all salaries across the organization as part of a planned job evaluation and employee pay analysis. This review was designed to support the organization's efforts to ensure alignment with industry salary standards and help address the high rate of staff turnover in direct service intervenor positions. The consultant confirmed that entry-level professional direct service intervenors receive lower wages than their counterparts in other organizations across the Intervenor Services and Developmental Services sectors.

The review also revealed that in order for the organization to **stay competitive**, professional direct service intervenor salaries needed adjustment. Despite operating within budgetary constraints, the organization developed a plan based on principals of **efficiency and fiscal restraint** to adjust salaries in phases within a **financially prudent** structure.

The plan took into account the fact that changes in staffing can have a negative impact on a person with deafblindness who has worked closely with an



intervenor to learn new skills and achieve significant goals. Because individuals with deafblindness need consistent access to Intervenor Services so that they can build life skills and thrive, issues with recruitment and retention can be disruptive.

DeafBlind Ontario Services invests in specialized training for intervenors to ensure they are equipped to provide the highest quality of support for a vulnerable population. The organization also invests in employees throughout their careers. Intervenor are held to high standards, follow sector-wide best practices and a recognized code of ethics.

High staff turnover costs the organization.

DeafBlind Ontario Services appreciates the Ontario Government's current direction, *"to make government more efficient and effective to ensure government spending is sustainable and delivers the best value."*⁴ However, the organization respectfully requests that the Ontario Government adhere to the goals of *"upholding its commitment to protecting critical front-line public services,"* to ensure that vulnerable populations, including persons with deafblindness receive the supports and services they need.⁵

Recommendation: Exempt professional direct service intervenor salaries from the *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019*. Remove the unintended consequence of increased pressure on recruitment and retention on a sector that provides critical front-line services to a vulnerable population.

Situation: Individuals with deafblindness require access to high quality, person-centered and integrated community-based supports for their highly specialized and unique needs. When client submissions are delayed, non-profits like DeafBlind Ontario Services who rely on funding to provide support services face serious fiscal challenges to meet rising costs year over year.

In a time of increased scrutiny and **transparency** about **fiscal accountability**, DeafBlind Ontario Services is committed to maintaining **high quality, cost**

⁴ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2019/fallstatement/pdf/2019-fallstatement.pdf>, p 112

⁵ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2019/fallstatement/pdf/2019-fallstatement.pdf>, p 113



effective services so that individuals with deafblindness have every opportunity to thrive.

DeafBlind Ontario Services took the **initiative to ensure transparency and accountability** in service delivery by examining how taxpayer dollars are spent through an activity based costing analysis between March 2012 and March 2018. The organization found that over this 6- year period, throughout substantial growth in the number of individuals it serves, the cost to deliver Intervenor Services only increased by 1% (consistently under the annual rate of inflation).

The analysis uncovered the following important points, while also **protecting what matters most – quality services for individuals with deafblindness**:

- 87% of an intervenor's time is spent providing direct service;
- Despite the organization experiencing six years of substantial growth, economies of scale are being maintained;
- In 2018/19 compared to fiscal 2017/2018, DeafBlind Ontario Services saw an 8% increase in the number of individuals receiving Intervenor Services, while keeping central administrative costs at 7% (despite the organization providing more services, it did not increase the costs to deliver those services.)

In alignment with the Ontario Government, DeafBlind Ontario Services is focussed on *“working smarter... just as private enterprise constantly re-evaluates its standards and best practices, the organization aims to “adapt, evolve and always strive to deliver people with the best services possible.”*⁶

The organization leads the way by embedding an annual activity based costing analysis process to ensure financial oversight and find efficiencies throughout its operations.

Recommendation: Collaborate with fiscally focused organizations like DeafBlind Ontario Services so that they can lead the way to ensure that individuals with deafblindness can remain independent and contribute to their communities.

⁶ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2019/fallstatement/pdf/2019-fallstatement.pdf>, p 112



Conclusion

Deafblind Ontario Services recognizes the Government of Ontario's commitment to *Protecting What Matters Most* in its 2019 Ontario Budget, and its plan to build "a bold new vision for the people of Ontario and for the future of our province" in the 2019 Fall Economic Statement. The organization appreciates that the Government of Ontario has been working to lay "...out a plan that restores the accountability of government and the people of Ontario's trust in it."⁷

The organization is encouraged that the Ontario Government continues to partner with DeafBlind Ontario Services to collectively and proactively protect what matters the most: **ensuring that individuals with deafblindness have access to high quality, person-centered** and integrated community-based supports for their highly specialized and unique needs.

Together with the Ontario Government, DeafBlind Ontario Services is committed to ***ensuring that individuals with deafblindness have every opportunity to thrive.***

With the right supports in place, the potential of a person with deafblindness is limitless.

⁷ <http://budget.ontario.ca/pdf/2019/2019-ontario-budget-en.pdf>