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Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs (OASIS)

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Written Submission RE:

Bill 106 – Pandemic Emergency and Preparedness Act, 2022

Geoff McMullen
President, OASIS
55 Gordon Street
Whitby, Ontario
L1N 0J2

My name is Geoff McMullen, and I am the President of the Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs – better known as OASIS.

As a brief bit of background, OASIS is a member driven organisation, that represents and advocates on behalf of our 190+ member Developmental Services agencies in every town and city right across the province.

These agencies serve over 65,000 of Ontario's most vulnerable citizens and employ 25,000 full and part-time staff that currently provide more than 85% of all developmental services across Ontario.

It is my privilege to make this submission, on behalf of OASIS and our member agencies, specifically in support of Schedule 7 of Bill 106, which enacts the *Supporting Retention in Public Service Act*.

It is not an over exaggeration to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the developmental services or DS sector, our member agencies and the individuals we support dramatically. Normal routines were disrupted, in-person relationships shifted to virtual, and traditional services and supports changed almost overnight.

Much of the credit for our sector being able to keep its head above water during the pandemic must be attributed to the Developmental Service Workers, or DSWs, working across Ontario and their commitment to the individuals and families they support.

First introduced as a temporary pandemic measure in 2020, the \$3/hour wage enhancement has directly led to greater workforce stability and continuity in DS agency staff.

It could have been far too easy for our sector to fall through the cracks, as has happened in the past, especially with so much happening across the province and with so many individuals, groups and sectors in need. We firmly believe that these investments have had a substantial positive impact on helping to stabilize the sector during these challenging times.

Over the past two years, OASIS has strongly advocated for making the \$3/hour wage enhancement for DSWs, permanent. Schedule 7 of Bill 106, if passed, would deliver on Premier Ford's personal commitment last summer to make the Wage Enhancement permanent.

Throughout the pandemic and through the present day, DSWs have performed challenging and specialized work to keep individuals healthy, safe and out of hospital while at the same time continuing to provide enriching programs and vital services. Making the wage enhancement permanent is a critical foundational step to demonstrate that DS staff are respected with fair compensation for the essential work they do.

By helping to stabilize the DS sector work force, the wage enhancement will help to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities continue to benefit from excellent supports and services.

Despite all this we must also recognise that it is possible that the \$3 could create challenges for some agencies. This would of course vary agency to agency but the \$3 could create agency wide ripple effects that might lead to complications such as compression issues between roles and other compensation costs. In addition, there are other significant issues facing the DS sector, it continues to face a growing staffing crisis amidst a highly competitive and unsettled labour market environment.

Due to the significant skills and labour shortage, a fully-funded multi-year sector staffing strategy is necessary to help attract and retain creative, compassionate and highly capable frontline staff which will be crucial to realizing the vision set out in the Government's guide to Sector Reform *Journey to Belonging*.

One final note is in regard to expenditure efficiency when there is a stable workforce. Constant recruitment and training costs are substantial when you have high turnover of staff. This is also reflected in the cost of overtime hours and direct support to individuals.

We must work together to ensure the long-term sustainability of the DS sector in Ontario, and by extension, the well-being of the individuals and families whom we support.

We look forward to working closely with members of all parties to address these and other ongoing challenges and to further strengthen Ontario's DS sector and ensure continuity of care and support for those with developmental disabilities and their families.

Thank You