

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
& ECONOMIC AFFAIRS RE THE PREBUDGET
CONSULTATION 2022 FROM THE HAMILTON SOCIAL
WORK ACTION COMMITTEE

January 25, 2022

(Dr.) Sally Palmer, Chair
Hamilton Social Work Action Committee
Unit 403, 1000 Creekside Drive
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FROM THE HAMILTON SOCIAL WORK ACTION COMMITTEE

The Hamilton Social Work Action Committee was initiated in 1997 in response to the 1995 cut of 21.6% from social assistance rates, which has caused poverty for social assistance recipients ever since. Our members are Social Workers, Student Social Workers, and Social Justice Advocates: we often partner with other groups such as the ODSP Action Coalition and the Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits (Hamilton).

Our major goal in making this submission is to see Ontario's level of social assistance raised to enable individuals and families to have a decent standard of living. A new concern has been raised during the Covid-19 pandemic by the shifting of Government Tribunals to Digital Hearings, which further marginalizes social assistance recipients who are seeking fair treatment, including moving from the *Ontario Works* program to the *Ontario Disability Support Program* as their physical or mental health deteriorates.

Some current conditions have made the inadequacy of social assistance levels even more critical:

- The rates have been frozen since 2018: the Liberal Government enacted a 3% raise in 2018, but the incoming PC government cut this in half.
- In the midst of our global pandemic, social assistance recipients have the highest levels of Covid-19 infections and deaths: their children are forced to spend more time at home, missing food programs that provide a safety net for families who are struggling to feed their children.
- Inflation has escalated to a high of 4.9 in Nov. 2021, creating a crisis for recipients who are faced with rising costs of food and shelter with no raise in their income.

Ontario social assistance rates for individuals are \$733 (OW) and \$1169 (ODSP), only 41% and 65% of Canada's poverty line. We submit that these rates should increase in

line with the federal government's response to the pandemic: they identified \$2,000 per month as a "basic income" for an individual.

We know that our Province can do more to directly support Ontarians who are living on social assistance, many of whom are unemployed because of physical disability or mental illness. Over the past 22 months, their limitations have been exacerbated by instability in the workplace caused by the global pandemic.

We are aware that Ontario has had a reduced caseload of social assistance recipients because of the funds made available from the Federal Government, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the Canada Recovery Benefit, and an expanded Employment Insurance program.

We are also aware that of all the money spent in Ontario on direct COVID-19 measures, only a small per cent of those funds came from the Province, with the majority coming from the Federal Government.

Our recommendations to the Standing Committee are as follows:

- Raise social assistance rates to match the Federal determination that \$2,000 per month is the minimum needed for an adult to survive today. Much of this will be spent locally, giving a much needed boost to small businesses and aiding economic recovery.
- Expand the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, to be made more widely available, accessible, with no time constraints, and make the process more transparent.
- Create a Digital Allowance so clients can afford a cell phone and/or internet access to stay connected to vital programs and services.

In January 2021, the Ontario Human Rights Commission wrote to then Minister Todd Smith (Children, Community & Social Services) pointing out the weakness of Ontario's "Poverty Reduction Strategy" in that it "does not take an explicit human rights-based approach to poverty reduction and does not recognize the right to an adequate standard

of living.” When social assistance rates fall so far short of Canada’s poverty measure, we can agree that the recipients’ present standard of living is anything but “adequate”.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations that would allow social assistance recipients to live their lives with adequacy, respect, and dignity, particularly during these uncertain times.

Sincerely,

(Dr.) Sally Palmer, Chair
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