



O.D.S.P. ACTION COALITION

C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON, M6K 1L3

MPP LOBBY KIT

JANUARY 2012

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NOTE: This lobby kit is available in both word and PDF and can be downloaded in full or by section at: <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/mpp-lobby-kit/>



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Why Lobby

Lobbying and meeting with government representatives is always an important thing to do: it is our democratic right, and is crucial if we want to have a say in the decisions that our government makes. However, it is especially important to be lobbying the Ontario government now around the issues of ODSP and social assistance.

- The government has appointed two commissioners to review our social assistance programs, with the aim of making changes and improvements to Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. We need to give our input into this process, to make sure the review does not result in simply cutting costs and finding savings.
- The Ontario government has said publicly that because of their large deficit, there is a need for “austerity measures” and spending cuts or freezes. We fear that the government will use this as an excuse to not make any real improvements to social assistance as this will cost money which they do not want to spend right now.
- In the last two years the government has only raised social assistance by a measly 1% per year, which does not even keep up with inflation. People on social assistance are getting poorer, and there is a real possibility that this trend will continue. We need to put pressure on the government to make a serious commitment to improve the lives of people on social assistance, including raising the rates to a livable income. Even if the government is claiming that it needs to make cut-backs and sacrifices, these should not be made on the backs of the poorest among us.

Who in the Government should you lobby?

Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) are our representatives in the Ontario government. They can be part of the Liberal party, which is the party that currently forms the government, the New Democratic Party (NDP), or the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party. MPPs are the ones who present ideas and changes and, in the end, vote on many of the laws that people in our province are affected by. They are the people who will decide what social assistance (including ODSP) will look like after the review.



How to Use This Lobby Kit

This kit includes the following tips and templates to help you with your advocacy efforts:

- 1. ODSP Action Coalition's messages and demands:** There are two documents, one on social assistance rates and the other on the key issues at stake in the Social Assistance Review. *These key messages documents are to be sent when you send a letter requesting a meeting with your MPP, so they have a chance to look at them before you meet. At the meeting, the content in these message sheets can be discussed. Since there are many messages, you may, in the interest of time, just want to pick two or three to emphasize.*
- 2. Questions for MPPs:** There are different questions for Liberal, NDP and Conservative MPPs. Depending on how much time you have for your meeting, you may have to choose which questions to ask. Decide beforehand what you would like to focus on and try to get a response, or better yet, a commitment from your MPP.
- 3. Background information** that provides more detailed information about five of the issues the ODSP Action Coalition is most concerned about in the Social Assistance Review, as well as summaries of the Coalition's two submissions.
 - Can and Cannot Work
 - Accommodation and the AODA
 - Mandatory Work Participation
 - Mandatory Treatment or Rehabilitation
 - Special Diet
 - Summary of the Coalition's 1st Submission: Dignity, Adequacy, Inclusion
 - Summary of the Coalition's 2nd Submission: An Activation AgendaBring these backgrounders to your meeting and leave them with your MPP for further consideration.
- 4. Messages and story worksheet** to help you focus your advocacy efforts and prepare for the meeting with your MPP.
- 5. MPP letter template** which you can use to contact your MPP and set up a meeting.
- 6. Lobby Tip-Sheet** with suggestions on how to contact your MPP and set up a meeting.
- 7. Follow-up MPP letter template** to be sent to your MPP after your meeting. It is important to thank your MPP for meeting with you and summarize any commitments that they made so they know you will be following up with them.
- 8. MPP report back form:** Complete this after your meeting with the MPP. This will help the ODSP Action Coalition keep track of how the meeting went and what commitments individual MPPs have made across the province. Send this form to the contact indicated or call Naomi Berlyne at 416-516-1422 ext. 250 to give your update over the phone.



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The Case for Adequacy in a Time of Austerity

In 2008, the global economic meltdown hit Ontario hard. Hundreds of thousands of Ontarians became unemployed, and many have been unable to find new good paying jobs. Since then, economic uncertainty has continued – especially here in Ontario, where unemployment continues to be high.

For other Ontarians, however, the pain of economic instability is nothing new. Poverty for people on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) has persisted over the past 15 years, despite small rate increases since 2005 and new programs like the Ontario Child Benefit. The huge income gap created when OW rates were slashed and ODSP rates were frozen in 1996 has yet to be filled. And since social assistance rate increases haven't kept pace with inflation, real incomes continue to fall.

On December 1, 2011, OW and ODSP rates increased by 1%. This means that the income a single person receives each month from OW went from \$592 to \$599. A single person on ODSP receives \$1,064 each month. A single mom trying to raise two kids only gets \$1,165 from OW¹.

And while there are other income sources that people on OW and ODSP can get – like tax credits and child benefits – the total incomes of the majority of people on OW and ODSP are still well below accepted poverty lines.

THE ODSP ACTION COALITION CALLS ON THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT TO:

Immediately cancel planned corporate tax cuts. Raise social assistance rates to reflect average rents, utility costs, food, transportation and other basic needs, including the additional costs of having a disability. Index OW and ODSP rates to inflation so people don't slide deeper into poverty over time.

It's not getting any easier. Housing costs continue to rise, especially in major urban centres like Toronto where most OW and ODSP recipients live. No level of government is adequately investing in building more affordable housing, despite waitlists that stretch for years and years. And the province's own 2012 rent increase guideline has been set at 3.1%, meaning that even more of a person's OW or ODSP income will have to be spent on housing – rather than food, clothes or other expenses. Energy costs also continue to skyrocket.

The cost of food is rising too. Statistics Canada recently reported that food costs have risen 4.8% since last November – the largest increase since July 2009. Staple foods saw some of the highest increases – meat went up by 6.2%, fresh vegetables by 13.2%, and bread by 11.9%. It's no wonder that people receiving a 1% increase in their incomes can't afford to eat healthy food. And it's also no wonder that the majority of people using food banks continue to be people who rely on OW or ODSP.

¹ See www.incomesecurity.org/documents/1percentincrease-NovDec2011.doc for more detail on the 1% increase

Transportation costs have gone up by 5.7%. And while these are Canada-wide numbers, the Ontario picture isn't any better. Prices overall went up by 2.5% since 2010. Ontario's 6.7% increase in food prices was the highest of all provinces.

Clearly, the incomes that 868,000 Ontarians currently count on from social assistance are not enough.

Lately we're hearing the provincial government wants Ontarians to "share the pain". They have been talking about the need to tackle the provincial deficit, with cuts to program spending deeper than anything we have ever seen before. Sometime soon, Commissioner Don Drummond will issue his report on public services – but he has already said that while health and education will mostly be spared the knife, spending in other provincial government ministries will have to be cut by as much as 30%.

That means social assistance is once again on the chopping block.

But is austerity the only option? Is cutting back on the programs and services that the poorest Ontarians desperately need the only way forward?

This is an important time to talk about inequality. To talk about who is hurting from economic turmoil in Ontario – the declining middle class – and who is hurting most – those already living in poverty, including people on OW and ODSP.

And who is not hurting at all. While the declining middle class and the poorest among us contend with rising costs, job losses, reduced benefits and increasing insecurity, corporations and the wealthy continue to enjoy government handouts. In an effort to create growth, governments have delivered tax cuts to the most well-off, including corporations, in the belief that the money saved will be invested in creating jobs – and jobs will be the answer to ending poverty.

That strategy simply isn't working. As the Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the OECD) said of its recent study on income inequality, "this study dispels the assumptions that the benefits of economic growth will automatically trickle down to the disadvantaged and that greater inequality fosters greater social mobility."

In Canada, corporations are sitting on half a trillion dollars – much of which came from tax cuts – instead of investing in their businesses and creating new jobs.

In other words, trickle-down economic policies – like giving tax breaks to the most well-off in hopes it will benefit the least well-off – just don't work. The funds given away in corporate tax breaks could have been used to tackle inequality, boost incomes, and increase quality of life through social spending that benefits us all.

As a society, we cannot continue to ignore inequality, including the poverty that people on OW and ODSP live with every day, while the most well-off benefit.



Respect for People with Disabilities in the Social Assistance Review

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario has been appointed to review social assistance and come up with ways to help people make the transition from OW and ODSP into the workforce. The Commission released a discussion paper last June and people across the province participated in consultations or made submissions, including the ODSP Action Coalition and many of our members. The Commission is expected to release a second paper with more specific options in February and then release its final report in June.

For the ODSP Action Coalition, this review is the most important opportunity in decades to improve ODSP so that people with disabilities can live with dignity. Unfortunately, we are increasingly worried that any restructuring that comes out of the review will be more about reducing the costs of ODSP than improving the lives of people with disabilities. We have made two submissions to the Commission. The first lays out our vision for a program that would be truly supportive of people with disabilities. The second responds directly to the Commission's questions around disability and work. A summary of both submissions, which includes links to the full submissions online, is available in your package.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, governments have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of people with disabilities. In June, the Commission will release its final report and the government will begin considering what changes to make to OW and ODSP. Under a minority government, all parties have the power to work together to restructure ODSP so that people with disabilities can live with dignity and respect, free from poverty. As individual MPPs, you can support us in our struggle for justice.

Disability should not equal poverty.

The ODSP Action Coalition has 7 messages for MPPs regarding the Social Assistance Review:

- 1) The Social Assistance Review is part of a Poverty Reduction Strategy supported by all three parties in the legislature. While the Review is heavily focused on employment, improvements to other aspects of ODSP would also be effective at reducing poverty and are crucial for people with disabilities who are not currently working. **Increasing social assistance rates, ensuring people on OW and ODSP get any new housing benefit, improving access to ODSP and ODSP benefits, continuing and improving the special diet allowance program, and increasing allowable assets are all changes that could be made to reduce poverty for people with disabilities.**
- 2) **If disability supports are restructured, the current definition of disability under ODSP needs to be protected.** It recognizes that the impact of a person's disability is based not only on the extent of any medical impairment but also the societal attitudes, barriers and lack of accommodations that exclude people with disabilities from many parts of the community and

the labour market. This definition reflects the reality of people with disabilities. We feel any changes that restrict this definition are an attempt to reduce ODSP caseloads and government costs, at the expense of people with disabilities.

- 3) The Commission is exploring the possibility of combining OW and ODSP into a single program where people with disabilities would be categorized according to those who can and cannot work. Work – and especially full-time work – is not the ultimate test of our abilities and shouldn't be the ultimate goal of a program that is supposed to help people with disabilities. **Even with better employment supports, many people with disabilities may not be able to participate fully in the workforce and will still need additional income and other supports.**
- 4) A person's ability to work depends not only on the nature of their disability but a combination of factors including health, age, education, skills, experience and the availability of employment supports, accommodation in the workplace, accessible transportation, and job opportunities. All three parties need to work together to provide people with disabilities with adequate financial and individualized supports to overcome the multiple barriers in their lives so that they can volunteer and be part of their communities, as well as work. **People with disabilities need access to good education and training, on-the-job accommodations, mentoring and networking programs, better access to information, connections to community services, and assistance with transportation, employment and medical-related costs.**
- 5) People with disabilities want to work, but need good jobs with decent pay, good benefits, and employers who understand what accommodations are, what their legal obligations are, and government support for making some of those accommodations. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act is not enough to level the playing field. The Commission says addressing problems in the labour market is beyond their scope. **All three parties need to work together with employers to do much more to break down the significant barriers people with disabilities face in the labour market.**
- 6) **People on ODSP need to keep more of their income when they do work and keep benefits like their drug cards if they don't get health benefits at work.** The ODSP Action Coalition believes that people should be allowed to keep at least \$500 in earned income from a job or self employment, which is the same amount that recipients can keep each month as help from family or friends with no deductions from their ODSP cheque. As well, many jobs no longer offer benefits so if people with disabilities are to continue working, the government needs to extend drug coverage for as long as someone is working and not just the first year. Without key changes like these, working can – and does - mean deeper poverty.
- 7) The Commission has asked whether it is reasonable to force people with disabilities into employment participation agreements or treatment and rehabilitation programs as a condition of receiving social assistance. Protect the dignity and human rights of people with disabilities to choose what is appropriate for them. **Punishing and coercing people to prepare for jobs that won't accommodate them or forcing people to go to treatment services is the wrong way to get people working or accessing healthcare. Threatening the stability of the lives of people with disabilities by threatening their income will only further impoverish and distress people with disabilities.**



Questions for Liberal MPPs

- 1) The final report of the Social Assistance Review is to be released this June. **How quickly does the government intend to implement recommendations, given the magnitude of restructuring in the public service that's being contemplated, both in the Drummond Commission review and by your government?**
- 2) A single person on ODSP currently receives a maximum of \$1064 per month. It's not enough to live on. Under your government, the gap created when ODSP rates were frozen between 1993 and 2005 has not been closed. Rates continue to slide in real terms because the increases that your government announced haven't kept pace with the rising cost of inflation. During the last election, your party made no further commitments to increase social assistance rates or index rates to the cost of living and, since being elected, has focused on the need to reduce the deficit. **If the Social Assistance Review recommends increasing OW and ODSP rates so that people with disabilities can live with dignity, would your government support that? Would you personally? What will you do to bring other MPPs in caucus on side?**

(Note: In February, the ODSP Action Coalition and Put Food in the Budget are partnering on another postcard calling for increases to social assistance rates. You may want to get some cards signed and present them as part of your meeting with your MPP).

- 3) The Ontario Child Benefit is the cornerstone of your government's Poverty Reduction Strategy and families on OW and ODSP are some of the poorest in the province. Yet many have benefitted very little because of the way social assistance rates were cut and important benefits like the Back to School and Winter Clothing Allowances were eliminated. **What will you do to ensure that people on OW and ODSP get the full benefit of any further moves to deliver more money through the tax system (such as a Housing Benefit)?**
- 4) **During the election, your party committed to increasing the Ontario Child Benefit to \$1310 by 2013. Given the recent talk of across the board cuts to most ministries, will you keep your commitment to families living in poverty? Will you ensure poverty reduction remains a priority by bringing in the increase in this provincial budget?**
- 5) **What is your party's position on whether or not earnings should be clawed back from people with disabilities who work but do not make enough money to leave ODSP? What is your position personally?**
- 6) **How will you personally share our perspective on the Social Assistance Review with the Minister of Community and Social Services, in caucus discussions and during budget deliberations?**
- 7) **What other kinds of concrete support can you provide to assist us in moving our vision forward for restructuring ODSP so that people with disabilities are truly supported in their communities and in the workforce?**



Questions for NDP MPPs

- 1) **Is the Social Assistance Review on your party's radar? How are you planning to respond? Are you planning to use the release of the final report to push for particular kinds of reforms? What changes will you be pushing for?**
- 2) **A single person on ODSP currently receives a maximum of \$1064 per month. It's not enough to live on. In your election commitments, the NDP committed to tying ODSP rates to inflation and following through on recommendations of the Social Assistance Review to improve income adequacy. How is the NDP planning to push the government to improve adequacy for people on OW and ODSP, given the current fiscal climate? What will you do personally?**
- 3) **The NDP talks a lot about making life affordable for working families. Where does improving social assistance fit in the NDP's priorities for 2012, particularly in terms of negotiations with the minority government?**
- 4) **Delivering more money through the tax system is an idea being discussed by more and more policy groups. The Ontario Child Benefit is an example of how this would work and is the cornerstone of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Yet families on OW and ODSP have benefitted very little in comparison to working families because of the way social assistance rates were cut and important benefits like the Back to School and Winter Clothing Allowances were eliminated when the OCB was introduced. During the election, the Liberals promised to ask the Social Assistance Review to develop options for a Housing Benefit in Ontario. And the NDP went further, promising to introduce a Housing Benefit. It's likely a Housing Benefit would be delivered through the tax system, like the OCB. What will you do to ensure that people on OW and ODSP get the housing benefit and future increases to the OCB without losing the money they receive through social assistance?**
- 5) **During the election, the NDP and the Liberals both committed to increasing the Ontario Child Benefit to \$1310 by 2013. Will the NDP push for this in the upcoming budget as a condition of giving your support?**
- 6) **In your election commitments, the NDP promised to "eliminate the 50% earned income deduction on the first \$300 of income for the first year of employment so that ODSP recipients can keep more of their earnings". The ODSP Action Coalition believes that people should be allowed to keep at least \$500 in earned income from a job or self employment, which is the same amount that recipients can keep each month as help from family or friends with no deductions from their ODSP cheque. How can the Coalition work with the NDP to push for an earnings exemption following the release of the Social Assistance Review's final report?**
- 7) **How will you personally share our perspective on the Social Assistance Review with the Minister of Community and Social Services during Question Period, in caucus discussions and during budget deliberations?**
- 8) **What other kinds of concrete support can you provide to assist us in moving our vision forward for restructuring ODSP so that people with disabilities are truly supported in their communities and in the workforce?**



Questions for PC MPPs

- 1) **Is the Social Assistance Review on your party's radar? How are you planning to respond? Are you planning to use the release of the final report to push for particular kinds of reforms? What changes will you be pushing for?**
- 2) A single person on ODSP currently receives a maximum of \$1064 per month. It's not enough to live on. Under your government, ODSP rates were frozen between 1993 and 2005 and, under the Liberals, this gap has never been closed and rates continue to slide in real terms because the increases announced haven't kept pace with the rising cost of inflation. During the last election, your party made no commitments to increase social assistance rates or index rates to the cost of living. **If the Social Assistance Review recommends increasing OW and ODSP rates so that people with disabilities can live with dignity, would your party support that? Would you personally? What will you do to bring other MPPs in caucus on side?**
- 3) **The Tory "Changebook" during the election talked about streamlining the welfare system and its rules. What would that look like?**
- 4) In your election commitments, the Tories promised to "allow OW and ODSP recipients who work part time to keep more of their benefits and ease their transition from welfare to a job". The ODSP Action Coalition believes that people with disabilities should be allowed to keep at least \$500 in earned income from a job or self employment, which is the same amount that recipients can keep each month as help from family or friends with no deductions from their ODSP cheque. The release of the Social Assistance Review's final report in June will be an ideal opportunity to push for this kind of change. **What amount of earnings exemption would you push for?**
- 5) **How will you personally share our perspective on the Social Assistance Review with the Minister of Community and Social Services, during Question Period, in caucus discussions and during budget deliberations?**
- 6) **What other kinds of concrete support can you provide to assist us in moving our vision forward for restructuring ODSP so that people with disabilities are truly supported in their communities and in the workforce?**



The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: “Can” and “Cannot Work” Is the Wrong Question

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is thinking about changes to ODSP. One thing they’ve been talking about is that ODSP currently doesn’t make a distinction between people who “can” work and those who “can’t”. The idea is that maybe people who “can’t” work should get long-term income support, like a pension.

The Coalition does not agree with dividing people with disabilities in this way.

There is no clear line between people with disabilities who “can” and “cannot” work. No two such groups of people actually exist. Some people with disabilities that others think are “very severe” are able to work full time. Some with “less severe” disabilities are not.

As a group that advocates for people with disabilities, we have fought for a long time for an understanding of disability that is not based on whether or not people with disabilities can work. Work – and especially full-time work – is not the ultimate test of people’s abilities and shouldn’t be the ultimate goal of a program that’s supposed to help people with disabilities.

The old category of “permanently unemployable” meant that people with disabilities were not given opportunities or supports to work or contribute to our communities in other ways. Defining disability according to whether or not people with disabilities can work takes us backward. And it has real and negative implications. For example:

- Who decides who can and cannot work? What criteria are used? What exceptions would there be?
- Will employment supports only be given to those considered “able to work”?
- What about those considered “unable to work”, especially if they get more income? Would they be ineligible for supports that could help them work? If so, would they be even more socially isolated and excluded than they are now?
- What will happen to those considered “able to work” even though they have a disability that meets the current ODSP definition of disability? Would they get less income than those “not able to work”? Would they be required to sign participation agreements (like in OW) and get income taken away if they can’t meet the obligations?
- How would disputes be handled? Won’t this lead to more human rights challenges?

Employability is not an either / or – it is a continuum that depends on things like health, age, education, skills, experience and coping abilities, as well as employment supports, accommodation of disability in the workplace, and the job opportunities available.

The problem with ODSP is not whether people’s physical or mental condition makes them unable to work. The problem is that there is no good system of meaningful supports to help people with disabilities work – or participate in other ways – as much as they can. This is where the Commission and the Ontario Government need to focus their efforts for reform.



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The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: Accommodation and the AODA

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is thinking about changes to ODSP. One issue they're thinking about is how to get people on ODSP into paid jobs.

While it's true that people with disabilities on ODSP want to work – just like anybody else – it's also true that they experience many barriers to getting a job. One of the biggest barriers is the workplace itself. The workplace can be an especially difficult place for people with disabilities, unless employers are flexible and accommodate people's needs. But that doesn't often happen, even though employers have a responsibility to help us.

Because of this and other problems for people with disabilities, the provincial government has introduced the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (the AODA). This law is supposed to make many aspects of life in Ontario more open for people with disabilities. It creates standards that Ontario groups, companies, and organizations are supposed to meet to cut down on the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from being included.

One of the standards applies to working. It is supposed to make sure that employers in Ontario take more responsibility for making jobs more accessible to people with disabilities by providing certain kinds of accommodations. The government and the Social Assistance Review Commission think this will help people with disabilities find paid jobs.

The ODSP Action Coalition agrees that the AODA could be helpful. But we know there are problems too:

- The employment standard only applies to employers with 50 or more employees. Most of the jobs in Ontario are created by small companies with fewer than 50 staff. That's where the jobs are – not in big companies.
- The AODA doesn't include any tools that would force companies to make their workplaces more accessible for people with disabilities. So neither the government nor people with disabilities have any way to make sure that employers are actually doing what they are supposed to do to help people get jobs.
- The only accommodations that are included in the AODA for the workplace are accessible formats and communication support – even though there are a huge range of accommodations that people with disabilities need in order to work.
- The AODA does not even go as far as the Ontario Human Rights Code on these issues.

The AODA will not eliminate the extensive barriers people with disabilities experience in looking for paid work. People with disabilities will continue to need extensive employment supports to find work and will continue to have difficulties staying employed because of the lack of accommodations in workplaces. The Social Assistance Review and the governments need to focus on helping employers provide accommodations and improving employment supports for people with disabilities.



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The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: Mandatory Participation in Work-Related Activities

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is thinking about changes to ODSP. One issue they're considering is how to "place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to employment".

The ODSP Action Coalition is worried that this could mean that people with disabilities on ODSP would be required to look for work or get education or training as a condition for getting income and other benefits. This is what already happens to people on Ontario Works.

Since forcing people to work under Ontario Works was accompanied by a 21% cut to rates, the ODSP Action Coalition is also afraid that ODSP rates would similarly be cut, condemning people with disabilities to even greater poverty.

The Coalition strongly believes that this is the wrong way to get people with disabilities working.

Making the incomes of people with disabilities dependent on whether or not they participate in work-related activities is punitive and ignores the reality of their lives.

Whether people with disabilities are able to work depends on a number of factors including their health, education, skills, training, and experience. People with disabilities want to work, but need a variety of supports and services to assist them.

The workplace can be an especially difficult place for people with disabilities, unless employers are flexible and accommodate their needs – but that doesn't often happen. People with disabilities also need better training, upgrading and work placements. They need accessible and reliable transportation and childcare. And the number of complicated, punitive and intrusive rules regarding employment under ODSP need to be changed so that people with disabilities who are able to find work aren't overwhelmed by paperwork for ODSP or dealing with overpayments and threats of their cheque being cut.

The level of supports people with disabilities need doesn't currently exist. So making people with disabilities work will only result in increasing stress, frustration, despair and illness.

Making people with disabilities work under the threat of losing their income is punitive and coercive. It doesn't have any place in Ontario's disability income support programs – particularly when poverty reduction is an ultimate goal.

The right approach is to give people with disabilities the employment-related supports and services they need in a voluntary, collaborative, non-intrusive and universal way.



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The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: Mandatory Treatment or Rehabilitation

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is thinking about changes to ODSP. One issue they're thinking about is how to "place reasonable expectations on, and provide supports for, people who rely on social assistance with respect to participation in treatment and rehabilitation".

The Coalition is concerned that this could mean changing the system so that people on ODSP would only get a monthly benefit cheque if they agree to get treatment or rehabilitation. The Coalition is opposed to this kind of change.

There are a number of serious problems with making people with disabilities get treatment or rehabilitation as a condition of getting monthly income benefits:

- **Availability:** Access to treatment or rehabilitation is limited in many places in Ontario. Many people aren't able to find a family doctor. Getting in to see a specialist is often impossible, especially in rural areas and the North. Mental health services are also very hard to access. Making people get services that aren't available isn't fair.
- **Effectiveness:** Making people get treatment – for mental illness or alcohol / drug dependency, for example – may not be effective. There is considerable evidence that shows that treatment works better when people have a say in the treatment they get.
- **Ethics and legality:** Making people get treatment in order to receive their monthly income limits the control people with disabilities have over their lives. It is ethically and legally questionable. It could mean more human rights challenges.
- **Health supports:** People on ODSP need a number of other health supports, besides treatment or rehabilitation, but these other supports are often not available. For example, physiotherapy, dental and assistive devices coverage is very limited. Chiropractic, chiropody, massage, and other alternative health practices are not covered and not affordable for people on ODSP. If these supports were provided, more people with disabilities would have better quality of life and would be better able to work.

Threatening the stability of the lives of people with disabilities – especially those with mental health disabilities or addictions – by threatening their income is the wrong way to get more people into the workforce.

People with disabilities need a variety of supports, not forced treatment and rehabilitation.



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The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: The Special Diet Allowance

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance is thinking about changes to ODSP. The government has asked the Commission to think about what to do with the Special Diet Allowance program.

There has been a lot of controversy about Special Diet for many years. Because of the controversy, the government has made a lot of changes to the rules around Special Diet – like which medical conditions qualify for an allowance and which don't.

These changes have been very stressful for people who depend on the Special Diet Allowance. They need the extra money to buy the foods that their doctors or other medical specialists have said will help them with their medical conditions. The constant threat of losing the Special Diet Allowance is making people very stressed and sometimes even more sick.

Special Diet is not a “special benefit”. Special Diet is one of the three essential costs along with basic needs and shelter that are used to calculate “budgetary requirements”, or the total amount of money a person is entitled to each month. Because it's not a “special benefit”, Special Diet should not be moved outside of the OW and ODSP programs. If it was, some people with disabilities would no longer be eligible for social assistance as a result.

Special Diet is different from the issue of having enough money to buy regular, basic healthy food. People on OW and ODSP don't have enough money for a healthy, nutritious diet. But even if OW and ODSP rates were increased enough that people could afford healthy food, people with disabilities would still need the Special Diet Allowance. The Special Diet pays for foods that people need above and beyond a regular healthy diet. And these foods are often very expensive. They're not a “frill”. They're necessary to keep people healthy or prevent their medical conditions from worsening.

The ODSP Action Coalition calls on the Commission and the Ontario government to:

- Continue the Special Diet Allowance for the long-term to serve the very real health problems of many people on ODSP and OW.
- Index the Special Diet Allowance amounts to food inflation.
- Expand the list of medical conditions eligible for the Special Diet Allowance to include conditions like multiple chemical sensitivities and those outlined by the Special Diets Expert Review Panel in 2008.
- Establish a permanent Review Panel so that the list of medical conditions and the amounts of allowances can be updated on a regular basis.



O.D.S.P. ACTION COALITION

C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON, M6K 1L3

The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: The Coalition's 1st Submission: Dignity, Adequacy, Inclusion

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario is thinking about making changes to ODSP. The Coalition wrote a paper called “Dignity, Adequacy, Inclusion: Rethinking the Ontario Disability Support Program” and gave it to the Commission. It can be read at: <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/dignity-adequacy-inclusion-rethinking-the-ontario-disability-support-program/>. The paper talks about the changes that the Coalition thinks are important. This is a brief outline of what the paper says.

1. People with disabilities have the right to be treated with dignity

This means:

- Protecting the human rights of people with disabilities should be the focus of any changes to ODSP.
- The purpose of ODSP should be to make sure people have enough money to live on, to make sure they are treated with dignity, to reduce poverty, and to focus on accessibility.
- The structure of ODSP should be changed so that it supports this purpose.
- Individual people with disabilities should be able to qualify for ODSP on their own. Their spouse's incomes and assets should not be included.
 - This will help people with disabilities form relationships because potential partners won't have to take on financial responsibility for them.
- The current definition of disability should be kept and made even stronger.
 - The definition is good because it doesn't only look at a person's medical condition but also at the way barriers in society – like bad attitudes, physical barriers, and other things – contribute to disabilities.
- It should be easier to get on ODSP. Caseworkers should treat people better. It should be easier to get information. Information should be easier to understand.
- Asset levels should go up so people with disabilities can save.
- Any changes that are made to OW have to consider the fact that there are people with disabilities on that program and their needs have to be met.

2. Income benefits should be enough to support people's needs

- Incomes have to be raised. People can't afford to live on what they get now.
- Basic needs should be enough to pay for all the regular costs people have, including a healthy diet.
- Shelter benefits should be enough to pay for all of a person's housing costs.

- There should be an independent group that helps decide what regular costs are.
- People with disabilities have extra costs because of their disabilities. They also need income support for longer than other people. More money for a longer time should be part of any changes to ODSP.
- The Special Diet Allowance is a big support for people with disabilities. It should be expanded to include more health conditions and give more money.
- Some people think there should be a Housing Benefit for all low-income people. If the Commission decides to do this, they have to make sure of four things:
 - People on ODSP should not have any of their benefits taken away if a Housing Benefit is created.
 - A good system is put in place to make sure that problems are dealt with properly.
 - The Housing Benefit should help homeowners as well as people who rent.
 - There should also be money put into building more affordable housing.

3. People with disabilities should be given more help to be connected to their communities, whether by working at a job or in other ways

- People with disabilities should not be made to look for work or get work-related education or training and have their incomes reduced or suspended if they don't.
- People with disabilities who want to work should get more help with training and education and other work-related services.
- People who work should be able to keep more of the money they earn at a job.
- People should get more help with running their own businesses.
- There should be a special provincial plan to help people with disabilities to work.
- There should be special work done with employers to get them to hire people with disabilities more often.
- There should be a "social inclusion allowance" to help people do volunteer work and other kinds of activities in their communities.
- All the barriers in the system that make it hard for people to do activities in the community or work at a job should be fixed.

4. ODSP should work better with other programs and supports

- The province should work with city governments and the federal government to make all the programs for people with disabilities work better together.
- Caseworkers should help people get information about other programs and should help people connect with them.
- There should be better information that would help ODSP give more support to people with disabilities.
- Doing this would give people more benefit from these programs and help make sure that people don't fall through the cracks.



O.D.S.P. ACTION COALITION

C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON, M6K 1L3

The Review of Social Assistance in Ontario: The Coalition's 2nd Submission: An Activation Agenda

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario is thinking about making changes to ODSP. The Coalition wrote one paper about the changes we wanted to see, and gave it to the Commission. It can be read at: <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/dignity-adequacy-inclusion-rethinking-the-ontario-disability-support-program/>.

After speaking with the Commissioners, we decided to write another submission. Our second paper is called "An Activation Agenda for People with Disabilities on ODSP". It is available at: <http://sareview.ca/isac-resources/an-activation-agenda-for-people-with-disabilities-on-odsp/>. In it, we talk about four crucial issues that the Commission has to make sure are part of the changes they make to ODSP if they want people with disabilities to be able to work.

1. A Dynamic Understanding of Disability

- If people with disabilities are going to be able to work at a job, then the Commission has to make sure that they think about disability in the right way.
- If we only think about disability as something that stops people from getting a job, then we won't give people the right supports.
- Disability is not the same for everybody. And it's not the same every day.
- Some people with disabilities can work full time. Some can only work part-time.
- Some can only work sometimes, when they're feeling good. Other times, when they're not feeling good, they can't work at all.
- We have to recognize these differences and give people whatever supports they need so they can work in whatever way and however much they can.

2. Adequate Incomes

- People need enough money to live on.
 - If people don't have enough money, they struggle and have hard lives. They get anxious, depressed, and sick. They can't go out and do things and can't participate in the community. This isn't good for them or their community.
 - If people have more money then they will spend more money to buy the things they need. This helps the economy.
 - If people have more money, they will be able to afford the things they need to get a job – like clothes, grooming supplies, bus fare or a car, etc.
- Giving people enough money to live on is important for a lot of reasons, including helping people to find work.

3. Good Programs to Help People with Disabilities Get and Keep a Job

- People with disabilities need supports to get a job and help to keep it.
- They need good caseworkers that can help them think about what kind of work they want to do, make a plan for how to do it, and get them supports they need.
- They need to spend less time worrying about their income and the rules that ODSP makes them follow, and more time thinking about their plans for the future.
- They need good education and training programs. These programs should be different depending on what kind of work each person wants to be able to do.
- They need information that they get from their caseworkers to be clear and easy to understand.
- They need to be able to keep more of the income that they make from working.
- They need to be able to keep their drug cards if the job that they get doesn't give them one – and they need to keep them for a long time. Maybe forever.
- They need to be sure that they can get back on ODSP if they lose their job, for whatever reason.
- They need to get connected to other supports and services in their communities.
- One of the things people with disabilities don't need is to be forced to look for work, like people on OW are. This doesn't help them to get a job or keep it.

4. Good Jobs For People with Disabilities

- A big problem for people with disabilities is that there aren't good jobs out there for them to get.
- A lot of jobs don't pay very well and don't have benefits.
- The hours of work are sometimes hard for people with disabilities because they have to take more time to get ready for work or to get to work.
- Some employers aren't willing to hire people with disabilities because they don't know if people with disabilities can do their jobs well.
- Others don't hire people with disabilities because it might cost them money to have to change the job or the workplace to accommodate the disability.
- There have to be better incentives to make jobs better – so they pay more wages, give people benefits, and have safe workplaces where people get treated fairly and with dignity and respect.
- There has to be help for people with disabilities to open their own businesses.
- There have to be better programs to help employers understand that people with disabilities are just as good at working as other people.
- There also have to be better programs to help employers understand that they are required by the law to accommodate people with disabilities. And better programs to help employers with the costs of accommodation.
- And there has to be a special provincial plan to help people with disabilities work.



C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON, M6K 1L3

Lobbying – Key Messages and Personal Story

Use this sheet to help you decide which key messages you want to focus on in your meeting with your MPP, the points you want to make about that issue, and how your life would be affected if those changes were made.

My Key Messages:

- Create a short summary of what matters to you
- Decide the most important points you want to communicate. You can use the Coalition’s messages but choose one or two that you might have a personal example of. This makes it easier for the MPP to understand why that point is important to you and what a change would mean to your life.

1. _____

2. _____

My Asks:

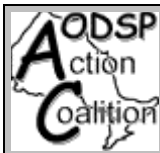
- Your asks are the 1-3 things that you want to see happen or changed. You should end your conversation/letter/presentation with your asks.

Tips:

- Be specific and clear
- Avoid being too broad or general (i.e., We need your support – this is way too general)
- Relate back to your story if possible
- Remember to mention these again at the end of your conversation/letter/presentation

1. _____

2. _____



O.D.S.P. ACTION COALITION

C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON M6K 1L3

Lobbying – Writing your Local MPP

Writing a letter or an email to your local Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) can be a powerful tool for change – after all, taking the time to write to your MPP shows that you really care about your issue. So write to them – and get your friends and family to do the same.

1) If you don't know the name of your MPP or your Electoral District:

Go to the Elections Ontario website at http://fyed.elections.on.ca/fyed/en/form_page_en.jsp and use your postal code or address to find out.

2) When you know the name of your MPP or Electoral District:

Go to the Elections Ontario addresses list at http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/members_current.do?locale=en&channel_id={923146e7-4d81-42a8-99f0-e61f5ab50387}&lang=en to get their contact information.

Make sure to send your letter or e-mail to their Constituency Office address – that's the office in your local community.

3) Deciding what to write.

Speaking from your own experience can have a big impact on your local MPP. So write a letter that talks about your experience with OW or ODSP - the ways the system has undermined you, failed to support you, denied you opportunities, or stopped you from reaching your full potential.

And tell them what you think a good social assistance system would look like – the resources, programs, and assistance that you think would help you and people in your community thrive, have economic security, and be able to live the life you want to live.

Keep your letter relatively short – two pages at the most – because your MPP or their staff will be more likely to read it that way.

MPP Letter Template

DATE

Your Name
Your Address

The (Honourable) **NAME OF MPP OR MINISTER** (**NOTE: Honourable is only used to address Ministers**)
Title (eg. **MPP or Minister of...**)
Address

Re: Meeting request from YOUR NAME

Dear _____ (First Name, Last Name),

I am/we are pleased with the commitment from your political party to improve Ontario's social assistance system. I am/We are members of the ODSP Action Coalition, a province-wide coalition of approximately 150 community disability agencies, provincial organizations, anti-poverty groups, legal clinics, and ODSP recipients who have been working together since 2002 to push for improvements to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) so that people with disabilities can live with justice and dignity.

The ODSP Action Coalition works closely with many people with disabilities in your riding who have struggled to survive on ODSP, or are still on Ontario Works because they have not been able to complete the complex ODSP application process. We believe that any restructuring of OW and ODSP must address the range of barriers that people with disabilities currently face. While we support improvements that would make it easier and more financially rewarding for ODSP recipients to work, our experience is that employment incentives alone are inadequate as an anti-poverty strategy.

For those who do find work, 50 per cent of their earnings are clawed back under current ODSP and OW rules. Many others remain unable to find a job or cannot work because of their disabilities. So without increases to OW and ODSP rates, significant reforms to the ODSP application process, and greater access to mandatory and discretionary benefits, in our view, many singles and families on OW and ODSP will remain mired in poverty.

People with disabilities need access to good education and training, on-the-job accommodations, mentoring and networking programs, better access to information, connections to community services, and assistance with transportation, employment and medical-related costs.

I/We look forward to meeting with you to discuss these issues and ways in which we can work collaboratively to ensure that people with disabilities will no longer have to live in poverty. I/We will be in touch with you shortly to arrange a mutually convenient meeting date.

Sincerely,

Your Name



C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON M6K 1L3

Lobbying Tipsheet – Meeting with your Local MPP

Meeting with your local Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) is a powerful, personal way to get your point across.

1) Find out who your MPP is and get their contact information

If you don't know the name of your MPP or your Electoral District, go to the Elections Ontario website at http://fyed.elections.on.ca/fyed/en/form_page_en.jsp and use your postal code or address to find out.

Then go to the Elections Ontario addresses list at

http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/members_current.do?locale=en&channel_id={923146e7-4d81-42a8-99f0-e61f5ab50387}&lang=en to get their contact information.

2) Send your letter expressing your concerns and asking for a meeting.

3) Set up an Appointment with your MPP

- A week or two after sending your letter, call your MPP's Constituency Office to arrange an appointment to meet. MPPs are usually available on Fridays in their offices. If the Legislature isn't sitting, they are available most workdays.
- Formally schedule an appointment through the politician's assistant or appointment coordinator, even if the politician or staff person has personally agreed to a meeting. Remember, lobbying starts with your first contact, so be nice to the receptionist and the administrative and executive assistants. They are the gatekeepers to your MPP. The nicer and more respectful you are to them, the more likely they are to help you get a meeting with your MPP and raise your issues.
- Sometimes several phone calls are necessary to get a date. Don't be shy about being persistent! Stress how many people you represent and/or are affected by the issue you wish to discuss. You will have to prove to the appointment coordinator that meeting with you is a good use of the politician's time

4) Decide who will attend the meeting.

It is a good idea to bring other people along – although it's best not to invite more than two or three people. It's also best for all the people who attend the meeting to live in the MPP's Electoral District. If you receive OW or ODSP, you might invite supportive people who work for a local agency, own a local business, or are local community, religious, or cultural leaders.

And if you are an activist, an agency worker, a community member, or a friend or supporter of a person living on OW or ODSP, make sure to invite at least one person with lived experience of the social assistance system to the meeting. And make sure that person has time to speak.

5) Preparing for the meeting.

- Call your MPP's Constituency Office to confirm the date, time and who will be at the meeting, about three to five days before the meeting. If the appointment needs to be rescheduled, be gracious.
- Let the office know who will attend with you and find out how long you will have to meet with your MPP. Most appointments will be short – 15 to 30 minutes – so you need to be clear about exactly which messages you want to convey.
- Make sure you know the most current information about the issues you want to discuss. Use the key messages and backgrounders in this kit to prepare.
- Telling your MPP about your lived experience of OW or ODSP can be hard, so you may want to make a few notes beforehand so that you remember what to say. And encourage the other people who are attending the meeting with you to do the same. Use the *Lobbying Key Messages and Personal Story Sheet* in this kit to help you.
- Make sure to arrive a few minutes early for the meeting to give yourself time to get settled.

6) During the meeting

Be assertive rather than aggressive. Being assertive will win you more respect. Try not to get into arguments. Focus on solutions rather than complaints.

Tell your story of how OW or ODSP has failed you or stopped you from reaching your full potential. Tell them what a good social assistance system with meaningful supports and opportunities would look like. Let them know how changes to ODSP that have been proposed in the Social Assistance Review would affect you.

What to Say:

- Have an internal agenda to make sure you cover all the points in the time allotted. This should stop people from covering the same ground or missing key points.
- Be friendly. Comment on what you have heard/seen about the politician's positions or work that you can support. You want to establish that you can work with them.
- Don't spend all your time talking. Leave about 5 to 10 minutes for the politician to ask questions. Decide in advance who is going to take the lead answering questions.
- Make sure the politician understands what you are asking him/her to do and that you will be following up.

7) What to ask the MPP to do specifically

If your MPP is a government Cabinet Minister, ask them to bring up your issues/demands in Cabinet meetings.

If your MPP is a member of the government party, ask them to bring up the issues/demands you have raised at one of their caucus meetings.

If they are a member of an opposition party, ask them to bring up the issues/demands you have raised during Question Period in the legislature.

Ask your MPP to write a letter to the Minister of Community and Social Services, saying that they support the demands you have raised, and asking for a response.

There are also several ways your MPP can support your issue in the community:

- Hold a community meeting in the riding
- Mail out information in the constituency
- Ask for reports/research from his/her staff
- Invite guest speakers (you) onto the local cable channel or to community meetings
- Hold media conferences with partners (you) on key issues

8) Follow-up

Send your MPP a follow-up letter thanking them for meeting with you, summarizing the content of the meeting, and confirming what the MPP agreed to do. You can use our “After the Meeting MPP Letter Template”.

At a later date, call the MPP’s office to see if the MPP followed through on any promises they made.

Use our “MPP Report back form” to let the ODSP Action Coalition know how your meeting went, your MPPs response to the issues, and any commitments they made.

After the Meeting MPP Letter Template

DATE

Your Name
Your Address

The (Honourable) **NAME OF MPP OR MINISTER** (*NOTE: Honourable is only used to address Ministers*)
Title (eg. MPP or Minister of...)
Address

Re: Meeting request from YOUR NAME / ORGANIZATION / GROUP

Dear _____ (First Name, Last Name),

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you on _____. I/We very much appreciate your interest in the issues identified by the ODSP Action Coalition and your commitment to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

I/we commend your recognition that/of **INSERT ISSUES THAT WERE DISCUSSED AT THE MEETING.**

Your commitment to **INSERT WHAT THE MPP PROMISED TO DO** is appreciated.

I/We look forward to working with you during your term. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact _____ at _____.

Sincerely,

Your Name



O.D.S.P. ACTION COALITION

C/O PARKDALE COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES, 1266 Queen St W., Toronto, ON, M6K 1L3

MPP Report back form

Please fax or e-mail this evaluation to:

**ODSP Action Coalition c/o Naomi Berlyne
Community Development Coordinator
Houselink Community Homes**

1678 Bloor st West Toronto, M6P 1A9

phone 416-516-1422 ext 250 / fax (416) 516 1344 / email NaomiBe@houselink.on.ca

Name of MPP or Cabinet Minister:

Constituency/Riding:

Date of Meeting:

Members Present on behalf of the ODSP Coalition:

Members Present from the Government:

Main issues/points discussed:

What was your MPP's response to the campaign demands?

What actions is s/he willing to take?

Is any follow-up necessary? (further information, another meeting, etc)

Any additional comments?