

February 11, 2021

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
Frost Building North, 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1Z1

Dear Minister Bethlenfalvy:

Re: 2021 Budget Consultations

Thank you for accepting our submission for the next budget on behalf of the Campaign Against Cuts to Social Assistance (CACSA). CACSA is a cross-sector and non-partisan campaign in Ottawa that endeavours to raise awareness on social assistance changes, and advocates for an improved social assistance system for low income and vulnerable populations.

Those living in poverty are more susceptible to transmission of COVID-19, and, particularly for those living with disabilities, are more likely to suffer worse health consequences upon contracting this disease. For Ontario to adequately weather and emerge from the pandemic as strong as possible, and to ensure equitable outcomes for all Ontarians, significantly improved anti-poverty measures must be put in place.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created great hardship for vulnerable Ontarians. Many vulnerable Ontarians have lost their employment due to the pandemic. The pandemic has created additional costs for those living on a low income and those living with disabilities.

We understand that the Federal government's investments in recovery benefits, such as the Canada Recovery Benefit, created significant savings in the provincial budget since Ontario Works caseloads are down approximately 20%. We are also aware that the province has over \$6 billion unspent in our Pandemic Fund and Support for People, Jobs, and Recovery Funds.¹ This presents a unique opportunity to invest in social assistance for Ontario's most vulnerable.

Our recommendations:

- 1. Re-instate a more robust COVID-19 benefit for all social assistance recipients of \$500/month, and disburse it automatically to all recipients for the length of the pandemic.**
- 2. Raise Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Benefit Program rates to match the cost of living and increase the amount of the housing allowance for social assistance recipients to match average local market rent.**

¹ Macdonald, David (January 2021). *Picking Up the Tab. A Complete Accounting of Federal and Provincial COVID-19 Measures in 2020*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2021/01/Picking%20up%20the%20tab.pdf>, p. 34.

3. Eliminate disincentives to work found in our social assistance programs and elsewhere by:

3.1. applying the employment earnings deduction rule to federal recovery benefits and Employment Insurance, rather than the current 100% clawback;

3.2. increasing the employment income threshold before clawbacks to \$800 per month;

3.3. maintaining eligibility for health and other benefits for social assistance recipients who are not eligible for income support due to receipt of recovery benefits or Employment Insurance until the end of the pandemic; and,

3.4. ensuring all workers have a minimum of 10 paid days of sick leave.

4. Appoint more adjudicators to the Social Benefits Tribunal to reduce the wait-time for a hearing from the current 18-month delay, to the Tribunal's target goal of 210 days from filing an appeal.

5. Maintain the Ontario Disability Support Program disability definition.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Sincerely,

Campaign Against Cuts to Social Assistance