



**Neighbourhood
Legal Services**
LONDON AND MIDDLESEX

Submissions for 2022 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations

Neighbourhood Legal Services (London & Middlesex) Inc. is a poverty law clinic assisting low income Ontarians who reside in London and Middlesex County with legal issues in the areas of social assistance, landlord/tenant and employment. As such, we are highly aware of the difficulties that low income Ontarian's encounter.

We would like to make the following submissions with respect to income security, affordable housing, and employment as part of the 2022 pre-budget consultation.

Income Security

The Poverty Trends Report in London 2020 noted that poverty rates in London remain stubbornly high and persistent. The report highlighted that one in five children live in poverty, that there was an increase in numbers of seniors living in poverty, and the poverty rates are higher for indigenous/visible minorities and recent immigrants. The 2021 London Vital Signs report painted a grim picture for those living in poverty. The picture showed that many low income Londoners live in substandard housing, that almost 12,000 families are living without stable food to survive, and that the use of food banks is increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the income inequality in our community. For example in 2021, food prices alone increased by over 3%. As well, the latest edition from Canada Food Price Report predicted that food prices will likely climb by 5 to 7% in 2022, adding nearly \$1000 a year to the grocery bill for an average family of four. Inflation for basic needs items hits low income families harder, especially for those on OW/ODSP who have not seen an increase to their meager social assistance rates since 2018. As such, we are making the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: A significant increase in social assistance rates to reflect the real cost of living. OW/ODSP benefits should reflect average market rent and utility costs, the cost of a nutritious basket of food, transportation, communication (internet/phone), other needs (hygiene, clothing, etc.) and disability expenses. Implement regular increases to OW/ODSP which are tied to inflation rates to ensure that social assistance rates continue to reflect the real cost of living.

Recommendation #2: Reinstate the Basic Income Pilot Project. A basic income will require a large upfront investment, but there are numerous long-term benefits in reducing

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the negative impacts of poverty. Savings will occur in the areas of healthcare, the justice system, child and family services, and homelessness/emergency shelters. Importantly, there is no evidence that a basic income discourages recipients from entering the workforce. Studies of pilot programs have shown that many recipients enter into education programs or take other steps to improve their employability.

Recommendation #3: Include phone/internet bills as an eligible expense for recipients of OW/ODSP. Phone and internet access is essential during the global pandemic when many agencies have changed their service models to allow access only via phone or email. Government agencies, including the Social Benefits Tribunal and the Landlord and Tenant Board, are administering hearings only via phone/internet. It is essential that those living in poverty have access to these services and a phone/internet is required to participate in society.

Recommendation #4: The Province has begun its transformation of the social assistance program and delivery of services. We submit that in order for this transformation to have a chance of succeeding, social assistance rates need to be increased and that life stabilization activities must be adequately funded and resourced. To provide OW/ODSP clients with adequate/timely assistance in areas of housing, mental health, addiction, education and training, more funds are needed for resources/programs in these areas.

Affordable Housing

London, like many communities across Ontario, is dealing with a growing homelessness crisis as a result of lack of affordable and subsidized housing. In London, the average cost of renting a one-bedroom apartment is >\$1150 per month. This amount far exceeds what those on social assistance or the working poor can afford. As well, London renters are experiencing a steady increase in “renoviction” applications as well as Landlord own use applications. These types of evictions are at times dubious and lessen the number of affordable housing units available. As well, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this issue and our clinic is receiving triple the number of calls regarding evictions than before the pandemic hit. London and Middlesex County has a severe shortage in affordable and subsidized housing with over 6000 people on the waitlist for rent-geared-to-income housing.

In finalizing their 4-year budget in early 2020, London City Council identified affordable housing/homelessness as a key issue to prioritize. All six of the affordable housing/homelessness business plans were accepted by Council to implement over the next 4 years. These business plans include increasing the amount of housing supplements being provided, the number of new affordable housing units constructed, and the amount of housing supports for those experiencing homelessness. In order for these business plans to be successful, additional funding from the Provincial government is required. As such, we are making the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Expand the Canada/Ontario Housing Benefit so that it can assist as many low-income individuals as possible to find and maintain affordable housing. The first couple of years of the COHB assisted a few hundred individuals, families but many more require this assistance to obtain and maintain housing.

Recommendation #2: Invest in repairing and constructing rent-geared-to-income housing units. Many current RGI units cannot house tenants because they are in such disrepair. Recent reports noted nearly \$200 million is required to repair and maintain London Housing RGI units.

Recommendation #3: Significant increase in ODSP Shelter Rates. A single individual on ODSP receives at maximum for \$497.00 for all shelter costs (rent/utilities). One is not even able to afford a room for that amount in London let alone a bachelor's apartment. Such low rates for shelter leads to a large number of ODSP clients who are homeless. This leads to significant societal costs in other ways (i.e. shelter system). Significant cost increase in ODSP shelter rates are required.

Employment

COVID-19 has highlighted difficulties faced by essential workers, especially in the area of the need for paid sick days. As such, we are making the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Implement legislation that allows for 10 personal emergency days, including 7 days as paid leave for all workers. Even before the pandemic, Ontario was falling behind other jurisdictions in Canada when it comes to paid sick or personal leave. Ontario does not currently provide for permanent paid sick leave for workers. The Federal government is implementing a 10 day sick leave for employees governed by federal legislation. We submit that Ontario should follow their lead.

We thank you for the opportunity to make the above submissions for the 2022 pre-budget consultations.

All of which is respectfully submitted, on this 24th day of January 2022,

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