

## Social Justice Vestry Motion 2023: Raise the Rates

**We, the parish of \_\_\_\_\_ call on the Province of Ontario to double social assistance rates for both Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, and thereafter to index these rates to inflation, so as to provide a safety net that enables people to meet their most basic needs.**

Since 1995, when the provincial government of the day cut social assistance rates by 21.6% for recipients considered employable (a program now called Ontario Works or OW), to live on social assistance in this province has been to live in increasingly deep poverty. The modest rate increases applied to both Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program between 2003 and 2018 did not even keep pace with inflation over that period, and after a 1.5% increase in fall of 2018, rates for both OW and ODSP were frozen for the next four years. Thus, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, single people receiving ODSP were 40% below the poverty line, while those receiving OW were more than 60% below the poverty line. Both rates fall well within what is considered “deep poverty”, or an income 75% of (25% below) the official poverty line.

As inflation has climbed, the poverty gap has only widened. In September 2022, the current provincial government followed through with its campaign promise to raise ODSP rates by 5%. While this is a welcome step after a four-year rate freeze, it is still far from adequate. The increase will only give single ODSP recipients \$59 more per month, nowhere near enough to lift them out of deep poverty.

Meanwhile, those on Ontario Works receive no increase at all. While people receiving Ontario Works are considered employable, the abysmally low rates of assistance drive them deeper into destitution, making it more and more difficult for them to lift themselves out of poverty. Nowhere in Ontario is the \$733 per month received by a single person on OW adequate to meet their needs for food, shelter, and clothing. It is hardly surprising that homelessness is increasing everywhere in our Diocese, with shelters overflowing from Peel to Peterborough and Collingwood to Cobourg, while food banks and other food security programs are reporting a huge spike in the numbers of people accessing their services for the first time. In 2019, the Daily Bread Food Bank, which distributes food to nearly 200 programs in Toronto served 60,000 clients per month across Toronto. That number doubled to 120,000 during the pandemic. Now, 182,000 clients use their services every month - and if current trends continue, the number is expected to rise to 225,000 by March 2023.<sup>1</sup>

Some ODSP recipients have even sought medical assistance in dying (MAiD) – not because they are dying of their disabilities, nor because they do not wish to live, but because their income is too meagre to allow them to live with their disabilities in dignity. For such people, the recently expanded access to MAiD may at least allow them to die with dignity.<sup>2</sup> We recognize that MAiD is meant to enhance personal agency and freedom of choice. However, when people who would rather live are put in a position where their lives are intolerable to them not because of their condition, but because society refuses to provide adequate levels of support, choosing assisted death in such circumstances is the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2022/10/08/daily-bread-food-bank-ceo-says-2023-is-looking-grim.html?fbclid=IwAR3vNg8fsJLmGwd4zwMh1GumMsd5gXeY0iCON5p8Br-rJn6rhzSgAecp0zw>

<sup>2</sup> Doctor-patient confidentiality means that we do not know how many social assistance recipients have sought MAiD due to a lack of adequate income and other supports, beyond those cases which have been reported in the news. However, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of people with disabilities has expressed “extreme concern” that disabled people seeking MAiD are not always able to access viable alternatives, including adequate social supports. <https://www.thestar.com/2022/assisted-death.html>

opposite of a free decision. As Canon Douglas Graydon has noted, this is an indictment against a society that has “determined that [disabled people] are not worthy of sufficient resources to ensure a quality of life.”<sup>3</sup>

This past summer, the Income Security Advocacy Centre (a branch of Legal Aid Ontario) released an open letter calling on the provincial government to double social assistance rates and index them to inflation.<sup>4</sup> This letter has been endorsed by more than 250 community organizations and social service providers, including food banks and legal clinics across the province, faith communities such as the Salvation Army and Mennonite Central Committee – Ontario, and coalitions such as the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), of which our Diocese is a member. A number of our FaithWorks partner ministries, including the Orillia Christian Centre – Lighthouse and the Dam, have also endorsed the letter.

It is true that doubling the rates of social assistance would present a significant cost outlay. However, the provincial government is already in an advantageous financial position. Lower social assistance caseloads during the pandemic have resulted in a savings of nearly \$800 million for the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and the provincial government currently has a \$2.1 billion surplus.<sup>5</sup> The province can thus readily afford a significant increase in social assistance rates, if not the full cost of doubling the rates. Moreover, a substantial increase in social assistance rates would reduce the externalized costs of poverty – the increased burdens on our healthcare, emergency services and criminal justice systems, which Ontarian taxpayers are already shouldering. Indeed, even before the pandemic it was conservatively estimated that poverty costs Ontario between 27 and 33 billion dollars per year.<sup>6</sup>

This year’s Vestry Motion offers our parishes the chance to add our voice to this growing call for income support levels that allow people on social assistance to meet their most basic needs.

This is surely one of our most fundamental obligations as a society. Disabled people on social assistance should not be driven to seek “death with dignity” because we fail to provide them with enough to live life with dignity. Those who are down on their luck should be supported to rise out of poverty rather than pushed deeper into destitution.

More importantly, it is one of our obligations as followers of Jesus to care for the most vulnerable in our society. To fail to respond to the needs of the poor in our midst is to be like the rich man in Luke 16, who enjoyed the good things of life while ignoring Lazarus at his gate. We are called instead to recognize in our neighbour the face of Christ, and to work together to ensure all have enough.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://anglicanjournal.com/justice-and-the-new-assisted-death-aid-is-now-easier-to-get-should-anglicans-be-concerned/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://incomesecurity.org/open-letter-premier-ford-double-social-assistance-rates-now/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://budget.ontario.ca/2022/fallstatement/pdf/2022-fall-statement-en.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://feedontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Feed-Ontario-Cost-of-Poverty-2019.pdf>