

ONTARIO BUDGET 2017

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

**ON ENDING HOMELESSNESS, ENDEMIC POVERTY,
AND PROVIDING INCOME SECURITY AND SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL SERVICES**

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Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Toronto (CCAT)

CATHOLIC CHARITIES of the Archdiocese of Toronto through its twenty-six member agencies provides outreach and support that improves the lives of people in communities in Toronto, Peel, York and Durham regions as well as Dufferin and Simcoe counties.

For over one hundred years, CATHOLIC CHARITIES has been providing leadership and raising awareness about issues that affect vulnerable families and individuals. We draw on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING and our desire is to build a more just society, while safeguarding the dignity of every person. We also draw strength from the Archdiocese of Toronto and its more than 1.8 million Catholics.

Guided by our Faith and the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church, we know that ending poverty and homelessness are essential to safeguarding people's basic human dignity. As Pope Francis has said: *"Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid."* Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 187.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on issues of housing and social assistance related to the 2017 Ontario Budget. Catholic Charities' member agencies daily deal with issues stemming from poverty, persistent homelessness and people suffering from mental illness, violence and abuse. Since the 2017 Budget will be the last fully implementable budget before the 2018 election, it is imperative to act now. Our recommendations reflect our concerns and those of our member agencies and other stakeholders.

❖ Invest in social assistance

Aware that there are over 900,000 Ontarians on Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Program (ODSP) who live in poverty on incomes that are below, and in some cases even far below, Canada's accepted and acceptable measures of poverty, we support the recommendation of ISARC, the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, to invest \$1 billion in social assistance.

- An investment of \$700 million should be spent on a 10% increase in basic needs and shelter allowance rates, with the remaining \$300 million spent on making positive rule changes.
- Increase the rates of assistance for OW and ODSP – single individuals on OW now receive the lowest benefit rates – and a percentage increase for family members of people with disabilities on ODSP.
- Just as the 'Healthy Smiles Ontario' program was restructured to provide dental benefits for low-income children and youth (OW, ODSP, ACSD) for preventive oral health services through local public health, so must dental care programs for low-income 'seniors' be expanded and for those on OW at least the same dental coverage as those on ODSP.

❖ Homelessness and Housing

With over 168,000 households currently waiting an average of more than four years for housing, there is still an enormous need for investment of significant resources to end chronic homelessness in Ontario through the development of badly needed social, supportive and affordable housing units.

The province must take a more pro-active role to ensure that more affordable housing is, in fact, created. The updating of Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy in March and the *Promoting Affordable Housing Act* (December 7, 2016) were steps forward.

The *Act* does establish a goal of ending chronic homelessness over the next decade; adopts the four priority groups – the chronically homeless; youth; Indigenous; and, people transitioning out of provincially-funded service systems and adds a new indicator on homelessness to the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The new legislation reflects many of the recommendations of the special Advisory Panel on Homelessness, especially to monitor and enumerate the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ontario. Improved data collection and monitoring strengthens our ability to prevent, reduce and end homelessness.

Catholic Charities was pleased to see ***inclusionary zoning*** as part of the *Act*. It is something for which we have been pressing the government for a very long time. It has the potential to ensure that affordable housing units will be an integral part of any residential development. We must underscore, however, that the new legislation has simply opened the door to inclusionary zoning, leaving it up to local municipalities to decide to implement.

While there have been some modest new housing investments through last year's budget, and new legislation provides an option toward the creation of secondary 'laneway housing' suites and inclusionary development, much has been left to municipalities to determine.

- **'Fast-track' a National Housing Strategy**

As federal operating agreements for social housing expire, when the Ontario government meets with Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, who is the federal minister responsible for housing, it must stress that a national housing proposal —that is both long-term and adequately funded — be fast-tracked and becomes a reality.

The current federal commitment to investing in social infrastructure must include significant, dedicated funding for housing and homelessness solutions. In particular, the federal government has put in motion a process that is to lead to the reinstatement of a National Housing plan for Canada. The recent national consultation, *Let's Talk Housing*, for instance, elicited input from Canadians across the country on a national housing strategy.

The provincial government is aware that today the affordability and safety of housing is increasingly compromised, placing many vulnerable households at risk. We must ensure that no one is without a place to call home, that those who need social and affordable housing can access it, and that decent rental housing options are available across Ontario in both urban and rural environments.

- ❖ **Basic Income Pilot Program**

Catholic Charities will monitor closely the pilot program for the development of an annual Basic Income. The main purpose of a Basic Income Pilot has been described as a test to see whether the broad policing, control and monitoring now present in Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario

Disability Support Program (ODSP) can be replaced with a modestly more generous basic income, disbursed automatically to those living beneath a certain income threshold.

Our concern is that there are many variables that must be considered. As cumbersome as current OW and ODSP mechanisms can sometimes be, they do reflect the varied nature of the people whom they are to serve. No single basic income could possibly respond to all the different situations confronting people, especially those connected with ODSP.

Given that it is suggested that Phase 1 of the pilot begin before the end of March 2017, and that the operational elements of the three phases of the pilot require basic income payments to flow for three years at a minimum, we urge the government to move quickly on initiating the program.

❖ **Mental Health**

Over seven million Canadians will experience a mental illness this year. There is hope for more understanding of the causes, for greater public awareness of the need for people to find the care they need, and more importantly for consistent and attainable treatment.

Catholic Charities is aware that it is estimated that half of all mental-health services in Ontario are delivered by a family doctor. Yet, many general practitioners lack the expertise to properly diagnose mental illness and often are unaware of existing networks to which they can connect their patients with agencies and doctors who can treat them. It is a particular problem faced by young people, since the majority of mental illnesses tend to surface during adolescence.

Help is being offered through family service agencies through walk-in counselling clinics. Catholic Charities Family Service agencies now have such clinics but the need is growing and there is need for additional funding to ensure that these 'lifelines' for people with mental health issues remain viable and active. There also needs to be more funding for child and youth health centres. The costs of inaction for people affected by mental health issues, not to mention the province's health system and for its economy, are simply too high to delay.

❖ **Accessibility for Ontarians (AODA)**

For Ontarians with disabilities, such as those in the deaf community and those with developmental disabilities, accessibility to information, skills and employment training is crucial. It must be fully adapted to provide barrier-free access.

We need to move more vigorously to ensure that the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) is fully implemented by all government services, especially websites and other information sources. It is clear that it has not been implemented throughout the province and this situation should be rectified, since the people who are adversely affected by it are the more vulnerable members of society.

❖ **Domestic Violence Against Women**

With one in three women experiencing some form of sexual assault in her lifetime, and three-quarters of sexual assaults perpetrated by a person known to her, it is imperative to expand the ways in which sexual violence, especially domestic violence, can be ended. Catholic Charities is aware that Ontario's 'Roundtable on Violence Against Women' is providing

valuable, on-going advice to the government on emerging gender-based sexual violence and harassment issues.

Regarding domestic violence, women represent 83 per cent of victims and if there are children, they too are scarred by these incidents and often require long-term care and counselling. Yet, domestic violence remains significantly under-reported with less than one-third of incidents made known to the police, and with many victims victimized multiple times.

Catholic Family Service agencies have been in the vanguard of those agencies who have continued to respond to these incidences of violence with innovative and important programs. Yet, funding for programs is still often lacking. The province must provide the funding needed for these important programs and realize the service provided by these community-based agencies.

- Lack of housing for abused women and children

For women and children who are victims of domestic violence, their first concern is to flee the violent situation and to find shelter and a place to live. Yet, most shelters are experiencing increased length of stays, because there is no priority housing available into which these women and children can move.

Shelters now operate at full capacity all year, but are serving fewer women because women are staying longer. The obvious impact is that less women and children can be sheltered from domestic violence situations because shelters are full and overwhelmed.

A Catholic Charities' member agency reports that in Durham, cots have been set up in some offices, converting them to sleeping quarters because of the increase in women and children fleeing abuse. It is a short-term solution to ensure that women and children stay safe and alive. Safety issues become heightened when a woman needs to be transferred out of an area because of the high risk nature of her situation.

- Under-funding of services for domestic violence victims

While the government has created initiatives such as through the "*It's Not Okay*" program, funding is too specifically targeted (sexual assault) and does not help close the gap on under-funding of services for victims of domestic violence. While it is important that sexual abuse be addressed, the need for funding to help women and children of domestic violence should not suffer unnecessarily from a lack of funding.

- ❖ **Older Adults ('seniors') suffering violence and isolation**

Ontario as well as Canada is grappling with the implications of the change in demographics related to older persons ('seniors'). It is estimated that by 2026, many of the more than 2.4 million Canadians age 65+ will require care and support and increase of over 70% from 2011.

It is one of most pressing challenges for governments and social service agencies. What is needed is fresh thinking toward the development of programs to meet current and future needs of 'seniors'.

Catholic Charities is pioneering an innovative outreach program to one of the most vulnerable segments of this ageing population: isolated seniors. They are often the most in need but become invisible in society and are therefore overlooked in terms of outreach and care. There is a need for funding support to help those social service agencies who are engaged in this important outreach.

As we did last year, we believe that the province's Seniors Community Grant Program should be expanded where it can to help support social service agencies in the community improve and augment their outreach in this area and so improve the quality of life of Ontario's seniors. Where this type of outreach and care is provided, the health and well-being of seniors is significantly enhanced for a much lesser cost than if they were ill and in hospital. There should be an increase in support for physiotherapy care and rehabilitation.

Catholic Charities believes that older adults ('seniors') should have equitable access to services and programs they need. Their often diverse needs are best served by front-line social service agencies whose care and concern helps fend off other more serious problems related to both physical and mental health. Social service agencies in the community are best suited to do this because their care, concern and compassion for older adults.

By focussing on isolated seniors, Catholic Charities knows how making this connection is vital to the health and wellness of these older adults. As the wall of social isolation is broken down, there is greater participation in community life. They now have the opportunity to participate fully in and contribute to their communities.

- Shelter and housing for Elder Abuse victims

Many 'seniors' are Elder Abuse victims and are often sent to shelters. While these older adults may face domestic violence issues, there are other complicating factors, such as dementia, need for assistance with personal care, etc., and elder abused women have specific needs. Shelters will take these women if they can, however, these shelters usually lack the services that older persons, especially elder abused women need. This creates a whole other set of issues; if a shelter is at capacity, this complicates their situation even further.

The province needs to focus its attention on these older adults by providing social service agencies with support through programs that address their physical and mental well-being and their safety. All seniors should feel that they will be able to live healthy, independent, active lives, and lives that are safe from abuse. The province needs to consider its quality of services that it is able to provide and should see how effective those services are when the implementation is given to social service agencies.

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FOR FURTHER ENQUIRIES OR INFORMATION

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