

POLICY BRIEF



People Not Pillars

A New Poverty Reduction Strategy 2025

Key Insights

Social assistance rates must be set to adequate levels and indexed annually.

An expanded and universal, portable rent supplement is needed to combat our housing crisis.

Employment Ontario is failing to assist social assistance recipients find permanent employment in stable, skilled jobs and careers.

Timely pre-employment supports are unavailable without a significant provincial investment that should be mandated to ensure equal access across all regions of Ontario.

There are significant changes that can be made to social assistance rules to improve incomes, and fairness, as well as lower administrative burden.

Background

On December 16th 2020, the Ontario government released a 5 year anti-poverty strategy entitled, “Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario (2020-2025)”. It is now time to renew the strategy.

“I've studied healthcare systems. I then had to study the poverty thing. And I'm also a history buff, so I look at patterns and trends. And siloing, you will start to hear politicians recently talking about the siloing. It's a problem that is decreasing our healthcare system. It's the problem that's keeping us siloed in poverty.”

We consulted with the community in early November. Rather than the pillars, targets, and dashboards the province used to create the former strategy, we heard that people wanted the government to examine how systems interact to keep people from

employment and overall well-being. Hamilton's recommendations centre on people and lived experiences, not on pillars. These are the changes people who experience and understand poverty want to see.

Recommended Areas of Consideration

Employment

Despite the province's dedication to re-designing employment supports delivery, they have yet to unlock the key to stable and meaningful employment.



Figure 1. Employment-related capture from our community consultation November 6th 2025.

During the consultation participants expressed dissatisfaction with educational opportunities, training, and the effectiveness of employment services. Their comments were echoed in a joint McMaster and Toronto Metropolitan University survey.

In *Survey Analysis of Ontario's Integrated Employment Services: Experiences of Job-Seeking Social Assistance Recipients with OW/ODSP Person-Centered Supports and Employment Ontario Employment Services* results showed “79% found the training and job preparation options to be limited and inadequate, suggesting a need to diversify and improve these services to align more closely with employment goals and market demands.”

If labour market participation is the policy goal, then we recommend creating an Employment Ontario that focuses on skilled jobs and careers that have longevity. This would end the 50% client return rate to Social Assistance that the government had hoped to reverse back in 2018.

Appropriate Supports and Services

To achieve a labour ready workforce, pre-employment needs to be put front and centre, with focus on people's well-being.

According to the City of Hamilton's 2024 Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness found:

- 87% of those surveyed rely on government assistance or benefits
- 22% of respondents indicated income was the reason they lost their housing
- Conversely, the top two barriers to finding housing are high rents (25%) and low income (23%) or nearly half of all people experiencing homelessness.

We recommend raising social assistance rates (especially those of Ontario Works which have been frozen since 2018) to adequate levels in order to promote good health and stability. This cannot be emphasized enough.

Participants also shared some important feedback on existing supports.

"Mental health services supports are horrible... You don't need to wait three years. Need help then. We just don't have it, plain and simple. I have had people I know that have actually gone to St. Joe's in crisis, saying, I'm not going to do this, I'm going to end my life, and be sent home. So where are the supports?"

We recommend a fully funded, and mandated provisioning of mental health services, childcare, telephone and internet, and transportation supports equally for all regions and municipalities.

Affordability and Financial Resilience

Those at our consultation thought current programs and credits did not go far enough, sharing specific recommendations to ensure greater anti-poverty impact.

This is a necessary change. The Hamilton Ontario Works Caseload Profile notes, "Of the 89% of Ontario Works (OW) clients in Hamilton who pay rent, only 5% are living in a subsidized (RGI) unit."

"We've encouraged the province to look at the Manitoba Rent Assist model, which again, as you exit social assistance, a rent benefit stays with you."

Additionally, changes to social assistance rules can also substantially help people:

- raise earnings exemption limits for Ontario Works to \$1000 a month,
- increase voluntary contributions/gifts and allow ongoing support items (rent),
- increase annual participation benefits and Personal Needs Allowances and index annually,
- reduce administrative burden and better support Social Assistance households by ending the basic needs/shelter calculation and replacing with a standard rate based on benefit unit size,
- stacking all benefits and credits until the poverty line will help stabilize people and get them out of poverty faster.

Works Cited

Government of Ontario, *Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario (2020-2025)*. [Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario \(2020-2025\)](#). Accessed November 2025.

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