



An Agenda for Change for 2022 and Beyond

Ontario for All is a nonpartisan organization supporting nonprofit leaders in playing active roles shaping evidence-based public policy.

This spring, we gathered nonprofit community service agencies across the GTA to explore their priorities for the future of Ontario. In the course of five meetings, over 550 individuals from over 300 nonprofits, engaged in discussions with panels of experts, debated the critical issues, and outlined their priorities. We were pleased to have an equitable balance between the 905 and 416 agencies among our participants, and participants also met in working groups by geography to explore issues in more detail.

The results of their work, which were recorded in 19 breakout group summaries, 3 hours of video, and 24 Zoom chat threads, have been consolidated here as a clear set of priorities from the nonprofit community service sector.

They paint a picture of an Ontario that works for everyone, achieved through:

- adequate income supports, including significant adjustments to social assistance modernization plans
- expanding and protecting affordable housing through investment in new, affordable, purpose built, social housing, and through effective rent control policies that protect affordability
- access to safe, affordable services like childcare, home care and long term care, delivered by reliable providers focused on quality care
- decent work, including adequate incomes, safe workplaces and appropriate benefits, with a focus on the most marginalized
- support for a robust community service sector.

These goals were spelled out in detailed analysis of key policy areas that affect the success of people in our province.

Key Policy Priorities for Ontario

Income Supports

Currently the Ontario Government is undertaking the largest rethinking of social assistance in over a quarter century. The system will be fundamentally restructured. The province will take on the management of all income supports directly, while all “life stabilization” supports will be managed by the municipalities and employment supports will be moved to as-yet unnamed third parties. There are opportunities and risks in this process.

More efficient approaches are desirable. The current social assistance system is unduly complex with too many subcategories of benefits, too many variables, and far too much dependence on appeals. But poverty is also complex, and the model being developed will need to be responsive to the specific needs of people with disabilities and other challenges. The new central intake for social assistance will need to be accompanied by options to move from automated intake to live caseworkers who can resolve problems that high-volume algorithms can't address.

Shifting life-stabilization programs like housing, mental health supports, and social supports to municipalities can make them more responsive. But such a shift needs to be accompanied by the resources to address demand, because many of those programs already have long waiting lists and limited capacity.

The development and assignment of new employment supports needs to address the problems, identified by the Maytree Foundation and others, when the UK and Australia tried similar approaches, and in some cases hired the same private companies being hired in Ontario to deliver these services.

Coordination is also critical because individuals on social assistance will have their support systems spread out across these three separate providers. The infrastructure for a coordinated should be in place before the rollout of the new system.

Although digital services can improve accessibility and efficiency, many people living on low incomes lack adequate Internet and will need access to devices, better Internet bandwidth, and tech supports to be able to connect to the new system.

Most importantly, these changes occur against a backdrop of social assistance rates that have fallen to between 40% and 60% below the poverty line. Long periods without increases have eroded purchasing power of assistance rates that were already low when they were cut back over 25 years ago. Certainly no one can realistically expect to stabilize their lives with a monthly shelter allowance of \$390 and a total income of \$733 per month—especially when they are penalized for obtaining other sources of income with steep claw-backs on their already-inadequate base income.

Ontario needs to focus the work of social assistance modernization on the well-being of recipients by:

- *raising social assistance rates to livable levels and indexing them to inflation*
- *adequately resourcing municipalities and other providers to ensure life-stabilization programs can meet demand*
- *ensuring that employment programs are focused on positive long-term outcomes for participants rather than moving them to any employment—even unstable, inappropriate, or precarious jobs*
- *investing in devices and connectivity for low-income families to ensure they can access the new, digitally focused system*
- *designing intake mechanisms to be responsive enough to address the distinct requirements of the full range and complexity of recipient needs, and*
- *creating robust systems to connect and integrate the three streams of activity.*

Affordable Housing

There is universal agreement that we are in the middle of a housing crisis, not just in the GTA but across Ontario. The pandemic showed clearly that governments can act on this issue and invest in what is needed when they make it a priority. Unfortunately, Ontario lags behind other levels of government in making those investments outside the pandemic period. For example, the \$1 billion Peel Housing Master Plan is at or near its targets of 1/3 of the funding from municipal and federal governments, but contributions from the province are still roughly \$250 million short of the target.

Recent provincial policy shifts designed to reduce regulations and accelerate housing supply may be able to speed up the creation of market housing, but municipalities, affordable housing providers, and those serving people who are homeless agree that these policies will do little to add to deeply affordable supply, co-ops, or social housing—which is where the need is greatest. New investment is needed to build truly affordable homes. The Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association estimates at least 99,000 units are needed.

Even as we work to build new affordable supply, we are losing existing units of affordable units at a far faster rate. Conversions, renovations, and demolitions slip through the large loopholes in the rent-control system to allow the elimination of as many as 60,000 affordable units in Canada each year—about 15 times as many affordable units as are built. This makes the *preservation* of affordable homes a critical piece of the puzzle. Strengthening rent controls is a key element of that work.

These problems make it more difficult to address homelessness, provide transitional housing, and meet the desperate need for supportive housing. With so few affordable units, these programs struggle to find places to deliver service, even with rent supplements, which are more and more often too small to cover the gap between incomes and rents for the most vulnerable.

Ontario needs to invest adequately in building 99,000 purpose-built, permanently affordable rental homes, including social housing, nonprofit housing, deeply affordable homes, and co-ops. That investment should include funding for nonprofit housing providers, partnerships with municipalities, and the use of government land for housing. Investments in rent supplements should continue to help bridge the gap between the cost of newly-built affordable units and the limited funds of people who rely on social assistance and minimum-wage jobs.

The increasing supply of affordable homes should be focused on providing safe, stable, accessible housing for people living on low incomes, people in transition from homelessness, and people in need of supportive housing.

Ontario needs to invest in the preservation of affordable homes, but also use regulations to preserve affordable homes by re-establishing real rent control, including rent controls on vacant units.

Access to Services

Ontario is in the midst of unprecedented times for critical community services. Long-term care has been through an unparalleled crisis, childcare is entering a historic new phase, and home care and eldercare are burning issues in the wake of the pandemic. But the current strategies for managing these areas are not adequate to ensure reliable, safe access to critical services.

There are clear risks that threaten access to quality services, and funding is central to many of them.

Ontario is headed toward a facilities crisis in these services. As demand rises, there are too few spaces and no real concrete plan to provide them before client need dramatically outpaces capacity. Ontario needs to make the needed capital investments to address the current shortfall and growing demand.

Staffing is a serious issue across core services. Personal support workers (PSWs), childcare workers, and long-term care staff are among our lowest-paid professionals and as a result, recruitment and retention are constant problems. Short staffing is a persistent and deepening issue and is directly affecting service.

These problems are not new, but they were made unmistakably visible in the pandemic. Nowhere was that more severe than in private sector long-term care where, studies showed, mortality rates were 25% higher than in municipal facilities, largely due to staffing levels and facility issues.

Ontario needs staffing strategies that help train, recruit, and retain skilled professionals, and support wages at more appropriate levels.

Ontario needs investments that ensure enough quality spaces to meet needs.

- *For long-term care that means:*
 - *ensuring that staffing levels rise to 4 hours per day now, not in the future;*
 - *accelerating investments in new beds; and*
 - *expansion that is focused on providers who have the strongest track record for quality care, not those who provide the lowest cost.*
- *In childcare we need an adequate wage floor for childcare professionals, which now hovers at less than \$3 above minimum wage, and investments in facilities to create the 86,000 new spaces promised in the childcare agreement.*
- *In homecare, we need more extensive access to homecare, PSW wages that are adequate to attract and retain staff, and adequate PSW time with each participant to ensure quality care.*

An Inclusive Economic Recovery

The pandemic's impact on the health of Ontarians was compounded by its impact on their economic circumstances. Though all Ontarians faced significant economic disruptions, some communities were hit harder, and will need the greatest support during rebuilding. Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities, youth, seniors, women and LGBTQ2S+ communities and people with disabilities were, by every measure, the people who faced the greatest impacts, and they are the people who have recovered the least. New investment should focus on correcting growing inequities.

The challenges that affect these groups intersect. Gaps in income supports drive food insecurity; spiralling housing costs strain income supports; lack of childcare and the growing precariousness of work undermine the return to employment and stretch families' resources; and stretched resources deepen the digital divide and cut people off from increasingly virtual services. These situations are all worsened as work precarity, low wages, and unsafe workplaces without critical benefits like paid sick time increasingly impact these hardest-hit groups.

Ontario needs to address the challenges to an equitable economic recovery, including investing in affordable housing, affordable childcare, adequate income supports, digital access, and creating regulations that support decent work in safe workplaces with adequate benefits and living wages—and Ontario has an obligation to focus those efforts on the communities hardest hit by COVID-19 to overcome the long-standing inequities that the pandemic intensified.

The Future of Nonprofits

Nonprofits play a key role in Ontario. The pandemic showed clearly how critical that role is. Nonprofits stepped up and tackled challenges, pivoting nimbly to respond to rapidly changing contexts. Nonprofits were able to do that in ways that governments, with all their resources and capacity, could not achieve. Whether it was food-security issues or vaccine rollout, community-based nonprofits were the ones who had the relationships in, and understanding of, community to have the needed impact. But still nonprofits seem to be an afterthought when it comes to government decision making.

That's hard to understand. After the role nonprofits played in the pandemic, it's clear that their capacity to shape and guide policy and planning is valuable. Ontario's 58,000 nonprofits and their 850,000

employees make up 8% of the economy, they are not considered as part of the economic strategy. While BC and Newfoundland have ministers responsible for the nonprofit sector, and most provinces have a minister responsible for small business, Ontario's government offers little engagement with the province's nonprofit sector. Too often, governments appear to see nonprofits as little more than less expensive delivery vehicles for programs designed at Queen's Park or City Hall.

There are risks in that approach that have serious consequences.

The constant pressure to run at low costs has made it steadily harder to recruit and even harder to retain staff. Staff are increasingly exhausted and overstretched as demands rise but funding remains frozen. Constantly shrinking funding affects the capacity of nonprofits to build the engaged and trusted relationships with communities that enable their success. Nonprofits are increasingly pressed to provide tightly measured, predefined deliverables instead of getting the flexibility and trust they need to craft solutions that work in changing contexts. Access to service space is becoming increasingly difficult as unbridled development continues to drive up rents.

It doesn't have to be this way. Nonprofits can be a partner with government to help shape policy and programs that are genuinely responsive to community needs and guide the planning and implementation of services to ensure they work at the front line, as they did in the pandemic.

Ontario needs to move away from the race to the bottom and fund and support the nonprofit sector as a partner, both directly in all ministry programs, and through a minister responsible for nonprofits, to codesign programs and policies, as the people who best know how it will work on the front line.

Ontario needs to commit to the investments required to provide for decent wages, stable core funding, growing the capacity of the sector, and support for the valuable work of community development.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

Income Security

Ontario needs to focus the work of social assistance modernization on the well-being of recipients by:

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- *adequately resourcing municipalities and other providers to ensure life-stabilization programs can meet demand*
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An Inclusive Economic Recovery

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Commitment

These issues, raised by the hundreds of partners in the nonprofit community, services sector point toward clear policies and critical priorities for the wellbeing of people across Ontario.

Please share with us your commitment to these policy goals, by May 23rd, 2022 by emailing your expression of support to info@ontarioforall.ca