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November 17, 2020

**Laura Belfie, Director
Social Assistance Policy, Planning and Innovation Division
Social Assistance Program Policy Branch**

Dear Ms. Belfie,

Request: We respectfully request that the Director provide Directives to Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Directors and Administrators to provide financial assistance for basic virtual support including but not limited to internet charges, for those in receipt of ODSP and OW who specifically request it.

We respectfully request that an exception be made in these exceptional times and that either funding for or purchased provision of internet be provided to those in receipt of OW and ODSP. The safety and well-being of recipients and their families rests on their ability to access information, attend support programs virtually, attend medical appointments and other necessary appointments.

Reason for Request: To encourage recipients of ODSP and OW to participate in and access community resources through virtual means during this pandemic and beyond. To access virtual programs and services in the community, internet service is required. Currently recipients of OW and ODSP do not have access to funds to pay for this ongoing, essential service.

Background: Technology provides the opportunity to improve access to services by removing the limitations of geographic location, health status, financial constraints and other barriers to participating. The lowest risk activities for everyone are virtual-only activities, events and gatherings where individuals remain physically distant while connecting virtually. Some medical and other necessary appointments are often held through Zoom or other virtual platforms.

Some provincial organizations have been able to provide, through the federal emergency grant, technology (smartphones, tablets, etc.) to clients. This allows them to participate in virtual programs and services. The grants run out March 31, 2021 and after that clients in receipt of OW or ODSP will not be able to afford ongoing internet services. The people who need these services the most are the

ones who cannot afford to participate. There are peer support, social programs and counselling services currently offered virtually and these are a life-line to those who live alone and suffer a disability.

Currently: Under the current Ontario Works Legislation, there is no directives that gives the Administrator authority to pay for internet expenses to support those with brain injuries and other disabilities.

As per Ontario Works Directive 7.4: Employment and Participation Benefits, internet costs could be supported under Employment-Related Expenses. However, it is clear that in order to be eligible, the recipient must be participating in employment assistance activities. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities are not employed and therefore cannot access internet costs under this directive.

Ontario Works Directive 7.7: Other Benefits states that discretionary funding is not intended to cover costs associated with ongoing payments. Funding may be provided to cover one-time exceptional costs at the discretion of the Administrator. Therefore, monthly internet costs could not be supported.

We respectfully suggest that this Directive can be amended to include an exception - that internet costs (which are not a one-time cost) to be included in the Discretionary Fund Directive.

We understand that the OW Regulations may need to be amended to allow the Directive to be followed. As the MCCSS moves towards supporting individuals with Life Stabilization, it is our further request that the monthly cost of the internet would be included in any future changes to Legislation as it relates to discretionary benefits.

Sincerely,

Stuart Howe,
CEO

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