



Queen's Park Day 2020: Key Issues Discussion Summaries and Responses

Introduction

On December 3, 2020, Spinal Cord Injury Ontario (SCIO) and March of Dimes Canada (MODC) partnered to host our first virtual Queens Park Day in celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Attendees joined us to virtually raise a glass to each other and to all Ontarians living with a disability, under the banner of "Creating Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Global Pandemic."

We were grateful to host members of our community as attendees in this new virtual format. During the discussion, a number of important questions and comments were raised by participants in the online chat. Due to time constraints, not all questions could be addressed during the event, but we committed to providing responses post-event.

Below, we have consolidated the questions under thematic headings. Under each section, we have included responses that contain helpful information and links to relevant government initiatives, as well as our organizations' responses to these issues. Thank you to everyone who participated and contributed their perspectives to this important discussion.

Accessibility regulations

Summary: Questions focused on progress on AODA implementation, digital accessibility standards, and Building Code updates for residences, as well as Ontario's collaboration with the federal government on the Accessible Canada Act. It was also raised that accessibility needs to go beyond the needs of those with physical disabilities to be truly inclusive of those with varying abilities.

Response:

- As shared in the remarks at the event from the staff from the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, a new announcement on the Built Environment Standard will be made in January 2021. As well, recommendations have been made for the Education and Health standards, and there is an opportunity to participate in [public reviews](#) of these draft standards.
- On the question of digital accessibility, beginning January 1, 2021, all public websites and web content posted after January 1, 2012 must meet WCAG 2.0 Level AA standard. Ontario's Information and Communications Standards Development Committee has posted their [final report with recommendations](#).
- The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility's [Advancing Accessibility in Ontario: Breaking Down Barriers in the Built Environment](#) framework includes increasing harmonization between Ontario's Building Code and National Construction Codes. There is also a commitment to develop an innovation guide with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to support the implementation of Ontario's Housing Supply Action Plan, which will address housing challenges and support fresh approaches to help make homes more accessible. In addition, in the [Ontario 2020 Budget](#), a Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit was

announced for 2021, which will support seniors who stay in their homes by assisting with improvements that make their homes safer and more accessible.

- In the [2019 Legislative Review of AODA](#), the reviewer recommended that Ontario coordinate with the federal government on efforts related to accessibility, as well as take advantage of future opportunities to harmonize standards or develop standards jointly. The same review also found that, while the current law is comprehensive and does cover invisible disabilities, the government should update the definition of “accessibility” to explicitly mention invisible, non-visible, or non-evident disabilities.
- Accessibility is a priority area of advocacy for us, and we are committed to continuing to work as a close partner with government at all levels on the development and improvement of accessibility standards. We will continue to promote opportunities for public engagement and consultation on accessibility standards to our consumers and community.

ODSP and income supports

Summary: Financial inequality was raised as being a crucial barrier to true inclusivity and accessibility. Questions focused on increases to ODSP, cancellation of the guaranteed income pilot, and proposals for a universal basic income in Canada.

Response:

- There have been no updates on increases to ODSP after the \$100 relief top-up was discontinued in August.
- While the federal government has indicated some interest in the idea of universal basic income, there are currently no commitments at the federal or provincial level to work toward a program of this type.
- However, in the September 2020 [Speech from the Throne](#), the federal government did commit to a new Canadian Disability Benefit modelled after the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors. Details about the specific program model or a rollout timeline have not yet been announced.
- Financial security and economic empowerment for people with disabilities is an advocacy priority area for us. We recognize that income supports and access to employment are among the most crucial issues facing people with disabilities and are committed to continue advocating on these issues and to providing input on the new Canadian Disability Benefit.

Employment

Summary: Questions focused on loss of jobs during the pandemic, particularly for seasonal workers, as well as the mental health supports available to support employees. There was also an observation that working from home has now become normalized during the pandemic, but that this has long been an issue that people with disabilities have advocated for.

Response:

- The [Ontario 2020 Budget](#) included commitments to connecting workers in the sectors most affected by the pandemic to training and jobs with an investment of \$180.5 million over three years, including a skilled trades strategy, an additional \$100 million of dedicated investments through Employment Ontario for skills training, a redesigned Second Career program, and \$59.5 million for workers to acquire in-demand skills.

- The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility’s [Advancing Accessibility in Ontario: Increasing Participation in the Economy for People with Disabilities](#) framework includes a commitment to support the [Discover Ability Network](#), which connects job seekers with disabilities with Ontario businesses looking to hire talent.
- In addition, in the September 2020 [Speech from the Throne](#), the federal government announced that they will bring forward a Disability Inclusion Plan, which will have a robust employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities.
- On the question of mental health supports, the [Ontario government announced](#) in December 2020 that they will be providing over \$147 million to immediately expand access to the provincial mental health and addictions system for people of all ages and address capacity issues in response to COVID-19. This includes funding for community-based services, as well as expanded virtual supports.
- Some other mental health supports for employees include:
 - [Carrying on: Mental Health Strategies for COVID-19 podcast](#) (Conference Board of Canada)
 - [Tips to manage mental health during COVID-19](#) (Canadian Mental Health Association)
 - [Return to the workplace: a psychological toolkit for heading back to work](#) (Mental Health Works and Bounce Back Ontario)
- Employment is another priority advocacy area for us. We are committed to continue to advocate for a disability lens on employment program investments, and to provide input on the development of the federal Disability Inclusion Plan.

Digital divide

Summary: Questions focused on how financial barriers prevent access to internet and devices, which can in turn create a barrier to employment and social connection.

Responses:

- In the [Ontario 2020 Budget](#), the government announced Up to Speed: Ontario’s Broadband and Cellular Action Plan, which will invest \$315 million over five years to expand broadband deployment to more communities that lack basic connectivity, increasing access in up to 220,000 households and businesses. In addition, in July 2020, the government launched the Improving Connectivity for Ontario (ICON) program, a \$150 million program that is funding innovative local partnerships focused on improving connectivity in underserved and unserved communities.
- At the federal level, the government is currently accepting proposals for the [Accessible Technology Program](#)’s January 2021 intake period. The federal government will co-fund innovative projects led by the private sector, not-for-profit organizations and research institutes to develop new assistive and adaptive digital devices and technologies in order to make it easier for Canadians with disabilities to more fully participate in the digital economy.
- MODC recently signed on to a letter, led by the Beyond Disability Network, to the Social Assistance Program Policy branch requesting that either funding for or purchased provision of internet be provided to those in receipt of OW and ODSP.

PSW wage increase

Summary: Questions focused on increased wages for PSWs, as well as additional funding for people with disabilities in rural areas to pay more competitive wages to PSWs.

Responses:

- In the [Ontario 2020 Budget](#), there was a commitment to providing \$461 million in temporary wage increases, effective October 1, 2020, for over 147,000 PSWs and direct support workers who deliver publicly funded personal support services. The provincial government is also investing \$52.5 million to recruit, retain and support over 3,700 more frontline health care workers such as nurses and PSWs.
- In response to the provincial government's staffing plan intended to address challenges in the long-term care sector, the Ontario Community Support Association (OCSA) has called for a [comprehensive and integrated health human resources strategy](#) that ensures all sectors have an adequate supply of qualified staff, including the community sector. They say that the pay disparity between hospital and community workers needs to be addressed.

Access to PPE/testing

Summary: Questions focused on access to testing and masks for people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses:

- Under Ontario's current [COVID-19 testing guidance](#), visitors, workers, and residents of long-term care and congregate settings (e.g. group homes, community supported living, etc.) can be tested at assessment centres or participating community labs with or without symptoms, or at participating pharmacies if asymptomatic.
- In terms of PPE costs, the [Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services](#) indicates that if those on ODSP have exceptional COVID-19-related costs, they may speak with their case worker about discretionary benefits. While widescale provincial funding is not available for individuals to purchase masks or other PPE, some local regions have non-profit organizations offering relief funding for individuals to purchase these items.
- We recognize that COVID-19 poses specific health and financial challenges for people with disabilities. We are committed to continuing to advocate for our community's unique needs during the pandemic.

Government spending

Summary: Questions were raised around government spending priorities, particularly with regards to hiring for new government positions, cuts to Legal Aid, and a desire for additional spending on supports for people with disabilities.

Responses:

- As mentioned above, financial security is an advocacy priority for us. We will continue to advocate for government spending that increases inclusion and equality for people with disabilities.

Community engagement

Summary: Comments focused on the disability community's limited access to power and influence, and a desire for government to better inform the community on issues and demonstrate deeper engagement and commitment on these issues.

Responses:

- The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility's [Advancing Accessibility in Ontario: Government to lead by example](#) framework includes plans for the government to lead by example in the area of accessibility, in its role as a policy maker, service provider and employer.
- There are a [number of committees and councils](#) at the provincial and municipal level which are seeking members with disabilities to provide perspectives on their needs and lived experiences. We will continue to advocate for and promote opportunities for our consumers and community to add their voices to the legislative process.

Social change

Summary: There were some general comments about how social changes often only occur once they benefit the wider population, rather than prioritizing the needs of people with disabilities. There was also a discussion about the links between the disability community's needs and those of the labour movement.

Responses:

- The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility's [Advancing Accessibility in Ontario: Improving Understanding and Awareness about Accessibility](#) framework includes plans for the government to work with its stakeholders, including partner ministries, broader public sector organizations, businesses and non-profit organizations to help raise awareness, change attitudes, and educate organizations about their accessibility responsibilities.
- We recognize that true equality and inclusion cannot happen with policy change alone – broader societal perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes about disability must also shift. We are committed to being leading voices on disability inclusion in Canada.

If you would like to make a contribution to advocacy related to any of these issues, please contact us:

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