

CITY OF LONDON

# “Clearing the Path Out of Poverty” ...

Step #2: Immediate Policy Changes to the Ontario Disability Support Program

The City of London’s Child and Youth Network  
Position Paper

Submission to Social Assistance Review Commission

February 2011



## Preface

Ending poverty is a priority for London's Child and Youth Network. In September 2008, London's Child and Youth Network released *The Best for Our Children, Youth and Families*: a plan for the first three years of our Child and Youth Agenda to 2015. The goal is to reduce the proportion of London families living in poverty by 25% in five years and 50% in 10 years. As the Network notes: to realize London's vision of "**happy, healthy children and youth today; caring, creative, responsible adults tomorrow**", we must act now to provide the assistance and supports that families need to succeed in life.

One of the best ways to help families succeed and move out of poverty is to remove barriers in existing support programs. This position paper is the second in a series prepared by London's Child and Youth Network called *Clearing the Path out of Poverty*. The position papers are part of a larger local strategy to end poverty, which includes:

- increasing awareness and engaging the community;
- reducing the impact of poverty and making day-to-day life better; and,
- breaking the cycle and stopping the next generation from living in poverty.

The first paper in the series recommended immediate changes to the *Ontario Works* Program. This paper discusses short-term changes to the Ontario Disability Support Program that will help individuals with disabilities have enough income to live now and in the future, as well as more opportunities to work and participate in our community.

*The Best for Our Children, Youth and Families identified four priorities:*

1. *End Poverty: Reduce the proportion of London families who are living in poverty by 25% in five years and 50% in 10 years*
2. *Make Literacy a Way of Life: Lead the province in child, youth and family literacy*
3. *Lead the Nation in Increasing Healthy Eating and Healthy Physical Activity: Create environments, neighbourhoods and opportunities that promote and support daily physical activity and healthy eating*
4. *Create a Family Centred Service System: Make it easier for London's children, youth and families to participate fully in their neighbourhoods and communities and to find and receive the services they need.*

# About the Ontario Disability Support Program

The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is designed to help people with disabilities pay for living expenses, such as food and housing. In addition to financial support, the ODSP provides help finding a job (Government of Ontario, 2009) and services that enable people with disabilities to live more independently (Government of Ontario, 2010).

Unlike *Ontario Works*, which is a temporary financial assistance program – a safety net in times of crisis – ODSP provides more long-term support. It recognizes that people with disabilities may need financial assistance for a long time – possibly their lifetime.

## Who Uses ODSP?

As of September 2010:

- 10,725 London households – 14,906 individuals – or less than 5% of the population were receiving ODSP
- about 1 in 7 households receiving ODSP had children and most of those households (about 60%) were led by sole support parents
- just over 2,000 children were living in families that depend on ODSP.

*The purpose of the Ontario Disability Support Program is to:*

- *provide income and employment supports to eligible persons with disabilities*
- *recognize that government, communities, families and individuals share responsibility for providing such supports*
- *effectively serve people with disabilities who need assistance*
- *be accountable to the taxpayers of Ontario.*

*Ontario Disability Support  
Program Act 1997*

## The Need for Change

ODSP is part of a patchwork of programs for people with disabilities, which include: the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program, employment insurance sickness benefits, private insurance plans, workers' compensation, and several disability tax benefits. According to the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2009), these programs need to be better integrated in order to help people with disabilities become more independent.

ODSP is often a last resort for people who cannot or do not qualify for other disability programs. People relying on ODSP struggle to make ends meet, to work and to participate in society (ODSP Action Coalition, 2010). ODSP is under review. Recently, the Ontario Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (2010) recommended some long-term changes, including:

- re-envisioning ODSP to improve the application process, minimize intrusion into people's lives, and support the aspirations of people with disabilities by providing better training and employment supports, including access to meaningful education opportunities that address barriers to employment and community participation

- exploring the possibility of making disability support services and benefits available to those receiving income support from employment or programs other than social assistance.

While London's Child and Youth Network strongly supports the recommendations made by the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council, we know these changes will take time. In the meantime, we want to see immediate changes that will help people with disabilities struggling to survive on ODSP now.

A number of rules and requirements are keeping people in poverty. As the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology noted (2009, p. 127) "As a group, people with disabilities face two constraints in their participation and activity levels: those directly linked to the impairment, and those imposed by social, structural and other barriers...known as handicaps...handicaps are barriers that could be removed..."

We have identified a number of short-term changes that will remove some of the handicaps imposed by ODSP. We have focused on changes that:

- can be made relatively easily and quickly
- do not directly involve other ministries
- will have both an immediate and long-term impact on the health and well-being of London's children and families
- have long-term benefits that outweigh up-front costs.

Our recommendations fall into four categories:

1. Make the program more accessible
2. Close the gap between benefits and the cost of living
3. Encourage employment and allow people to keep more income from other sources
4. Enable people to save for the future

# #1: Make the Program More Accessible

To be eligible for ODSP, individuals must be in financial need *and* have a substantial medical or physical disability that:

- is continuous or recurrent;
- is expected to last for a year or more;
- significantly limits their ability to work, look after themselves, or get out in the community; *and*
- has been verified by an approved health professional (Government of Ontario, 2009).

Some examples of disabilities that make people eligible for ODSP are a severe work injury, Parkinson's disease, schizophrenia and developmental delay.

## 1.1 Help People Apply for ODSP

The current application process is cumbersome and complicated. (Matthews, 2004; ODSP Action Coalition, 2010; Street Health, 2005). To prove they meet the criteria for ODSP, applicants must first complete a financial needs test. After proving financial need, their application is then referred to the Disability Adjudication Unit (DAU). They then have 90 days to complete and submit a medical application package, which documents their "substantial medical or physical disability". People who demonstrate financial need and are categorically eligible do not need to complete the medical application package. This includes those who have been deemed to be eligible for other disability programs such as CPP-Disability.

The medical application package includes four forms: two to be completed by health care providers and two to be completed by the applicant. To complete the forms, applicants may need expensive diagnostic tests and reports from a number of specialists. Both the process and the requirements are barriers, particularly for those who are older or who have mental health issues. Many people do not have a family physician who can help them obtain the medical diagnosis they need. As a result, many who are eligible for ODSP are not able to access the program.

A number of people living in emergency shelters have difficulty applying for disability benefits including ODSP (Street Health, 2005). London's experience with its Hostels to Homes project showed that with the help of a community support worker, many individuals who in the past were not successful in getting ODSP, were able to qualify. This gave them income to afford stable housing, allowing them to move out of the shelter system. To help people who are eligible for ODSP access the program:

### ***Recommendation 1.1***

***The Government of Ontario should fund municipalities to help applicants navigate the system.***

This change will result in higher up-front costs and more people accessing ODSP. However, that investment in turn will result in:

**Fewer people with disabilities living in deep poverty.** More people who meet the ODSP criteria will receive the supports they are entitled to under the law. They will benefit from higher incomes, greater access to health benefits and the opportunity to participate in employment programs.

**Savings in the health care, homelessness and criminal justice systems.** When more people living with homelessness and living with disabilities have access to ODSP, they are better able to afford to pay rent for existing housing and will be less likely to use services such as shelters or to have contact with the criminal justice system. Their health is also likely to improve, which will have trickle down effects on the health care system.

## 1.2 Change Eligibility Criteria for People Age 60 and Older

In the past (before 1998), people aged 60 and older who needed financial assistance were eligible for disability support (in place of general welfare) based solely on their age. This policy recognized the difficulties that older people face finding employment after a job loss, such as ageism, the need for different skills and training, and health problems related to aging that affect their ability to work.

At the current time, older adults who need financial assistance are eligible for *Ontario Works*, but they are not eligible for ODSP unless they have a documented disability. This policy is becoming a barrier to the growing number of older Londoners who have lost their jobs and are seeking employment and/or financial assistance until they are eligible for old age security programs.

For people aged 60 and older, finding employment for the last years of their working lives can be extremely difficult, particularly for those who have relatively little education and/or who worked in manual labour jobs. Although many have health issues that would make them eligible for ODSP, they are often unable to put together the medical documentation required to justify their claim.

*There are 37.5% more people between the ages of 60 and 64 receiving Ontario Works in London in 2010 compared to five years before.*

To remove these barriers and keep people who have worked their whole lives from falling into deep poverty:

### ***Recommendation 1.2***

***Individuals aged 60 and older should be automatically eligible for ODSP without requiring medical documentation of a disability.***

These recommendations were originally put forward by CLEONet as part of the *Take Our Seniors Off Welfare Campaign* (2005). CLEONet estimated that this change would cost the Province approximately \$30 million a year.

This investment will have three significant benefits:

- **Fewer older people will live in deep poverty.** ODSP payments are higher than those available through *Ontario Works* – which means older people on ODSP will be

able to afford a healthier diet, dental care and other health-related services that are important as people age.

- **Fewer children will live in deep poverty.** According to Grand Parenting Again Canada, about 20,000 Ontario children are cared for by their grandparents -- some of whom are aged 60 and older and may be receiving *Ontario Works*. Higher ODSP rates will raise these families' incomes, helping to move children out of poverty.
- ***Ontario Works* will be able to focus more resources on younger workers.** Over the next few years – even after the economy recovers – the labour market in Ontario is likely to be tight. Providing employment supports for older adults through ODSP will allow *Ontario Works* to focus its resources for younger people – who are more likely to benefit from the investment in retraining and find jobs.

## #2: Close the Gap Between Benefits and the Cost of Living

According to the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council, individuals and families on ODSP receive an annual income (including all social assistance, tax transfers, credits and benefits) of:

- \$13,362 for a single individual (\$12,504 in ODSP basic needs and shelter allowance plus \$858 in tax credits)
- \$24,795 for a sole support parent with one child (\$17,400 in ODSP basic needs and shelter allowance plus \$7,395 in tax credits)
- \$27,197 for a couple with one child when one parent has a disability (\$19,752 in ODSP basic needs and shelter allowance plus \$7,445 in tax credits).

For a single person, that translates into an hourly wage of \$7 – about half the amount he or she needs to have a decent standard of living in today’s society (Weingartner, 2010). For a sole support parent, it’s equal to about \$13 an hour – two-thirds of a living wage. For a couple with a child, it’s equal to about \$15 an hour – or three-fifths of what they need to live.

### ***What is a living wage?***

*It depends on family size. Based on work done across Canada, a living wage is in the area of:*

- *\$14 per hour for a single person.*
- *\$20 an hour for a sole support parent with one child.*
- *\$24 an hour for a couple with one child.*

(Weingartner, 2010)

### **2.1 Improve Benefit Rates**

Maximum ODSP shelter and basic needs benefits are predetermined by the Province and are based on family size and type. They do not take into account local community costs of living. Individuals and families who rely on ODSP report that they do not have enough money to live (ODSP Action Coalition, 2010). Despite the fact that both the federal and provincial governments have increased tax credits and children’s benefits, individuals and families on ODSP still struggle to manage. Because of their disability, most people could rely on ODSP for a long time – which means they and their families may be at a financial disadvantage for many years.

Many different groups and advocates have recommended ways to close the gap between ODSP benefits and a living wage. For example, the Subcommittee on Cities recommends a basic income guarantee at or above the low income cut off (LICO) for people with severe disabilities. The Association of Local Public Health Agencies and the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction recommend that ODSP recipients receive a \$100 food supplement. The Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (2010) recommends that Ontario set standards for a liveable income and use those standards to assess the adequacy of Ontarians’ incomes. The Toronto City Summit Alliance (2005) recommends that an independent advisory body establish income rates for people on assistance programs.

To reduce the gap between ODSP benefits and the cost of living:

***Recommendation 2.1***

***Increase ODSP rates consistent with the rate of inflation. According to the Honourable Dwight Duncan, the province's Minister of Finance (2010), between 2010 and 2013, the inflation rate is expected to average 2.0% per year.***

***Recommendation 2.2***

***Provide a food supplement in the range of \$50 to \$100 a month for each adult receiving ODSP.***

***Recommendation 2.3***

***Establish an independent advisory body to review ODSP benefits against the cost of living, and recommend rates.***

These recommendations could have significant cost implications for ODSP -- \$200 million a year for a \$50 food supplement, \$400 million for a \$100 food supplement alone, not including administrative or technology costs -- but the potential benefits are also significant:

- **Fewer Ontarians – including fewer children – living in deep poverty.** More families will have the resources they need to have a decent standard of living.
- **Healthier adults and children.** With higher incomes and the food supplement, families who rely on ODSP will be able to afford healthier foods, which should reduce health care costs and lead to greater success in life and school.
- **More rational, appropriate benefit rates.** At the current time, recommendations about benefit rates come mainly from advocacy groups. With a non-political body regularly reviewing rates and providing advice, the rates are more likely to be based on rational information and to be in line with the cost of living.

## **2.2 Improve Transportation Rates**

The gap between ODSP rates and actual costs is not limited to income. It also affects benefits such as transportation to attend medical appointments, participating in volunteer work and attending education and training.

People who qualify for ODSP are entitled to be reimbursed for "the cost of transportation that is reasonably required in any month for medical treatment". However, the ODSP mileage rate (18¢ per km for those using their own vehicle; 18.5¢ for people living in the north) has not changed since 2000 and is inadequate. It is well below the Canadian Automobile Association (2009) estimated cost of driving and owning a car (i.e., 32.1¢ to drive a 2009 Chevy Cobalt 32,000 km per year and 65¢ per km to drive 18,000 km per year). It is also significantly less than the 41¢ per km ODSP pays volunteers to drive

someone to an appointment, the 41¢ per km paid by the Northern Health Travel Grant Program, the 47.8¢ per km average mileage rate paid by 204 municipalities in 2008 (Wood & McLeod, 2008) and the 49.5¢ per km the Canada Revenue Agency allowed for moving or medical transportation costs in the 2007 tax year.

Unlike *Ontario Works*, ODSP does not cover transportation costs for people who are involved in activities that may help them be more employable or engaged in their community, such as volunteering, attending classes in English as a second language, or taking educational upgrading.

To improve transportation benefits and make them more consistent with other programs:

***Recommendation 2.4***

***The ODSP mileage rate should be increased to 41¢ per km, the same as the Northern Health Travel Grant Program.***

***Recommendation 2.5***

***ODSP recipients who volunteer and/or attend school in order to upgrade their education (English as a second language courses, adult education programs and/or part-time post-secondary education) should be eligible for bus passes or mileage expenses for their own vehicle.***

The cost of increasing the mileage rate for travel to medical appointments is expected to be relatively low, but the cost of covering transportation to volunteer or upgrade education could be significant. Once again, in the view of London's Child and Youth Network, the long-term benefits outweigh the costs:

- **Reduce the gap between cost of living and ODSP income.** Individuals and families who must drive themselves to medical appointments will be reimbursed fairly and adequately.
- **More people with disabilities participating in the community.** When ODSP recipients have support to attend school or participate in volunteer activities, they are more likely to be engaged in their communities.

## #3: Encourage Employment and Allow People to Keep More Income from Other Sources

At the current time, ODSP discourages recipients from having or developing other sources of income, including employment and rental income. In some cases, existing policies keep people from working and/or becoming more self-sufficient.

### 3.1 Employment Income

ODSP recipients who work receive a \$100 work-related benefit but they have 50% of their net earnings (less child care and work related expenses) deducted from the monthly income support they receive from ODSP.

For many people, the financial reward for working is too low and the 50% deduction seems punitive (ODSP Action Coalition, 2010). For example, someone who works and earns \$700 a month is only able to keep \$350 plus \$100 from the work-related benefit. When that income is translated into an hourly wage, the person is making only \$2.90 an hour more than on ODSP alone – far less than the \$7 to \$9 needed to close the gap between ODSP benefits and a living wage. In fact, working may not increase the individual’s or family’s income enough to improve their standard of living.

*Individuals with disabilities face more barriers to work than people without disabilities. In 2006, the unemployment rate for Ontarians with disabilities was 8.3% compared to 6.1% for those without activity limitations. Some barriers are related to the person’s disabilities but others are due to structural barriers in the labour market, the workplace, and support programs for people with disabilities.*

To increase the incentive to work and help families become more financially secure:

#### **Recommendation 3.1**

***Increase the amount of employment income that ODSP recipients can keep by increasing the exemption rate, re-establishing a flat amount of earned income that is exempt (similar to what was in place before the policy changed) and applying an exemption rate to the remaining amount of income, and/or increasing the work-related benefit.***

This recommendation is consistent with Bill 23 “Enhancing the Ability of Income Recipients to be Financially Independent” (a private member’s bill proposed by MPP Toby Barrett in 2010), which proposes that monthly income of \$700 for single people and \$1,000 for couples be exempt and that all child support income be retained. While this change will mean an increase in costs, it will have significant long-term impacts:

- **Higher incomes and a higher standard of living.** As of March 2010, 11% of people receiving ODSP could benefit from this policy change. (Social Assistance Trends). They would be able to use the additional income to achieve a decent standard of living or to build assets that will help them and their children become more self sufficient in the long-term.

## 3.2 Income Related to Employment

By definition, people who receive ODSP may not be able to work consistently and will need to access employment-related income programs as well as ODSP. One hundred percent of the gross income received from employment-related programs such as Employment Insurance and Canada Pension is deducted from ODSP benefits.

There are two problems with this that may keep people from working. Deducting 100% of gross income from employment related income programs rather than net or actual income makes people worse off than if they were not receiving this income. They can be worse off than if they had never worked. Losing work means a significant drop in income, creating more financial stress for the individual or family, which can affect their health and ability to return to work.

To remove this barrier to employment and help people maximize other sources of income:

### ***Recommendation 3.2***

***Use net income rather than gross income when deducting Employment Insurance or Canada Pension benefits from ODSP benefit. This recommendation is consistent with the recommendation in our Ontario Works policy position paper.***

### ***Recommendation 3.3***

***Treat Employment Insurance benefits the same as earned income, and deduct only 50% of benefits from ODSP benefits. This recommendation is consistent with the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council's recommendation.***

While they will have cost implications, the potential benefits are significant:

- **More individuals and families will not be worse off as a result of receiving EI and/or CPP income.** Based on provincial data (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2010), approximately 15% of ODSP recipients could benefit from this policy change – these people would not be worse off as a result of receiving Employment Insurance or Canada Pension Plan benefits.
- **Incomes will be more stable.** Treating Employment Insurance benefits in the same way as earnings will help families continue to have a stable income even after a disability-related job loss. This change will help reduce the stress on individuals and families and may make it easier for people to return to work. This policy change will affect a small percentage (less than 1%) of ODSP recipients, based on provincial data (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2010) .

### 3.3 Spousal and Child Support Payments

Any spousal and child support payments that ODSP recipients receive are deducted dollar for dollar from their ODSP benefits. This policy is inconsistent with the Ministry of Community and Social Service's direction to remove children from social assistance.

*Deducting child support payments from monthly benefit cheques...That money is supposed to be for the children, to help feed and clothe them. (p. 15. O.D.S.P. Action Coalition, 2010)*

Support payments are intended to help pay for a child's basic needs as well as school and extracurricular activities. By deducting these payments (estimated to be about \$200 per month) from benefits that are already below the cost of living, ODSP is diverting income from the child and creating more hardship for families.

To allow children to benefit from support payments:

#### **Recommendation 3.4**

#### **Deduct 50% rather than 100% of spousal and child support payments from benefits.**

This recommendation, which is consistent with that of the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council, would cost the program approximately \$6 million a year for existing recipients – and likely more, given that – with this change – more families will be eligible for ODSP. If extended to people on *Ontario Works*, the cost would be another \$16 million a year.

As indicated in Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, London's Child and Youth Network also believes in supporting families with children because we know that investing in children, especially in the early years, improves development and encourages long-term success.

- **More children will have access to basic necessities, activities and education.** Families who receive ODSP will be able to afford to do more for their children. With additional resources, children can fully participate in school and in community activities, which helps improve educational outcomes, increase literacy rates and improve overall health.
- **More families will benefit from ODSP.** With this change, more families will be eligible for ODSP, and both adults and children will benefit from the income support and employment program opportunities.

### 3.4 Rental and Boarding Income

When ODSP recipients rent out a room without meals in their home, 60% of the rental income or \$100 (whichever is greater) is deducted from their ODSP benefits. When they provide both room and board, 40% of the room and board income or \$100 (whichever is greater) is deducted from their ODSP benefits. (Note: this policy does not apply when the renter/boarder is a child or grandchild of the ODSP recipient and is receiving social assistance in his or her own right.)

There are three main problems with this policy:

- Requiring at least \$100 to be deducted as income – even though the amount received may be less than \$100 -- is arbitrary.
- The amount deducted does not take into account the gap between the shelter allowance provided by ODSP and the person’s actual housing costs. In January 2010, the ODSP Action Coalition recommended ending the reduction of benefits in situations where people rent out a room in order to be able to afford their shelter costs when the full shelter cost is not covered by the maximum shelter amount as well as removing deemed boarding charges for adult children when no rent or board is paid. Following its review of Canada in 2006, the UN Subcommittee on Cities recommended that our country increase the amount that people on social assistance receive for shelter allowances to reflect actual rent/housing costs.
- The policy fails to recognize that income received from renting out a room may be needed to allow homeowners who became disabled stay in their home.

To reduce the negative impact of deducting rental and boarding income:

***Recommendation 3.5***

***Remove the \$100 minimum deduction and exempt any rental income up to the recipient’s actual shelter cost (i.e., if the person’s mortgage is \$1,000 and the maximum ODSP shelter benefit is \$464, then the person can earn up to \$536 in rental income before deductions).***

*There is a vital link between housing, health and quality of life.*

(London Community Housing Strategy, 2010)

This change would affect only a small proportion of ODSP recipients so the cost would be relatively low. However, the impact on that small number would be significant:

- **Greater ability to manage housing costs and maintain safe, affordable, stable housing.** Individuals and families who are able to earn rental income to cover the gap between the ODSP shelter allowance and their actual housing costs will be better able to manage their incomes and costs. They are also more likely to maintain and enjoy safe, affordable, stable housing.

## #4: Enable People to Save for the Future

Preparing for the future helps individuals and families break the cycle of poverty. One way to help people prepare for the future is to encourage savings. In the 2008 budget, the Ontario Government announced plans to work with partners to establish an Asset Building Initiative for people with low incomes – a promise that has yet to be realized.

The amount of assets that ODSP recipients are allowed to keep and still be eligible for the program have not changed since 1998:

- \$5,000 for a single person
- \$7,500 for a couple
- \$500 for each dependant other than a spouse

*“Even a small amount of savings will allow low-income Canadians to enhance their own human capital in ways that may offer limitless returns.” Robson 2008*

These assets include the cash value of their Registered Retirement Savings Plans and Tax Free Savings Accounts, but not Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs). Also considered as an asset are Individual Development Accounts (IDAs): savings accounts held by people with low income who make regular contributions to the account that are matched by contributions from the government or another source (i.e. United Way).

Savings in IDAs can only be used for certain purposes, such as education, training, capital for a micro-enterprise or home ownership. People who qualify to set up an IDA also receive support services such as financial management training, counselling and monitoring to help them save. Treating an IDA as an asset that can be cashed in does not recognize the fact that they are intended to encourage people living with low income to save towards a specific goal and become more self sufficient over the long-term.

### ***A hand up... not a hand out***

*To help families build savings and financial stability, the Child and Youth Network will be implementing a matched savings program in London to help struggling parents move towards gainful employment or save for their child's future education.*

Because of the ODSP limits on both the amount of savings or assets people can keep and the types of assets that are exempt, individuals and families must spend most of their retirement and other savings before they qualify for benefits. With little savings, they do not have the resources to deal with emergencies, such as an unexpected family illness. They also become less and less able to educate their children, own a home, enjoy their retirement or break the cycle of poverty – and more dependent on social assistance over the long-term.

Building savings and assets is important for people on social assistance to become self-reliant and plan for the future. To encourage ODSP recipients to save:

***Recommendation 4.1***

***Increase asset limits to \$6,000 for each adult plus \$500 per child.***

***Recommendation 4.2***

***Expand asset exemptions to include \$6,000 per adult in RRSPs, \$6,000 per adult in Tax Free Savings Accounts and any amounts in matched savings accounts such as Individual Development Accounts.***

***Recommendation 4.3***

***Asset limits and asset exemptions should be tied to inflation.***

The cost implications of these policy changes will be outweighed by long-term benefits for individuals, families and society as a whole:

- **More resilient individuals and families.** Households that receive ODSP benefits will have the financial resources to cope with emergencies, and to pay for education and other activities that can enhance their own and their children's development.
- **Greater consistency within ODSP.** An asset limit of \$6,000 is consistent with the maximum of \$6,000 in gifts or voluntary payments that each member of a household on ODSP can receive in any 12 month period. Given that ODSP already exempts some assets in Registered Education Savings Plans and RDSPs, it is more consistent to also exempt a portion of Registered Retirement Savings Plans and Tax Free Savings Accounts (Stapleton, 2009). Under the existing policy, individuals and families are penalized based on their choice of savings plan.
- **Greater consistency with other jurisdictions.** Other provinces – including BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec and Nova Scotia – already have an exemption for asset-building matched savings accounts such as IDAs built into their social assistance rules (Robson, 2008).

## Conclusion

Whenever children and youth are raised in poverty, communities suffer. We know that families led by adults with disabilities are more likely to struggle to find and maintain employment, and to have low incomes. We also know that investments that lead to secure, adequate incomes for more families – including families with disabilities -- have a positive impact on health and quality of life. They help individuals, families and our community.

The recommendations in this paper set out practical, immediate steps to support families affected by disabilities. They have the potential to help individuals who have disabilities move themselves and their families out of poverty – which is critical if we are to achieve our vision of “**happy, healthy children and youth today; caring, creative, responsible adults tomorrow**”.

The Child and Youth Network is committed to raising awareness, promoting public support for income security programs, and developing innovative strategies that will help families living on low income manage their money, find affordable housing, improve their day-to-day lives, and ultimately break the cycle of poverty.

*“All Londoners deserve to have meaningful opportunities to participate in and contribute to our community... Social policies should not be “band-aid” approaches that simply help people to pay the bills, but should promote opportunities for long-term self-sufficiency”.*

*(London's Social Policy Framework, 2006).*

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