

SCI Ontario's Analysis of the 2013 Provincial Budget

The 2013 provincial budget, *A Prosperous and Fair Ontario*, was introduced by the Minister of Finance, the Hon. Charles Sousa, on May 2nd. It contains items of interest to Ontarians with spinal cord injuries and their supporters.

At their heart, budgets are about priorities. Spinal Cord Injury Ontario's mission is to assist persons with spinal cord injuries and other physical disabilities to achieve independence, self-reliance and full community participation. With this perspective, three core themes emerge from the document: investments in home care, supports to facilitate increased employment of persons with disabilities, and reform of social assistance programs and benefits.

We concur with the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance that the budget as a whole must be implemented in a manner that maximizes accessibility for all Ontarians.

Its release may be read here:

<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/05032013.asp>

The budget as a whole may be viewed here:

http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2013/papers_all.pdf

This document provides a brief overview of some highlights and the response of SCI Ontario for each:

Attendant Services

For this budget cycle, SCI Ontario staff presented the business case for investments in Community Outreach attendant services; you can read more about this campaign here:

<http://www.sciontario.org/whatsnew/support-independent-living-%E2%80%93-support-community-outreach-attendant-services>

SCI Ontario has been clear: both seniors and non-seniors should receive the home care services they need. Here, the Province committed to the following:

“In the 2012 Budget, the Province made a commitment to increase investment in home and community care services by an average of four per cent per year. The government is building on this commitment by providing an additional one per cent per year to increase overall funding for home and community care services by an average of five per cent annually over the next three years. Investments in these services would increase by over \$700 million by 2015–16 above 2012–13 investments, including \$260 million in 2013–14.

“The government will be investing to reduce home care wait times for nursing services and improve personal support services for clients with complex care needs (including people with SCI). All clients requiring nursing services, including hospital and community referrals, will be targeted to receive service within five days of Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) assessment. For complex care clients, referred by either community clinics or hospitals, in need of personal support services, the target will be first service within five days of CCAC assessment (p. 121).

RESPONSE:

SCI Ontario is pleased that the new dollars for CCACs are not targeted solely to seniors. That said, we wait to see what supports will be provided to the Community Support Services sector to provide Community Outreach funding, the self-administered Direct Funding program, and supportive housing. These components are crucial to developing a person-centered, barrier free system of supports. Funds from the additional 1 (one) percent increase to the community sector should be used to increase these supports to reduce unnecessary Emergency Department admissions due to exacerbated secondary health complications, facilitate optimum health, and enable community participation.

Employment

In this budget, the Ontario government has committed to engage with the private sector and other partners to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities and other social assistance recipients facing multiple barriers to employment (p. 89).

Measures will include:

- Working with corporate leaders to establish a Partnership Council on Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities to champion the hiring of people with disabilities;
- Engaging with employers and service delivery partners in a series of roundtables to improve social assistance employment services and supports for those who are able to work, and to better connect clients, including people with disabilities, to the workforce; and
- Engaging municipalities, First Nations communities and employment service providers on better ways to link social assistance recipients with services provided by Employment Ontario.

The Province also speaks of a more “improved and consistent approach to assessing the needs of clients, to better match clients to services based on individuals’ needs and readiness to work” (p. 46).

Furthermore, the Province has committed to further integrate employment and training services under Employment Ontario of the Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities (p. 48).

RESPONSE:

SCI Ontario supports the development of such a Council, and encourages the Province to develop clear benchmarks for the hiring of persons with disabilities. As well, there must be a focus on meaningful, well-paid employment. The Province is encouraged to liaise with non-profit sector partners to leverage existing expertise to increase the likelihood of success.

As the Ontario Disability Employment Network notes:

"[The proposed Council] appears to mirror the work of the Ontario Disability Employment Network with the development of the Champion's League and, obviously, we believe that Champion Employers can be a great asset in moving the employment agenda forward. At this stage, our only reservations are to determine the makeup of this Council, the role that Government will play in it, and to ensure we don't have too many vehicles of this type that are not coordinated or that seem to compete with each other. Our preference is that they should explore the option of tapping into and supporting existing structures"

(ODEN's submission points are extrapolated from the 2013 Provincial Budget Synopsis as it relates to enhancing employment opportunities for people who have a disability by Joe Dale, Executive Director of ODEN).

We also share the Network's concern regarding the silence around disability within the proposed youth employment strategy:

"The Finance Minister announced an investment of \$295 million over 2 years to bolster an Ontario Youth Jobs Strategy. In the text they state: "Employment opportunities would be available across Ontario, with an added focus on areas with high youth unemployment, including at-risk youth (e.g. youth leaving care, youth receiving social assistance), Aboriginal youth, recent immigrants and visible minority youth, and youth in rural and northern communities." Nowhere is there mention of youth with disabilities. In conversation with Ministry of Finance officials, this was an omission that had not been picked up on. We will need to pursue this with MTCU managers, who will be responsible for the implementation of these programs."

We expect the Province to ensure that such a strategy is explicitly inclusive of – and tailored to the needs of – youth with disabilities.

As well:

1. In its efforts to introduce "one stop shopping" for employment and training services, the Province should ensure that disability-specific employment supports are maintained. These services are better able to provide customized supports for people with disabilities. We support the integration of services under Employment Ontario with access to specialized services rather than under purview of municipalities; and
2. While municipalities are partners in the provision of such services, downloading the overall administration to them will result in multiple levels of bureaucracy and less customized supports for clients (not all regions will provide the same, high quality levels of service).

With respect to service integration, we concur with the Network:

“Service integration is still not clear. While there are lots of references to service integration, integrating employment services with Employment Ontario, it is not clear that this includes those employment services operated by ODSP.”

See **Social Assistance** for more information on employment supports.

Social Assistance

With respect to social assistance and employment, the Province has committed the following (pp. 87-92):

- Increasing the amount of money that people on OW and ODSP can keep when they work. The first \$200 of a person's monthly earnings will be exempt, with a 50% reduction rate applied to earnings above that amount;
- A “top up” of \$14 dollars a month for those on Ontario Works;
- Increasing the benefit rates of the Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works (general welfare) by one (1) percent;
- Treating income from self-employment the same as above, rather than reducing it dollar for dollar from benefits; and
- Harmonizing annual gift limits for both Ontario Works and ODSP recipients to \$6000, and the liquid (cash) asset limit for those on OW to \$2,500 for singles and \$5000 for couples.

RESPONSE:

We are in support of the \$200 monthly earnings exemption, as well as treating income from self-employment the same as income earned from traditional employment. These are positive moves to promote income security. Similarly, we support the harmonizing of the annual gift limit. We applaud the Province for not requiring those on OW to deplete resources before becoming eligible for social assistance.

While we support the 1 percent increase in benefits, we note that the Province has removed – or tightened the eligibility criteria around – specific benefits. Two of these are the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit and the Special Diet Allowance. With respect to the former, now the

Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative provides less financial support to individual recipients of ODSP. The latter has been made available to fewer recipients in recent years, resulting in diminished food security.

We also note that the Province did not heed the Commission's recommendation to increase funding for Ontario Works recipients by \$100 immediately.

We believe that the Province should make Pathways to Employment, as recommended by the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario voluntary rather than mandatory.

As well, we support a more simplified Northern Health Travel Grant for medical purposes, provided reforms do not result in reduced access for recipients.

Other

Here are some other items of interest found in the budget.

- **Accessibility Directorate**

"The Province has announced that the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario will move from the Ministry of Community and Social Services to the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment. This will allow the government to better work with Ontario's businesses, organizations and communities to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities" (p. 89).

RESPONSE: SCI Ontario has no position under which Ministry the Accessibility Directorate is housed, provided all Ministries are accountable to the Directorate – and vice versa.

- **Caregiver Support**

"The government has introduced the proposed Employment Standards Amendment Act (Leaves to Help Families), 2013. It would, if passed, recognize the importance of family and job security, and would build on the existing Family Medical Leave by creating three new unpaid job-protected leaves. These leaves would allow employees to care for sick or injured loved ones, or cope with the illness or loss of a child, without the fear of losing their job" (95).

RESPONSE: SCI Ontario supports the extension of Family Medical Leave benefits to assist families in providing support for loved ones with chronic medical illnesses.

- **Health Links**

"[The Province has created] 23 Health Links across the province to date to encourage greater collaboration and coordination by a patient's different health care providers, ensuring high-needs patients, such as seniors and people with complex conditions, receive more responsive care in the right place" (p. 121).

RESPONSE: SCI Ontario supports the alignment of health services to provide people with chronic conditions the supports they need – be they in hospital, rehabilitation, and community settings. We await the developments of the Health Links initiatives by way of improved outcomes for Ontarians with SCIs.

- **Registered Disability Savings Plan**

"The Ministry of Community and Social Services and other ministries will work with community partners to promote RDSPs and encourage ODSP recipients and other people with disabilities to establish RDSPs. This will help improve the low take-up rates of this valuable savings vehicle" (p. 98).

RESPONSE: SCI Ontario supports this measure; however, we note that this is the promotion of a federal program.

- **Supporting Opportunities for Aboriginal Communities**

Initiatives include a transitional fund for housing for all low-income people in First Nations communities, not just those on social assistance (p. 96).

RESPONSE: SCI Ontario emphasizes the need to apply universal design principles in the construction of new housing.

Conclusion

As it stands, it is not yet clear if the Budget will receive the necessary support of the Ontario New Democrats – the Official Opposition Progressive Conservatives have stated they will vote against it. If the budget passes – with or without modifications – we will monitor its implementation with regards to the wellbeing of our clients. If the budget does not pass, we will engage all parties on these – and other – priorities for our clients.

For more information on disability and employment, visit:

Ontario Disability Employment Network

www.odennetwork.com

Spinal Cord Injury Ontario Employment Services

<http://www.sciontario.org/service/employment>

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