

April 29, 2021

Hon. Victor Fedeli

Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation, and Trade
College Park 18th Flr 777 Bay St
Toronto
ON M7A 1S5

Hon. Prabmeet Sarkaria

Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction
7th Floor, 56 Wellesley St. W
Toronto, ON
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Re: Concerns with the Ontario Small Business Grant

Dear Minister Fedeli and Minister Sarkaria,

Thank you for your continued leadership to support employers as they experience economic disruption related to COVID-19. As the situation continues to evolve, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is taking concerns from the business community and communicating them to all levels of government.

As you know, small businesses are experiencing significant hardships during the pandemic and unprecedented revenue losses. Comprised of 140 chambers of commerce and boards of trade in every corner of the province, the Ontario Chamber Network has worked tirelessly and closely with the province's small business community, providing critical supports and information to support members.

I am writing to you to share the growing concerns we have heard from our Chamber Network as it relates to the Ontario Small Business Grant, which centres around four key areas:

Lack of communication with applicants:

- Applicants have been denied without reason and/or insufficient explanation.
- Applicants have been unable to speak to anyone via the helpline or different support channels.
- Applications have been deemed ineligible for missing information rather than being asked to provide that additional information.

Lack of clarity:

- The appeals process is unclear. Businesses who thought they were eligible have been rejected, with no way to follow up and no timely response from government.
- Applicants have been declined because they are self-employed and use their personal bank accountants for their business as opposed to a business account.
- Applicants have trouble applying to the grant if English or French is not their first language.

Technical issues with the system:

- The system continues to crash or does not properly save applicants' information. Consequently, some business owners have had to restart the entire application processes, wasting precious time and resources as a result.
- Applicants are asked to provide additional information before the second round of payment is processed, but the link provided does not always work.

Short timeframe to submit an application:

- On March 24, the province announced through Budget 2021 a new intake round for the Ontario Small Business Support Grant. The original deadline to apply was March 31, which was subsequently extended to April 7, 2021.
- We acknowledge and thank your government for doubling the grant in the recent budget. The grant has helped many organizations survive the crisis thus far. Moreover, we commend the province for making this an automatic top-up instead of asking businesses to re-apply. This will reduce the administrative burden on both businesses and government.
- However, some small businesses were unable to meet the April 7 deadline as many are grappling with numerous pressures during the pandemic. The short, two-week window is unfeasible and, consequently, the grant may not support the very businesses it was intended to help.

Accordingly, the OCC is asking your government to address the above issues related to the Ontario Small Business Support Grant by considering the following recommendations:

- Improve transparency and clarity of government responses to applicants who have been denied. As part of this communication, the government should provide greater clarity on the appeals process and decision-making criteria.
 - Ensure relevant information and assistance is available in other languages for applicants whose first language is not English or French.
- Fix the back end of the online system for businesses trying to access this grant.
- Provide businesses with a sufficient timeframe and clear eligibility criteria to submit an application, be it for future rounds of the Small Business Support Grant or other similar programs. Specifically, we hope that the forthcoming Ontario Tourism and Hospitality Small Business Support Grant accounts for the shortcomings of the Small Business Support Grant identified above.

Public health and safety are priorities for all Ontario businesses. We will continue to monitor and assess new developments pertaining to COVID-19 closely and work with our members, partners, and all levels of government to provide support to business.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce