

April 8, 2020

Hon. Todd Smith  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
7th Floor, 438 University Ave.  
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

**RE: Supporting Ontario's most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Dear Minister Smith,

Thank you for your continued leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation evolves, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is receiving concerns from the community and communicating them to all levels of government.

Ontario is home to over 2.6 million people with disabilities, many of whom rely on social services to support their daily well-being. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disability population has become more vulnerable as access to supports has been challenged.

The OCC commends the government's announcement on March 23<sup>rd</sup> to provide \$200 million in social services relief funding for municipalities and social service providers to help protect the health and safety of Ontario's most vulnerable populations, including the expanded Emergency Assistance program through Ontario Works to support individuals directly. These measures are much needed and form the start of a comprehensive response to addressing the present challenges facing persons with disabilities and organizations that serve them.

More than ever, persons with disabilities need to have access to the important services provided by charities, not-for-profit organizations, and social service agencies. Demand for these essential services increase during times of economic and social uncertainty. For organizations receiving funding from the Province of Ontario, they need to be reassured that funds will continue to flow, that funding renewals or extensions be automatic or made as seamless as possible as to not impact service delivery, and organizations be granted flexibility on how funds are used including a recognition that program outcomes may shift due to the current environment. Furthermore, the OCC recommends reporting requirements be relaxed or delayed, allowing organizations to focus on providing service to their clients.

If possible, the Province of Ontario should communicate funding allocations for the coming fiscal year as quickly as possible to allow budgets to be set and service to continue. In addition, the government must ensure that social service organizations have the same access to government stimulus and support programs offered to business.

For populations where social distancing and self-isolation is not possible, such as those who rely on support of others to perform daily functions, service must continue safely and the government must ensure persons with disabilities and support workers have access to personal protective equipment.

Within the post-secondary system, there are over 50,000 students with disabilities in Ontario's colleges and universities, many of whom receive academic supports through their accessibility office on campus. With classes now being conducted online, these students may not be receiving the academic supports and accommodations they need to succeed. We suggest the government work with post-secondary institutions to identify additional resources that may be required to support students with disabilities.

Furthermore, the businesses community is also facing unprecedented strain at this time. The OCC recommends a delay of any planned new regulatory measures as a result of reviews of different sections of the AODA and for the government to evaluate whether year-end AODA compliance reporting deadlines should be adjusted.

We further encourage the government to engage in ongoing consultations with disability organizations to understand the unique needs of this sector with real, on-the-ground feedback as the situation evolves.

Public health and safety are priorities for all Ontario organizations. 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 Ontario communities.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi  
*President and CEO*  
*Ontario Chamber of Commerce*