



# RNAO

Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario  
L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers  
autorisés de l'Ontario

Hon. Lisa MacLeod  
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services  
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September 7, 2018

**Re: Reconsider your decision to cut/damage/compromise Ontario's social safety net**

Dear Minister MacLeod,

The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) wants to reinforce with you its grave concerns over the reforms to the social assistance system, announced July 31.<sup>1</sup> These concerns are based on ethical grounds and on the impact the changes will have on population/Ontarians' health.

Social assistance rates are already inadequate because they do not reflect the actual cost of living. Your assurances of "compassion for people in need," run counter to the actions of your government, which is reducing the increase to social assistance rates from the previous government's 2018 budget promise of three per cent to only 1.5 per cent.<sup>2</sup> The lack of consultation with people who will be directly affected does not match a government that claims it is "for the people."

Minister, a 1.5 per cent increase does not even match Ontario's inflation rate of 2.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> For an individual receiving a maximum of \$721 monthly on Ontario Works, or the \$1,151 monthly maximum on the Ontario Disability Support Program,<sup>4</sup> a 1.5 per cent increase results in an extra \$10.82 and \$17.27, respectively. This increase leaves 916,924<sup>5</sup> of the most vulnerable among us struggling to pay rent and buy food. The result is suffering and illness.

The evidence is conclusive: poverty makes people sick and leads to premature death. The World Health Organization states that "poverty is the single largest determinant of health, and ill health is an obstacle to social and economic development."<sup>6</sup> According to Health Quality Ontario, "the poorer you are in Ontario, the more likely you are to have worse health outcomes."<sup>7</sup> The

inadequacies of our social assistance system are well-documented<sup>8 9</sup> as is the finding that increased provincial spending on social services has been shown to improve health.<sup>10</sup>

RNAO recently participated in an inquest that shed much-needed light on the dangers of Ontario's frayed safety net. In June of this year, a coroner's jury heard evidence into the death of 49-year-old Grant Faulkner, who died from smoke inhalation after a shelter he made out of plywood caught fire. He was trying to stay warm on a bitterly cold January night. Sleeping in tents, make-shift shelters, and occasionally with friends were the options available to him as he tried to get by on about \$220 per month in social assistance payments.<sup>11</sup> Of the 35 recommendations made by the coroner's jury examining into his death, a number were directed to the ministry of children, community and social services, including: "increase the amount of income provided to individuals receiving social assistance to reflect the real cost of shelter and basic needs."<sup>12</sup> The 1.5 per cent increase is inadequate to address the jury's recommendation.

RNAO is also profoundly disappointed that the government is ending the basic income research project on March 31.<sup>13</sup> As part of the project, independent researchers from McMaster University and St. Michael's Hospital have been tracking changes in health, food security, employment, housing and education.<sup>14</sup> This data would have provided valuable evidence to inform public policy. Cancelling the project only one-third of the way through its three-year timeline is a waste of the \$50 million invested in the first year of research.<sup>15</sup>

The cancellation is devastating for approximately 4,000 people in Lindsay, Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Brantford, and Brant County who are participating in this project.<sup>16 17 18 19</sup> RNAO rejects the claim that this research project is ending "in a compassionate way" with a "lengthy runway."<sup>20</sup> We concur with Senator Hugh Segal's assessment that project participants believed the government of Ontario's promise that "they would not end up worse off for signing up for the pilot project. They have now been let down without notice and without consultation."<sup>21</sup> Psychiatrist and CEO for the Wellesley Institute, Kwame McKenzie, describes the cancellation as a "high risk situation." According to McKenzie, "sudden shocks to vulnerable people increase the chance of heart attacks and of developing high blood pressure, and can worsen the prognosis of chronic diseases, including cancer. Sudden shocks are also linked to the onset of schizophrenia, anxiety and addictions. Suicides are often linked to recent social trauma."<sup>22</sup>

RNAO's 41,000 (and growing) voluntary and active members, including RNs, NPs and nursing students, urge the province of Ontario to continue with the basic income research project for its last two years, as promised during the 2018 provincial election campaign.<sup>23 24</sup> The province must also proceed with the 2018 budget promise of a social assistance rate increase of three per cent. Following these immediate measures, RNAO looks to the government to implement the evidence-based recommendations of the *Income Security: A Roadmap for Change* report to strengthen the social assistance system.<sup>25 26</sup>

Minister, please don't make poverty worse in Ontario. Don't open the door to more suffering and more illness amongst those who are deeply vulnerable in our society. Instead, work to build a healthier Ontario where all people can live in dignity. RNAO stands ready to work with people with lived experience, health and social policy experts, civil society, and the government of Ontario to address the critical issue of poverty.

With warmest regards,



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Chief Executive Officer  
Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)

CC: Hon. Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario  
Andrea Horwath, Leader of the Official Opposition  
John Fraser, Interim Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party  
Michael Schreiner, Leader of the Green Party of Ontario  
Hon. Christine Elliott, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care  
France G linas, NDP Health Critic

## References:

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