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| Canadian mental health association, Ottawa Branch |
| Presentation to the Economic and Finance Committee proceedings |
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Living in Poverty is very taxing on one's health. Living on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is not easy for several reasons. If you get a rate raise on your ODSP cheque, that raise gets clawed back by the social housing authority where you live and put towards paying the rent. Hence, my rent increases every time I obtain a rate raise on the shelter allowance given to me by ODSP. Increase in rent outside of the shelter allowance rate raise comes out of my personal allowance. I have therefore, less money to spend on my food. Living on the money we get every month gives us no extra money if you have any emergency.

We don't know from month to month if we are going have enough money to pay hydro and rent. Depending on where you live, Hydro rates can be very expensive. If I didn't have food bank to go to get food some months, I would not eat because the hydro cost increased from 100.00 to 200.00 per month. Because I live on ODSP, I can’t have my electricity on during the day at all because the full Hydro rate is on and I am trying to reduce the amount I pay in Hydro. My electricity is turned off from 6:00 am until noon as well as from 3:00 pm until 7:00 pm. I wear many sweaters to stay warm and not get sick. Because I have an underlining condition where I have to use a CPAP machine, the cost of hydro is even more expensive. My monthly bill can be up to 250.00 a month depending on my daily schedule. Because of my disabilities and health conditions, I was forced to get a part time work. Even with this extra income coming in, I still struggle to pay my bills on a regular basis. Some months, I end up paying my rent and hydro first and with whatever is left, I use to buy food.

The food I buy and receive from food banks is not healthy. It is full of additives, fats and sugar and generally perceived from health professionals as not healthy. I can’t obtain healthy food because it is too expensive and costs around $250.00 per month. Fresh fruit and vegetables are not cheap and if you want to be healthy you need to buy the more expensive foods. If you have any disabilities and health conditions that require healthy food, you can’t always eat the food you are given by a food bank. Therefore, it makes it quite difficult for me to stay healthy and to stop the progression of some illnesses. It is difficult for me to access my local food bank as it is far and there is little to no public transportation because I live in a more rural sector of the City of Ottawa. My housing provider is a social housing organization.

I know several people who need special diets but are having a very difficult time to survive because they can't get the right food for their special needs to treat certain illnesses and conditions such as, leukemia, hyperglycemia, diabetic, lactose intolerance, avoidance of anaphylactic shock due to food allergies and access to gluten free foods. This is due because of the cut to the Special Diet Allowance. Eating foods that are low in nutrition and/or food that you need to avoid due to these conditions but have no choice to buy because of your finances create grave consequences to those that eat them and shouldn’t. Many end up in the hospital because of this, which hikes up the costs of health care for all and takes up scarce resources and time.

Because there is no moving allowance any more (Community Startup Benefit), people are unable to move into a new apartment because they don't have the money to cover the costs. There are many reasons why people on ODSP and Ontario Works (OW) need to move such as, being over housed in the social housing system, fleeing an abusive relationship, neighbourhood safety reasons, (neighbourhood is unsafe), obtaining an apartment after being homeless, hydro is too expensive, the apartment is no longer affordable, need of an accessible apartment because of disability, the apartment is uninhabitable, etc. No Community Startup Benefit means that people can't get the basic housing needs met such as, curtains, blinds or curtain rods, pay for movers, buy a bed, etc.

I no longer have access to certain needed disability related supplies and assistive devices because some of these items that were once covered and paid for by the ODSP system are no longer paid for. I have a serious back problem that requires specialized orthotics and shoes that are no longer covered and paid for by ODSP. This creates more of a financial burden for me as I have to spend money I don't have to pay for physiotherapy, other services and devices. Because of this, I have to take painkillers to manage my pain and to be able to continue to live my life. My part-time job pays for the physiotherapy that I must do twice a month in order for my condition to stabilize and not get worse.

I have two cataracts growing on my eye and have a history of glaucoma in my family. Because of these conditions, my eyes need to be checked more often than usual. I also have another eye problem that is related to my dyslexia called Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, which needs to be checked regularly. However, since the cuts to vision benefits, I am unable to obtain these regular check-ups more than once every three years. These changes put me at increased risk of illness and other related complications.

In order to be happy and healthy, you also need to exercise, have hobbies and be involved in community life. This is not possible on a very fixed income. I wish to be like any citizen where I can enjoy my life, eat healthy and have all my basic needs met. However, because I struggle with health issues and disabilities, I am condemned to live a life in poverty, full of stigma and discrimination. Please restore these needed services and benefits as well as raise the rates of social assistance (ODSP/OW) so that I and people like me can live a more dignified life. We will cost the overall system (health care, justice, etc.) less if we can pay our bills, eat better and have access to community resources and services.