

St. Stephen's
Community House

ODSP: The Risk of a Narrower Definition

*A survey of
86 people on
social assistance*

Member Advocacy Committee
St. Stephen's Community House

May 2019

The threat of a narrowed definition of disability under the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

INTRODUCTION

The Member Advocacy Committee (MAC) at St. Stephen's Community House is a group of people with lived experience of disability, poverty, homelessness, racism and more. Most of us are on ODSP. We decided to do this survey, as we are concerned that the Ontario Government has announced it intends to narrow the definition of disability eligibility on the program in the future. While we are glad to hear that hopefully people like us will be grand parented on the program, we are very worried that people with similar disabilities could be denied their rights to disability coverage going forward.

FINDINGS

Our surveys were conducted by peer leaders from the MAC. It became clear to our leaders through doing individual surveys that there is a lot of anxiety about the proposed change in definition of disability under ODSP. Respondents worry that people denied disability will "fall through the cracks" and "cost the system more" due to using more costly emergency services such as police, ambulance, hospitals, shelters and prisons. A number of respondents said there will be more suicides as people will be increasingly desperate, due to not being able to survive financially on Ontario Works. Another often mentioned possible result is that people in their desperation could turn to crime to make ends meet, and even try to go to jail where they will at least get a bed and meals: "three hots and a cot".

One respondent worries that many disabled people are vulnerable to being targeted for cuts to their benefits: "I worry about coming changes, will I lose my benefits, will they try to disqualify me and then I'll have trouble getting back on? Families with autistic children fought for reinstated funding but that means we won't be spared. We would have to launch an extremely aggressive and public fight and traditionally we are too ill and poor to organize in the way the parents and Francophones did. If we could do that, we might get them to back down on certain things. They have slashed Legal Aid by 30% thus preventing professional advocacy for recipients."

Difficulties getting onto ODSP

We learned that a number of people who obtained ODSP had to try several times to get onto the program. This reveals how hard it can be for people to get onto the system even with the current broader definition of disability. Some respondents used services at legal clinics to help them appeal a negative decision, and were successful. Our group is concerned that going forward with cuts to legal aid in Ontario, people may not have this avenue of appeal open and will face even more barriers to get onto the program. Some respondents' comments follow:

"I started off denied three times. I was told to go to legal aid. They took my application and sent it to a doctor."

"I was on OW. I was turned down and went to a legal clinic and they appealed it. Then I got granted."

"I applied after I had four heart attacks. For six years I tried to get on ODSP. I got my MPP to help."

"Through a hospital after a major accident. I got rejected, then applied for an interview. I got rejected again, then went to a hearing and was finally accepted two years later!"

What can happen when disabled people are denied ODSP

A total of 80 respondents gave narrative answers to the following question:

The Ontario Government is proposing to change the current definition of disability to a more narrow definition. If the definition of disability changes, certain disabilities may no longer be accepted onto ODSP. Disabilities which may no longer qualify could include cancer, mental health issues, addiction, chronic pain, and some other hidden disabilities. This means that people with disabilities which are episodic (off and on) will likely not qualify. Those already on ODSP will likely be able to stay on the program. What do you think of this possible change?

A cross section that represents a number of answers appear below:

"It is a bad idea. People will steal."

"I think it is ridiculous. People with "hidden" disabilities have just as many and sometimes more barriers to working as their counterparts."

"It's bad news for mentally ill people. This will add to homelessness, more despair. St. Joseph's is shutting down its emergency psychiatry department."

"This change is unfair and demeaning to people who suffer from invisible disabilities, if this change follows through it will put those who suffer/live with the disabilities written above at risk for further pain/mistreatment. We aren't living in the 1940s where white rich people will benefit from the government authorities."

"Ridiculous! Hidden disabilities, mental health/addiction issues are debilitating and can affect your wellbeing as much as visible disabilities."

"Unacceptable. This is death by a thousand cuts. We should be expanding the definition of disability and reinstating basic income, not cutting to subsidize horse racing and tailgates."

"I think that it will leave many people who are seriously ill destitute and in poverty."

"I think this is nothing more than an ongoing effort to destroy the social safety net. This is political and ideological."

"It will make a lot of people more crazy (who get turned down from ODSP). Life is already unbearable. I was a roofer for 30 years, working on my knees. We've gotta pay for more things."

"Not good. Already it was hard to get on. I had to appeal."

"That's very bad. People are gonna die slowly....It's already too difficult for people to get on (ODSP). I was at a shelter. Four people I know died. They weren't on the (ODSP) program. Three of them are natives."

"As a person who suffers from hidden disabilities I myself haven't applied for ODSP because to apply is such an overwhelming task as is for someone like me. To ask people who have such disabilities to jump through hoops is unrealistic to me. Any cuts made to these programs will do so much more damage to communities and those that live in them."

"Disappointed in lack of foresight by Government, lack of compassion. That if they really cared about saving money they'd be pushing for changes in monetary policies that have been designed to enrich the ultra rich."

"Don't like it. It's not fair if people have mental health challenges how can they expect them to work and pay the rent? People will start living more on the streets, we will see more tents this year vs. last year."

"What we are seeing right now it's gonna get worse. I would be a thorn in the government's side. I could end up in jail. I was institutionalized in Picton: Huronia. Society's "rejects". (people will end up in jail) so they've got three hots and a cot."

"It's predatory. A society is measured by how we take care of its weakest."

"It's not good. Not fair. Gives everyone something to worry about. It's threatening."

"Detrimental to the populations who suffer from cancer, mental health issues. Canada is a first world nation and can afford ODSP to clients or Canadians suffering."

We asked respondents: What do you think would happen to someone with a hidden disability such as chronic pain, mental health issues, cancer or another condition who is denied ODS?P?

Respondents gave stark answers, based on their own experiences and what they witness in other disabled people's daily lives:

"Overdose on street drugs. Death - not able to function i.e. cancer."

"They will end up on the streets."

"That person won't survive! Makes it incredibly harder to make ends meet - decline in health."

"They may be unable to survive. They can't work and won't have ODS?P support thus raising poverty levels dramatically."

"Poor quality of health increase in mental health and addiction issues due to stress."

"I think that more people will end up homeless or in shelters. More people using food banks."

"They would be homeless and be denied the basic quality of life benefits."

"They will suffer and they'll die. End of story."

"Lost in the cracks of the system and the system more heavily burdened and increased homelessness and extreme poverty."

"I believe that they could fall through the cracks of the system. I believe homelessness, illness and deaths would rise to an unprecedented level."

"They seek support OR relief on the street or black market. Opiate use increases, homelessness and crime rates go up as people start to steal to support drug/medication for pain and depression."

"Keep suffering and deteriorate and land in jail and hospitals. That will cost the system more."

"Increase in suicide."

"Starve."

BACKGROUND and DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey Locations

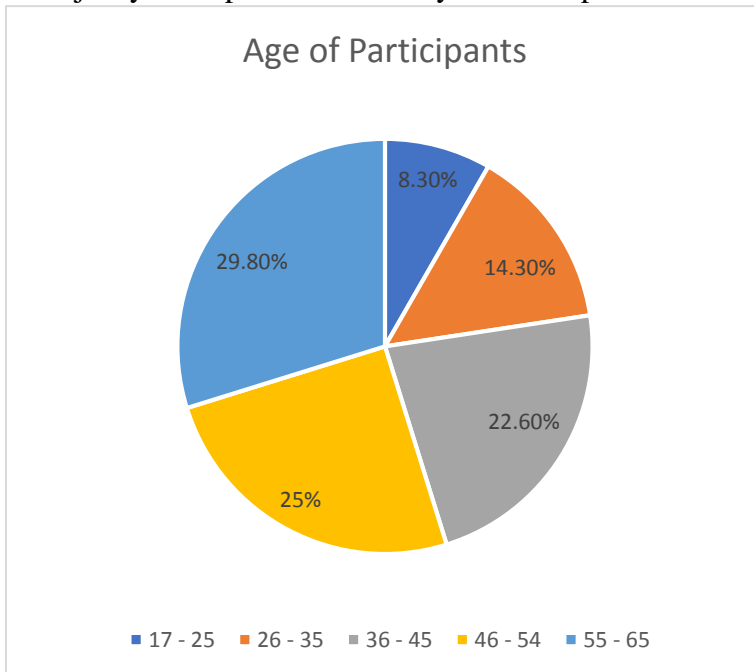
Our survey was conducted in April and May 2019. We surveyed 86 people in a number of drop-in locations, as well as two online surveys. Surveys were done with the following groups, programs and drop-ins:

Group/Organization	Number of People Surveyed
Corner Drop-In, Stephen's Community House	34
Toronto Community Addictions Team peers	19
Sistering women's drop in	13
St. Felix Centre	11
Opportunity Knocks – youth employment program St. Stephen's Community House	7
ODSP Action Coalition (online surveys)	2

Everyone surveyed is living on social assistance, with 80.5% on ODSP and 19.4% on Ontario Works.

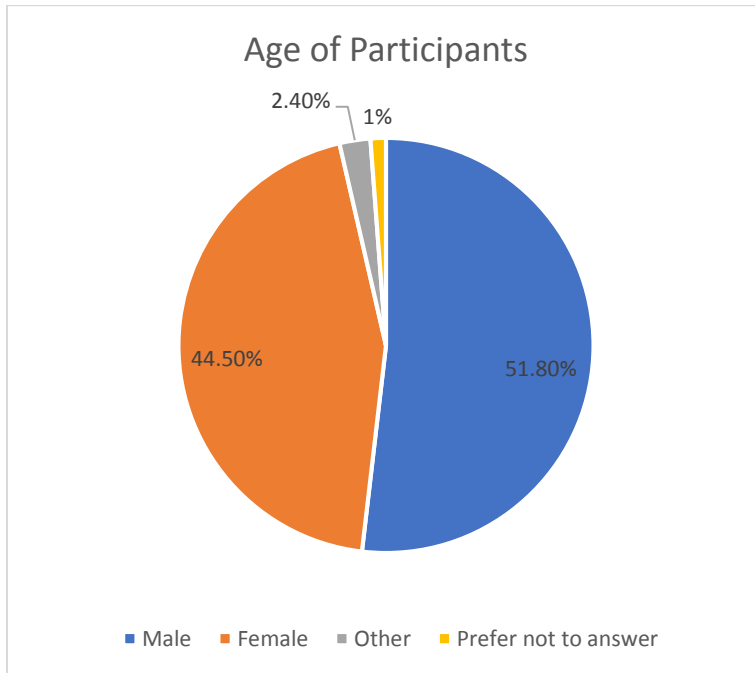
Age of Participants

A majority of respondents are 45 years and up:



Gender

Just over 50 % of respondents are male.



Number of years on ODSP

The average number of years for people on ODSP is 8.75 years. One respondent had been on the program for less than a month, while another respondent had been on the program for 40 years. Many people had been on the program for around ten years or more.

Mental health issues

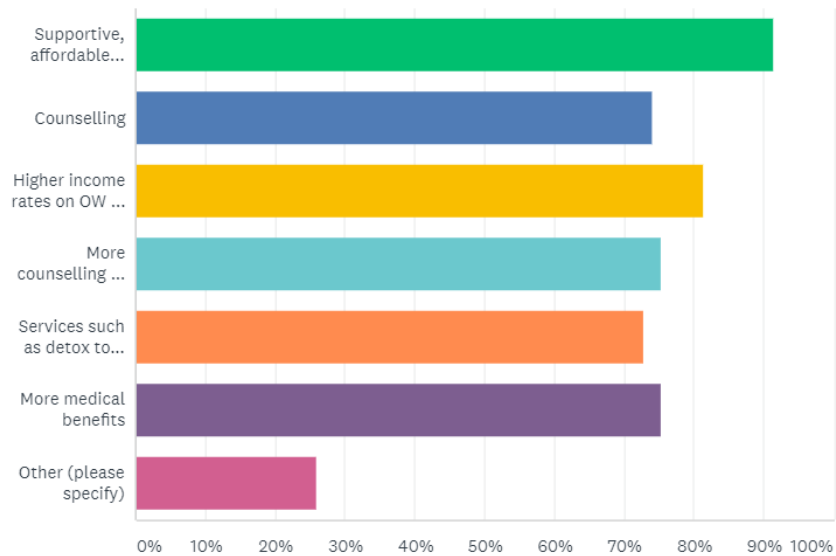
Of the participants interviewed, 77% identified as having mental health issues, while 22% said they did not have these issues. People had a range of answers from 1 to 10 in terms of how much ODSP had helped with their mental health issues. The median answer is 5.5 with some being very negative with how much ODSP has helped, and others being very pleased with the ODSP supports for their mental health. Clearly, having more money on ODSP has led to improved mental health incomes for a significant number of respondents, based on their qualitative answers, reported in other parts of this survey.

What else is needed for people on ODSP

A number of supports are needed for people with disabilities, according to respondents. As with some of our previous surveys, supportive affordable housing is first on this list, followed by counselling and higher rates on ODSP and OW. Detox services and more medical benefits were also identified as high priorities.

Thinking about support for people with disabilities in Ontario, what else is needed?

Answered: 81 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Supportive, affordable housing	91.36% 74
Counselling	74.07% 60
Higher income rates on OW and ODSP	81.48% 66
More counselling for mental health issues	75.31% 61
Services such as detox to help with addictions	72.84% 59
More medical benefits	75.31% 61

Other identified needs for disabled people on ODSP include

“Qualified Clinical Nutritionists and Naturopaths need to be recognized by ODSP as qualified professionals in assessing clients regarding this benefit and how it applies to people with multiple chemical sensitivities and food allergies.”

“More freedom to save and earn income without penalty to my monthly benefit.”

“More understanding and patience.”

“Safe injection sites.”

“Hard drug addicts need their own housing/shelter system.”

“More access to employment programs.”

“Services such as rehab to help with addictions.”

“More food programs on weekends especially holiday weekends.”

“Access to food and clothing banks and recreational activities (gym, sports, lifestyle programs).”

“Money for women’s feminine needs.”

Concerns about changing definition of disability on ODSP

Of the 86 people surveyed, 47% were unsure if their disability would be included in a narrower definition under ODSP in the future. 14% thought their disability would not be included while 39% thought their disability would be included.

The uncertainty about ODSP and how to rely on the program creates stress and anxiety for many recipients. Even being told they would likely be grandfathered onto the system of ODSP going forward, a number of respondents expressed anxiety when being surveyed. This is partly due to the ongoing challenges people face being heavily scrutinized and surveilled on the program. Benefits that are taken away or reduced and medical reassessments make life on the program stressful. Participants weigh in about their concerns in this area below:

“I study the directives so I am no longer terrified when things go wrong, although it is frustrating and anxiety-inducing I am still apprehensive of my caseworker, when I have one assigned. The fear of Big Brother will always be there.”

“Astounded that ODSP does not require disability education as hiring prerequisite to its caseworkers, thus leading to high variability in effectiveness of service dispensation to clientele. Equally astounded to learn that many front-line caseworkers and administrators Lack Understanding of the Policies under which they are legally bound to provide service. As a result, many legitimate clients are being denied access to service – as per Human Rights and Disability Acts. Frustrated that ODSP policies Lack Currency and Fail to address many Invisible Disabilities.”

Positives of being on ODSP

A number of participants showed they valued having the higher income and stronger supports on ODSP, especially when compared to OW. Better dental coverage on the program, access to vision care and other enhanced medical and drug benefits were all mentioned as positives.

Other positives are outlined below:

“It makes me more independent. It does improve my physical health to the certain point.”

“My worker is amazing and supportive.”

“Feels good, I am able to get more things I need and can pay rent. I feel more secure with the money coming in. Am able to live better and feel safer.”

“Good, so far. It is not just the money. Having financial stability helps to alleviate anxiety, which in turn helps me want to move forward with employment.”

“It has allowed me to have a place to live and some dignity.”

“I feel as though it is giving me a chance to get back on my feet while allowing me the time to take care of my health and get certain things in order. It is essential and necessary for me to be able to live - otherwise I'd be homeless - AGAIN. It is better than being homeless - but after rent and living expenses I have \$30 a month.”

“ODSP allows me to have financial stability while working on my addiction and mental health issues.”

“My life has improved dramatically since being in the program. I feel grateful and have been able to spend more time volunteering to help those that are in greater need. I do not feel hopeless.”

“I get what I need. My special diet, my transportation, extra health needs i.e. Depends, Ensure.”

“I feel terrible and relief at the same time. I don't have to panhandle or relate to crime.”

“I qualify for extra (dental) cleaning each year due to gum recession from a bad upbringing.”

“When I am unable to leave my house for weeks at a time I feel some solace in knowing that at least I am able to somewhat afford food and rent.”

“So far, all the workers have been helpful and professional. My first OW worker really impressed me by suggesting that I apply for ODSP.”

“Because of my addiction issues, my rent being paid directly to my landlord ensures I will have a place to sleep every night, even when my disease flares up.”

“They raised the income of working ODSP recipients to \$100 and raised the income to \$200 for those who work without taxing the first \$200. It's a good raise.”

“Assistance with housing and medical transportation allowance to get to appointments etc. And help with getting into programs to better myself.”

“Get paid more money from special diet allowance. I eat better.”

“For me it was about feeling accepted on ODSP. I do not feel like a person that society has rejected and feel better about myself so I can be a contributing individual help others.”

“It allows people to have a basic income to survive instead of being on the street.”

Navigating the system and other challenges on ODSP

It takes work for recipients to manage their own case on the ODSP system. One respondent sums it up:

“Caseworkers or the computer system screws up three to six months out of the year for the past several years. False suspensions, no caseworkers, lost files, missing benefits, false overpayments. Endless paperwork, calls, resending documents. Very time consuming and I’m never at fault. It’s a job to manage staying on top of things.”

Ongoing problems with ODSP

The most mentioned problem with ODSP is the low rates and substandard housing and food. Responses outline a range of problems below:

“Money. Lack of social life. Privacy. Dignity. Inadequate housing. I have PTS (post traumatic stress).”

“Not matter what - people own you - no communication with workers. Physical brain injury and PTSD. I do appreciate the opportunity to try to take care of me.”

“Having to work with a very minimal budget.”

“The stigma associated with having a disability.”

“Stretching a lump sum over a month in a major urban centre. The fear of one mistake ending benefits for a month until I can fix it, regardless of whether it was my error or not.”

“Not enough for rent.”

“My worker. I had a hard time to get glasses. I have diabetes and my vision is blurry. I could barely wear the glasses. I got glasses again and had a hard time. When I wanted glasses paid, it was a hassle. I had to go four times to the worker. Now that I am dealing with everything I see a psychiatrist. Before I could just cook a meal (when housed). When my arm starts paining that bothers me. Things I used to do I can't anymore. I have arthritis in a number of places. I had to wear sandals all winter.”

“Not enough money to live on. Still need subsidy for rent and food bank to eat and have NO other funds. I have chronic depression, anxiety, PTSD.”

“Prejudice that landlords have in i.e. renting an apartment.”

Homeless on ODSP

We observed a disturbing possible trend of people on ODSP who are homeless. At St. Felix Centre, half the participants we interviewed were homeless, and some were on ODSP. This centre provides 24 hour services, including mats for people to sleep on, on the floor. Three participants on ODSP stated they had experienced rental eviction and were currently sleeping on mats on the floor in a crowded space.

One respondent on ODSP who has a mobility impairment due to diabetes and has chronic pain said he is currently homeless. “I have been through pretty much hell. I am on insulin and can’t take my doses four times a day. I am staying at a respite centre. I sleep on a mat. It’s hard to find an apartment. I had to wear sandals all winter (due to foot problems). And I can’t cook a meal.”

A woman on ODSP interviewed at St. Felix said she and her brother got evicted from their affordable housing. “ODSP weren’t very helpful. They didn’t lift a finger to help me.” She has been on ODSP for 40 years, and does not like being on the program. “I thought Doug Ford would be more for the people. But he’s not.”

CONCLUSION

The Member Advocacy Committee is committed to joining with other leaders and allies to ensure ODSP is a program available to all people with disabilities, including people with chronic pain, cancer, mental health, addiction, episodic disabilities and more. We heard many difficult stories about people who are already on the program and need more services and better rates. We share their concerns that if people are denied ODSP, they will face destitution and worse. We urge the Ontario Government to commit to maintaining the current ODSP definitions, and to raise the rates on ODSP and Ontario Works so people have enough to live on.

ODSP SURVEY

Member Advocacy Committee

SURVEY LOCATION _____

Experiences with the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our survey. This survey is being conducted by the Member Advocacy Committee at St. Stephen’s Community House. We are a group of people with lived experience of disability and more. The purpose of this survey is to learn about what people’s thoughts and experiences with ODSP. This information will help us to best represent Ontarians’ interests in speaking to the Ontario Government about their proposed changes to the ODSP program. **Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You do not have to use your name.**

ODSP SURVEY:

1. What age are you?
 17 to 25 36 to 45 55 to 65
 26 to 35 46 to 55

2. What gender do you identify as?
 Female Male Trans Other
 Prefer not to answer

3. Are you on ODSP or Ontario Works? ODSP Ontario Works

4. If yes, how long have you been on ODSP? _____

5. The Ontario Government is proposing to change the current definition of disability to a more narrow definition. If the definition of disability changes, certain disabilities may no longer be accepted onto ODSP. Disabilities which may no longer qualify could include cancer, mental health issues, addiction, chronic pain, and some other hidden disabilities. This means that people with disabilities which are episodic (off and on) will likely not qualify. Those already on ODSP will likely be able to stay on the program.

What do you think about this possible change?

6. Do you think your disability might no longer be included in the ODSP definition of disability if changes are made?

_____Yes _____No _____Unsure

7. If you are on ODSP, how did you apply for the program?

a) Were you on Ontario Works first? _____Yes _____No

8. If you are on ODSP, how do you feel about being on the program? Please explain.

9. If you are on ODSP, how would you rate your quality of life on ODSP?

Not good *Very good*
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. If you are on Ontario Works, or were on Ontario works before, how would you rate your quality of life on Ontario Works?

Not good *Very good*
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

16. Please state and explain one good experience you have had with ODSP or Ontario Works.

17. How has your life improved since you got onto ODSP, if you are on the program?

18. What makes life challenging on ODSP? Please explain.

19. Do you identify as having mental health issues?

_____ Yes _____ No

20. If yes, how much has being on ODSP helped you with your mental health issues, if you are on it?

Not well

Very well

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

21. Thinking about support for people with disabilities in Ontario, what else is needed?

_____ Supportive, affordable housing

_____ Counselling

_____ Higher income rates of Ontario Works and ODSP

_____ More counselling for mental health issues

_____ Services such as detox to help with addictions

_____ More medical benefits

_____ Other, please specify: _____

22. What do you think would happen to someone with a hidden disability such as chronic pain, mental health issues, cancer or another condition who is denied ODSP? Please explain.
23. Is there anything else you would like to share about social assistance and ODSP?

Thank you for filling out this survey. Your voice matters!

Please check this box if you are willing to be contacted to discuss your story further

Please share your name if you want us to contact you.

NAME: _____ TELEPHONE: _____

EMAIL _____

Please check this box if you want to hear from us about what we learned through this survey