

Budget to reveal true colours

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In less than two weeks, when Ontario Finance Minister Greg Sorbara delivers his budget, people with disabilities and their families will find out whether this province truly values their lives or merely pays lip service.

Seven months later, when voters go to the polls, Queen's Park will reap what it sows.

It's truth time again. Time for Sorbara to acknowledge that people who cannot work because of illness or disability deserve some dignity and quality of life. That's impossible to achieve with the current unnecessarily complex Ontario Disability Support Program.

In an open letter last week, a group of Torontonians challenged the province's social services minister, Madeleine Meilleur, to live on \$979 a month. That's the highest amount available to an individual forced to eke out an existence on ODSP. Most get much less.

"We challenge (Meilleur) for one month to live in substandard housing where the monthly rent is \$436," the Toronto Region ODSP Action Coalition wrote. That would leave her \$543 – or \$17.51 a day – for food, laundry, TTC tokens, telephone and other necessities, and hygiene and grooming products.

"We challenge the minister to ... find a way to survive, let alone live in dignity."

Clearly, a significant increase in support rates is long overdue. As is a change in the system. Four years ago, in a report called *Denial By Design*, the **Income Security Advocacy Centre** condemned ODSP as little more than a thinly veiled device to force those in need off assistance and onto the streets. It also noted the province's Social Benefits Tribunal was overturning on appeal almost half of the decisions to deny benefits.

A report from Street Health, which serves people who are homeless, paints a similar picture, showing the system routinely denies ODSP access to disabled homeless people despite the fact that they qualify for support. Denying access ends up costing the shelter and health care systems more in the long run, it adds.

And when Durham Mental Health Services asked staff to talk about their clients' experiences with ODSP, it got a detailed picture of the heartbreaking drawbacks. In his summary of responses, David Clarke, co-ordinator of community development, noted there was "a general sense that in many cases the system worked because of exceptional staff going above and beyond to make a difference."

That being said, the report notes, among other things:

- "At times ODSP doesn't take into account the special needs of clients with disabling mental health disorders."
- "The 3 per cent increase to monthly allowances implemented on Feb. 28, 2005 was the first increase to social assistance rates in Ontario since 1993....Because rates don't increase with the cost of living, recipients have become steadily more impoverished."
- "Long wait times for applications to be approved and long return times for calls to customer support."
- The way ODSP notifies clients of decisions "provides little information on what the problem is or how to remedy it. Clients who struggle with mental health issues are especially vulnerable to the disorienting effect of these notices."
- A slow, stressful and unresponsive appeal system.

Websites for groups advocating changes to ODSP include odspaction.ca, geocities.com/torontodisabilityaction and <http://home.cogeco.ca/~mmdilts/Fireside.htm>