



DeafBlind
ONTARIO SERVICES

Pre-Budget Submission

**The Honourable Charles Sousa
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
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*If 95% of what we learn comes through our eyes and ears,
imagine the challenges of being both deaf and blind.*

DeafBlind Ontario Services presents the following recommendations for the 2016-2017 Ontario Budget:

- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Include compensation increases for Intervenor Services in the Ontario government's fiscal framework. Salaries should recognize the expertise and unique skill set of the profession of Intervenor Services, and include cost of living increases.

- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Help persons with disabilities live in dignity by providing for the real costs of living. Ensure that Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates reflect average market rates and are adjusted annually for inflation, so that the lifelong and unique needs of Ontarians with deafblindness can be met.



Executive Summary

DeafBlind Ontario Services welcomes the consultation process for the 2016 - 2017 Ontario Budget and is pleased to have the opportunity to provide input for consideration to the Government of Ontario.

The quality and strength of a society is reflected in the treatment it accords those who, through no choice or fault of their own, constitute its most vulnerable citizens. We support the government's commitment to "help build a fair society... and support people with disabilities" while striving to improve the quality of life for all Ontarians.¹

For over 25 years, DeafBlind Ontario Services has been enriching the lives of individuals who are deaf and blind, one touch at a time. Each individual who is deafblind has a varying degree of sensory loss. Therefore, they will have their own unique, individual way of communicating and require the support of Intervenor - specially trained professionals using the sense of touch to help them communicate, and specialized housing that caters to their unique needs.

DeafBlind Ontario Services, while striving to maintain service standards, readily attests to the reality that funding has not kept pace with the unique needs of the people we serve or cost pressures.

In alignment with the government's poverty reduction strategy, we agree that more could and should be done to support vulnerable populations, which include persons with disabilities, so that they do not continue to fall into poverty.²

DeafBlind Ontario Services urges recognition that this situation cannot be sustained and that continued underfunding comes at a significant cost to both the individuals concerned and society at large. Transfer payment agencies either have reached, or are reaching their limits in terms of the type and quality of supports and services they can offer.

Intervenor are specially trained to be partners in communication with people who are deafblind, providing the visual and auditory information necessary to enable the person who is deafblind to interact with other people and their environment. Intervenor do not act as caregivers but assist our clients with communication and life skills to become more independent. Individuals who are born deafblind often have additional cognitive and physical disabilities, and other medical issues. Therefore, Intervenor are trained to not only provide critical communication support, but also address these additional physical, cognitive and medical challenges.

¹ 2015 Ontario Budget Speech, <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2015/statement.html>

² Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014 – 2019, p 8



Salaries for the almost 600³ Intervenor who work across Ontario do not reflect the unique and specialized nature of this emerging profession. Compensation for Intervenor should be higher than those of Personal Support Workers and Developmental Services Workers, due to the level of specialized training and education required. Low wages creates challenges in employee recruitment and retention, leading to a compromised level of Intervenor support standards.

DeafBlind Ontario Services supports the creation of a fair, equitable and transparent service system that meets the unique and complex needs of individuals who are deafblind, and does this in a prudent and financially responsible manner. Since 2004, we have been a committed and active participant in the Transformation of the Intervenor Services Agenda. DeafBlind Ontario Services is extremely impressed at the government's nimble progress that has been realized during the past two years.

We encourage the government of Ontario to take the next step in this process and ensure that funding meets the unique and individualized needs of persons who are deafblind because, "we can all play a role in creating the right conditions and opportunities that allow *everyone to pursue a better future.*"⁴

³ As of March 31, 2015 (Intervenor Services Human Resource Strategy Research Survey, July 2015)

⁴ Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014 – 2019, p 2



KEY ISSUES & SOLUTIONS

1. MCSS Transformation Agenda – Profession of Intervenor Services and Compensation

CHALLENGE: Compensation in the Intervenor services sector remains low and non-competitive compared to salaries in other social services sectors. Salaries are not keeping pace with the growing need or reflect the specialized, individualized supports required of Intervenor to meet the unique need of clients across our sector.

One of Ontario's greatest strengths is its people's talents and skills. Intervenor act as the "eyes and ears" of individuals who are both deaf and blind. They provide the visual and auditory information necessary to enable the person who is deafblind to interact with other people and their environment. Although salaries have increased over the past decade, they remain low and non-competitive and do not reflect the specialized and emerging nature of the profession.

DeafBlind Ontario Services applauds the Ministry for committing to the Intervenor Services Human Resource Strategy (ISHRS) and thanks them for their investment over the course of the strategy. The ISHRS will lead to highly qualified intervenors providing quality, consistent services to individuals living with deafblindness through a clear and broadly accepted set of expectations for the role and function of an Intervenor with identifiable core competencies.

DeafBlind Ontario Services recognizes the government's commitment to strengthen retirement planning for all Ontarians. We are prepared to work with the government as they prepare to introduce a new mandatory provincial plan – the Ontario Retirement Pension Plan (ORPP) that would offer a secure benefit for life.

Working together, we believe in "the potential that can be realized when supports are put in place and barriers are removed."⁵

RECOMMENDATION: Include compensation increases for Intervenor in the Ontario government's fiscal framework. Salaries should recognize the expertise and unique skill set of the profession of Intervenor Services, and include cost of living increases

⁵ Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014 – 2019, p 2



2. Increase Ontario Disability Support Program Levels

CHALLENGE: The continued restrictions of the Ontario Disability Support Program can create barriers for persons who are deafblind and cause them to live in poverty.

Many people with disabilities in Ontario are living in an ever-increasing state of poverty as a result of ODSP failing to provide adequate levels of income support. We know that “people with disabilities are still overrepresented among Canada’s low-income Population.”⁶ While the current government has taken steps in a positive direction by making annual cost of living increases to ODSP, these benefits remain more than 18% below what they were in 1993 when compared to inflation. All of DeafBlind Ontario Services’ clients are recipients of ODSP.

ODSP levels are 40% below the poverty line at about \$1,000 per month and need to cover costs that include rent, food, clothing and transportation. An increase in these vital supports will create additional opportunities for people who are deafblind to thrive in their daily lives, leading to positive outcomes in alignment with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy’s perspective, “when environments adapt to individual need, *the effects of a disability can change in severity or even disappear altogether.*”⁷

MCSS must concentrate on those in financial need – and on people with disabilities and other special needs - so that they can participate fully in their economy and communities: “Exclusion from the full array of social life costs not only the individual who is excluded but also the society to which that individual belongs. Furthermore, the costs multiply or cascade for the individual, their family and their community.”⁸

RECOMMENDATION: Help persons with disabilities live in dignity by providing for the real costs of living. Ensure that ODSP rates reflect average market rates and are adjusted annually for inflation, so that the lifelong and unique needs of Ontarians with deafblindness can be met.

⁶ In from the Margins, Part II: Reducing Barriers to Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion, Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, June 2013, p 95.
http://www.cwpcsp.ca/resources/sites/default/files/resources/In%20from%20the%20Margins%20Part%20II_Reducing%20Social%20Exclusion%20and%20Social%20Cohesion_Senate%20Committee_June%202013.pdf

⁷Disabling the Disability Mindset, Sherri Torjman, The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2014

⁸ http://martinprosperity.org/media/ReleasingConstraintsMPI_June11.pdf, p 47



CONCLUSION

The quality and strength of society is measured by the treatment of our most vulnerable.

Individuals with congenital deafblindness are arguably among the most vulnerable citizens in Ontario - this is supported by the Ministry of Community and Social Services' Deafblind Research Project.

Intervenor services are vital for adults who are deafblind, enabling them to communicate, gain life skills and nurture relationships to prevent isolation.

While we understand the fiscal constraints that the Government of Ontario is faced with in these economic times, we strongly urge the Ministry of Community and Social Services to provide additional resources to adequately serve all Ontarians who are deafblind.

We're doing our part to ensure efficiency in service delivery, optimizing value for money invested by government.

We encourage the Government of Ontario's to follow through on the commitment articulated in the 2015 - 2016 Budget to *"address the needs of Ontarians now – and to build Ontario up – for a strong and prosperous future."*



BACKGROUND

Deafblindness – A Unique Disability

- Deafblindness is a complex disability that combines varying degrees of both hearing and visual loss, making it unique to each individual and requiring specialized support.
- Although a person who is deafblind may not be completely deaf or completely blind, they do not have enough of either sense to navigate their environment independently.
- Individuals who are deafblind have both hearing and vision impairment that is severe enough to affect communication, mobility and access to information and the environment.

The People We Support

- For over 25 years, DeafBlind Ontario Services has been enriching the lives of individuals who are deaf and blind, one touch at a time.
- DeafBlind Ontario Services is a not-for-profit organization that helps individuals who are deafblind increase their independence and improve their quality of life through specialized services.
- Individuals who are deafblind have the capacity to build their life skills, gain independence and contribute to the greater community with the support of specially trained Intervenors who use the sense of touch to help them communicate, and specialized housing that caters to their unique needs.

Intervenors – A Specialized Profession

- Intervenors are specially trained professionals who act as the “eyes” and “ears” of the individual who is deafblind through the sense of touch.
- The philosophy of Intervenors is “Do with, not for”. They work with individuals who are deafblind, helping them learn through experience, empowering them to make informed decisions and be active participants in all areas of their lives.
- By building a bond of trust, Intervenors use communication and active engagement that opens new doors of opportunity for individuals who are deafblind. This enables them to interact with the world around them and achieve as much independence as possible, to enjoy and embrace life’s journey.



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Intervenor Services

- Since every individual who is deafblind has a varying degree of sensory loss, they will have their own unique, individual way of communicating: smartphones, tablets and computers, various forms of sign language, braille, or large print.
- The world of an individual who is deafblind extends only as far as their reach. Through the specialized touch of professional Intervenorers, the world is brought closer to them.

MISSION STATEMENT

DeafBlind Ontario Services supports individuals who are deafblind to live and thrive within the community.

VISION STATEMENT

Enriching lives one touch at a time.