

Student Working Paper Series: No. 2025 - 001

Disability and Poverty:

Thriving under the Ontario 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy and Beyond



This Student Working Paper is part of the
Thriving vs. Surviving: Bridging Gaps in Canadian Disability Supports

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Purpose and Problem

Ontario Residents with disabilities have been a priority group for the province's employment assistance and social programs. The 2020-2025 Poverty Reduction Strategy (MCCSS, 2025a) set a goal to transition 60,000 people annually from social assistance programs, such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW), into employment. As of 2023-2024, the population split among these programs is a 60-40 split where 368,052 individual and family applicants are on ODSP and 245,246 applicants are on Ontario Works and may not have a disability. These numbers do not account for children dependent on families within either program (Maytree, 2025). The 2019 baseline and the 2024 outcome demonstrate the strategy has not achieved the intended outcome of transitioning more than 35,000 people from these programs into employment each year. The efforts taken by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD), and Service System Managers (SSMs), non-profit organizations who provide training and employment supports, and those persons with disabilities seeking suitable employment have not increased the number of people leaving social assistance programs for employment. The employment conditions best suited to serve the long-term careers and sustainability of people with disabilities are those with flexible hours in recognition, inclusive work cultures, and deliberate structures to serve skill development for the worker living with disabilities. These are necessary employment conditions because people with disabilities have varying energy levels and need time off for medical appointments, need to feel comfortable discussing their capacities and limitations within operational meetings, and need support to plan their personal growth (Buettgen & Klassen, 2020; Corbière et al., 2019; Gatto et al., 2021; Lysaght et al., 2018; Lysaght et al., 2024). The MCCSS should enable employment that is expected to be suitable for people with disabilities as a key part of their 2026-2030 poverty reduction strategy, serving as a plausible and effective strategy to support an integrative multi-step process to transition people with disabilities into thriving careers.

People who experience social barriers and marginalizing conditions experience deeper and more widespread poverty than non-marginalized counterparts. Based on the market-based measure of poverty, which is established from collecting prices of necessities, goods and services such as food, clothing, transportation, and shelter (Gustajtis & Heisz, 2023), the annual income

threshold to be above the poverty line varies by population density in Ontario, but ranges from \$49,691 to \$58,659 in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2025a). From one 2023 estimate, people with disabilities in Ontario are 55.4 percent more likely to be in poverty compared to counterparts without disabilities. People with disabilities have a poverty rate of 14.6 percent while people without disabilities have a poverty rate of 9.4 percent, as measured by the Market-Basket Measure (White, 2025). Ontario residents with disabilities face twofold barriers to overcoming poverty and achieving thriving: high barriers to employment and insufficient resources to overcome those barriers and sustain long-term employment participation. People with disabilities have workplace needs, ranging from dexterity and mobility capacities to strains on their regular attention from anxious and depressive responses to stressful settings. But accommodations through technologies and other negotiated arrangements enable residents in Ontario with diverse abilities to make contributions to workplaces and achieve economic independence (Hossain, Tompa, & Gewurtz, 2021; Lindsay & Ahmed, 2021). These are conditions where an individual worker, an individual employer or manager, and widely available accommodations materials or technologies are coordinated for a positive benefit.

Increasing the breadth of support to people with disabilities requires a dynamic approach to the labour market as a system. The current employment market does not facilitate a clear transition from the social assistance program of ODSP into employment because the available support enables highly driven individuals to experience economic growth and control their experience of well-being. These are not situations that are experienced across the provincial labour market. A more comprehensive strategy to transition people with disabilities into full-time and permanent employment would recognize that social groups are not going to be universally supported by assistive technology and individual supportive choices alone. Challenges to acquire resources for labour market and employment growth need to go beyond abilities of one determined client. The barriers that people with disabilities face are compounded by comorbidities and varied challenging circumstances, which expand the affordability struggles that affect all residents of Ontario. People with mobility, dexterity, and vision related disabilities need higher incomes to pay for home and vehicle modifications, housekeeping and laundry services, specialized psychiatric, accommodated fitness, physiotherapy, and pharmaceutical care services (Yin et al., 2024).

This is where community organizations and non-profits are important in helping people with disabilities living below the market based poverty line. These organizations offer services to people with disabilities and people in poverty who require resources and services engagement to more effectively participate in their communities. These sectors are also settings where people with a heterogeneous skillset can find employment suitable to their strengths and capabilities. To increase the leadership of the Government of Ontario and reach their 2020 goal of transitioning 60,000 clients from social assistance to employment, the province should prioritize community organizations and non-profit sectors as high demand employment sectors. The MCCSS (2025a) identifies construction, manufacturing, and health care as high demand employment sectors. These three currently prioritized work sectors offer a restrictive range of skill, an exclusionary perspective of valued work, and lack the stability to offer long-term stable employment.

Facilitating the transfer of people with disabilities from ODSP into employment with broad options for employment skills and for workplace settings is an aspirational policy action to ensure this population experiences well-being benefits of enjoyment, belonging, and purpose (Lee, Kubzansky & VanderWeele, 2021). The Canadian Excellence Research Chair in Health, Equity, and Community Wellbeing (CERC-HECW) advocates for improving the employment conditions of people with disabilities in Ontario, alleviating poverty, and thriving in physical, emotional, and social health. To this end, this working paper aims to make policy recommendations for the 2026-2030 poverty reduction strategy, which is currently under development with the lead of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and the collaboration across members of private, public, and non-profit sectors.

Circumstances of People in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

The overlapping experience of disability and poverty affects people across Ontario. From a survey conducted in 2020 and 2021, respondents with disabilities or chronic health conditions identified “financial strain” as their primary source of stress (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2024). To address this compounding challenge people with disabilities face, the Government of Ontario developed the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The ODSP is a registry which

provides monthly payments up to \$1,408 for a single person and more for families with dependent children (MCCSS, 2025c). The program exists to support people in Ontario with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and people who receive retirement benefits but do not own other assets (MCCSS, 2023a). From 567 questionnaires with young adults who use homeless shelter services in Hamilton, Niagara, and Toronto regions conducted in 2016-2017, 16.8 percent of these homeless participants are receiving monthly income from ODSP (Collins & Schormans, 2023). Since 2008, the use of ODSP has increased. The fastest growing segments of ODSP clients are people with mental illnesses (Zhang, 2025). The most substantial rise in ODSP use has been in small to medium sized cities including Belleville, Barrie, Cambridge-Waterloo, Peterborough, Guelph, St. Catharines–Niagara, and Windsor. While Ottawa and Toronto did not have significant changes in ODSP use (Zhang, 2025).

While ODSP provides short term financial relief to the eligible population, it is limited in its amount to ensure thriving of disability communities. The maximum annual amount that a person on ODSP can receive in a year is \$16,896, which is far short of the Market Basket Measure of poverty in Ontario with the range of \$49,691-\$58,659 (MCCSS, 2025c; Statistics Canada, 2025a). If an ODSP client is working a waged job, then every dollar they earn from waged work is deducted from their monthly social assistance benefit. The ODSP client who is living anywhere in the province is living in poverty, which demonstrates that the area of residence does extend the beneficial support of the monthly \$1,408 social assistance payment. They live at a third of the poverty level even with ODSP, no matter where they live, whether in rural communities, small towns, or large cities such as Toronto (Figure 1).

People with disabilities are a third of people who use food banks in Ontario, which demonstrates that the ODSP benefit and \$1,000 of earned income before the clawback is inadequate (Ozga & Smith, 2023). Ontario residents with ODSP as their primary income sometimes participate in an informal cash work arrangement so that they can earn an income that they do not report out of concern of a monthly payment clawback. This is a prohibited practice for people within the ODSP program however program clients find that they cannot survive without breaking the income reporting rules (Lahey et al., 2021).

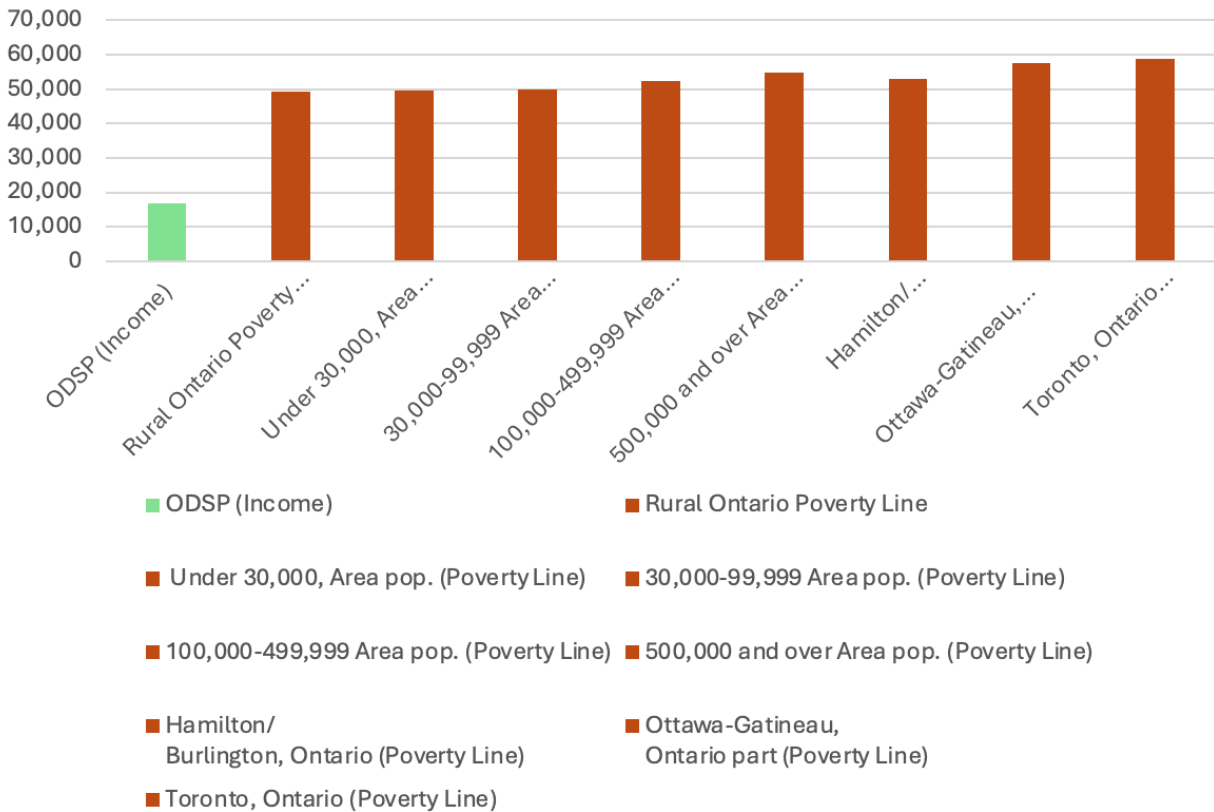


Figure 1. Income and income required to meet the poverty threshold (Market Basket Measure) (Statistics Canada, 2025a; Yin et al., 2024).

To address this shortfall, the Government of Ontario announced an increase of 2.8 percent to ODSP set to start in July 2025, the time of writing of this report (MCCSS, 2025c). However, this incremental increase does not meet the needs of people with disabilities to thrive. Addressing this income gap, borrowing from the goal of the 2020-2025 poverty reduction strategy, needs to be resolved primarily through acquiring employment, and particularly acquiring employment in identified high-demand employment sectors of construction, health care, and manufacturing.

Current Actions of the Government of Ontario to Address Poverty and Unemployment Among People with Disabilities

The province is committed to continuously improving services and supports to aid people with disabilities. There is strong interest in removing barriers to employment so that people with disabilities can earn higher incomes and reach independence, which are conditions associated with thriving. The Government of Ontario, following the Poverty Reduction Act (2009) created five year strategic plans for poverty reduction. The Poverty Reduction Strategy 2020-2025 was introduced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks of the loss of employment across the province. The goal of this strategy was to set the province in a position to “recover and thrive.” The Government of Ontario understands that the systems people live with do not interact independently or in silos. Instead, the economic, social, and health systems interact in people’s lived experiences (MCCSS, 2025a). The services aim to support overlapping and compounding needs of people who face barriers to employment. Provincially funded services are mandated to offer employment training and services integration, wraparound support, and other emergency services to develop holistic connections between community services, public health, and future employment (MCCSS, 2025b). The support the province is offering to people with disabilities living in poverty includes direct financial benefits and tax credits for child care, such as the Child Care Expense Deduction and the Ontario Child Tax Credit.

Within the MCCSS Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) offices, the Passport program provides funding for community and mentoring support to enable people with developmental disabilities to engage in thriving activities in their communities (MCCSS, 2022a). Additionally, the Skills Development Fund is supporting non-profit organizations and colleges to develop in-demand skills training, employment counselling, job coaching, hands-on training, and mental health services in order to prepare people with disabilities for the labour market (MLITSD, 2023). One unique Service System Management model run by the Government of Ontario, through coordination with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), which administers ODSP with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills

Development (MLITSD). It offers work-focused training programs and funding to encourage workplaces to join community specific combined services through non-government partnerships. The Government of Ontario is in the process of merging social assistance programs like ODSP into employment counselling and training programs by coordinating with recently appointed Service System Managers (SSMs), which can be municipalities, private sector for-profit organizations, non-profit organizations, Indigenous organizations, or colleges. SSMs are in a collaborative and partner position with both the MCCSS and the MLITSD to coordinate social assistance payments and employment services (MLITSD, 2024a). This is part of an ongoing process of an integrated employment services plan to streamline people on ODSP into meaningful employment (MLITSD, 2022b). SSMs make contractual agreements to manage and ensure services and gift card funding are moved from the Government of Ontario to clients who need social assistance and employment services (MLITSD, 2022a). Merging employment training and counselling services with social assistance through SSMs has been a priority action for the 2020-2025 poverty reduction strategy for the anticipated outcome of placing people with disabilities on ODSP from social assistance into suitable employment.

The priorities of employment fit within a broader public strategy to transform sectors of the province to be resilient to ongoing economic challenges. The 2024 Annual Report for the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which tracks the province's progress, identifies high-demand employment sectors: manufacturing, construction, and health care (MCCSS, 2025b). The province is funding non-profit organizations who act in the sector of shelter, counselling, and housing, and children's summer camp organizations which support varied material and social needs of communities (MTCG, 2025). The province uses language of "integrated services" to describe a goal of connecting people with disabilities to appropriate service providers so that the client can achieve well-being outcomes of "thriving" and "financial independence." The immediate evaluation of the first stages of SSM management was conducted by the consulting firm Goss Gilroy Inc. and CCI Research (2023) through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups of social service professionals and their clients, including those with disabilities on ODSP. This evaluation found that clients on ODSP who engage with SSMs feel misunderstood and ignored. Furthermore, the SSM caseworkers who interacted with various clients receiving social assistance payments and seeking employment were perceived as "insensitive" and

“intrusive” when discussing the complex lived circumstances of these Ontario residents (White & DeBellonia, 2024).

The participation that people on ODSP have with employment services, despite the shortcomings of those caseworkers, demonstrates intention and effort on the part of Ontario residents with disabilities who are interested in joining the labour market. This is an important goal by recognizing that many recipients of ODSP aspired to leave the program for employment. “Recipients who have managed to stay off ODSP described the need to ‘thrive’ not just ‘survive.’ With this mindset, they found the fortitude to set long-term goals and the steadfastness to see them to fruition.” (Lahey et al., 2021, p. 186).

While there are people with disabilities in Ontario with stable employment and career successes, there are also people with disabilities entrenched in deep poverty and health-threatening precarity. The disparate outcomes call attention to the potential for all people with disabilities to be able to reach a well-being outcome of joy, autonomy, accomplishment, and belonging within a workplace or community, with adequate systemic assistance. Facilitating a work culture in Ontario which serves people with disabilities calls for coordinated efforts across stakeholders. To connect people with disabilities to employment, for employers to develop suitable working conditions for people with disabilities, and for the Government of Ontario to support working people in a volatile macro-economic situation. Unfortunately, the services have not been moving clients off social assistance, such as ODSP, at any rate beyond the 2019 base number (MCCSS, 2025b). People with disabilities in Ontario are eager to engage with caseworker social service professionals for constructive feedback, continue to need income support through ODSP, and are optimistic about reaching well-being outcomes from suitable employment opportunities.

The Three “High-Demand” Employment Sectors and Current Labour Market Conditions for People With Disabilities

There are varied barriers to employment which affect people with disabilities. People with disabilities in Canada have an unemployment rate of 7.6 percent compared to an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent for people without disabilities, according to the June 2023 Labour Force Participation survey. This is a monthly survey which collects employment data across Canada to identify the employment participation rate as well as other workforce demographic information. The data from this survey demonstrates that a quarter of those who retire choose to retire because of issues related to health and disabilities (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). The provincial investments in job and skills training aim to transfer people on ODSP into construction, manufacturing, and health care sectors (MCCSS, 2025b). Employment in these sectors is a narrow target and is exclusionary to the sustainable working conditions for people with disabilities.

Manufacturing, construction, and health care have the highest frequency of workplace critical injury events, with a cumulative 2618 injury events in 2022 (MLITSD, 2024b). 6 percent of workers who report serious injuries at work do not recover sufficiently to return to work within an 18 month period and 10 percent of these workers permanently retire from the labour market after their injury (Mustard et al., 2021). 24.9 percent of people who experienced injuries at work report that they have limitations on their movement or dexterity 18 months after the injury (Dobson et al., 2022). Construction and manufacturing are sites where people acquire disabilities from the injuries they experience on the job. At present 16.7 percent of Canadian residents with a disability have a pain-related disability, and 10.6 of Canadian residents with a disability have a mobility disability (Statistics Canada, 2024). These groups would rarely be able to experience well-being emotions of accomplishment in work settings which cannot match their abilities. The roles which are at risk of workplace critical injury are physically demanding roles. These roles do not typically include accommodations based on physical ability (C.D. Howe Institute, 2025). Furthermore, the construction sector is facing anticipated declines in

employment. As of 2024 construction and manufacturing have been sectors with more layoffs than hiring, as factories close and housing starts have been in decline (FAOO, 2025). There is an anticipated loss of 41,000 construction jobs in the Greater Toronto Area before the end of 2027 (BILD, 2025).

The MLITSD investments in Employment Ontario and Integrated Skills Development programs seek to train and provide certifications for people with disabilities to leave poverty through employment in the manufacturing sector. Patrick Cooper-McCann and Andrew Guinn (2024) provide a comprehensive history of the automotive manufacturing sector in Ontario. Automotive manufacturing has been a highly valued economic sector for the past century, but in particular after the 1965 Canada-United States Automotive Products Agreement, which was a precursor to the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, North American Free Trade Agreement, and the current Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement. The political emphasis on maintaining a strong federal investment stake on this manufacturing sector in order to maintain technological innovation and stable employment. However, there has been a recession in manufacturing every decade since the 1965 agreement. There are periods of years of vacant or underutilised factories and persistent unemployment in metropolitan areas such as Barrie, Oshawa, and Windsor-Essex (Cooper-McCann & Guinn, 2024). The automotive manufacturing sector continues to be an unstable employment sector with persistent anxieties of factory layoffs and closures (Yates & Holmes, 2019; Beatty, 2025). The Census Metropolitan Areas which have the most significant share of their employment through automotive and adjacent manufacturing also have rising rates of people with disabilities who are unemployed (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). The people who are laid off who have sector specific skills in technician or industrial painting may not find similar employment within their metropolitan area. Investing in the training and certification for people to work in this sector takes the risk of the worker facing a probable layoff at an uncertain date. 16.7 percent of Canadian residents with a disability have a pain related disability and 5 percent of Canadian residents with a disability have a dexterity disability (Statistics Canada, 2024). This is a population who is at risk of having exacerbated harmful symptoms from workplace injuries and physical challenges to performing manufacturing work. Skilled trades in manufacturing is not a suitable work environment for a substantial number of people with disabilities in Ontario.

This is a population that will be challenged to fit into the physical demands of construction and manufacturing roles. The 2026-2030 poverty reduction strategy will be developing policies and programs to support the employment of Ontario residents facing poverty, especially those with disabilities. The whole province is expected to experience a recession in the labour market for construction and manufacturing. The employment transition targets from ODSP to employment were not met during the 2020-2025 period when construction and manufacturing were labeled as 2 of the prioritized “high-demand” sectors. The Government of Ontario may be disappointed that the ODSP clients were not eager or able to join these skilled trades sectors. The real risk of exacerbating existing chronic pain, dexterity, or mobility disabilities, and the perceived risk of acquiring new disabilities from workplace injuries may have contributed to how some people with disabilities avoided or were prevented from joining these sectors.

Emergency health care is characterized as a hostile work setting. By appearance this sector seems to be less physically demanding than construction and manufacturing. However people who work in this sector are at risk of exacerbating or acquiring mental health related disabilities. Nurses claim that they have developed anxious and depressive disorders after starting the profession, symptoms of chronic exhaustion, and that the hospital workplace setting makes them vulnerable to violence without protection from hostile patients (Brophy et al., 2024). 54 percent of Registered Practical Nurses surveyed by the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario report experiencing violence in the 2024. The people who commit violence against nurses are primarily patients and patients’ families, but also coworkers, supervisors, and managers (WeRPN, 2025). Among those who intended to leave the nursing profession, 44 percent claim they are leaving because of concern over workplace violence (WeRPN, 2025). 10.4 percent of Canadian residents with a disability have a mental health related disability (Statistics Canada, 2024). These people are unlikely to persist through years or decades in a hostile stress-inducing work environment. The health care sector is a challenging sector to try to connect people with disabilities for the outcome of a thriving career.

The “high-demand” sectors are not suitable work environments for people with disabilities. Across sectors the workplaces which are not suitable to people with disabilities have rigid schedules, insufficient funding for workplace assistive devices or specialized protective

equipment, and hostile work cultures (Gato et al., 2021; Latimer et al., 2020; Buettgen & Klassen, 2020). There are people with disabilities in Ontario who exercise personal resources to cope with financial and employment uncertainty. But this individualistic solution can be only applied to people who have access to adequate resources or have less severe disabilities. From a nationally representative survey of people with disabilities, 81 percent of people with less severe disabilities reported that they expected their financial circumstances to remain stable from 2020 to 2021. In the same study, a follow-up interview with a participant who self-reported anxiety and phobia based mental illnesses, mentioned that they were able to maintain stable employment because they work in public administration where their position has job security and person-centered sustainable working conditions (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2023). Interview participants of a study claimed that they were able to transition from ODSP into higher income employment through their own personal resources. These resources included personal networks and individual drive to acquire employment (Lahey et al., 2021). While some people have resources to overcome the challenges on the individual level, nearly half of people with disabilities may need greater or systemic support. In the previously mentioned national survey, 46 percent of respondents with severe disabilities, especially those who had comorbid conditions, expected their financial situations to become worse over the 2020-2021 period (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2023). From surveys among youth who use homeless shelter services, half self-reported a depressive or anxiety disorder, more than a third reported a learning difficulty or ADD/ADHD, and more than 10 percent identify as having a developmental, intellectual, or physical disability (Collins & Schorman, 2023).

When the 2020-2025 poverty reduction strategy began, nearly half of people with disabilities reported to be at risk of losing financial stability, while more than half had the employment stability to aspire to well-being conditions, including the sense of achievement and belonging (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2023). These circumstances call for a more significant leadership from the MCCSS and the MLITSD to change the living circumstances of the residents with disabilities, who are already living in or are at risk of deep poverty. The forthcoming 2026-2030 Poverty Reduction Strategy brings an opportunity to address this bifurcation and ensure that all people with disabilities in Ontario have an opportunity to thrive.

Policy Options

The Government of Ontario has the opportunity to create a new approach to service delivery and support for people with disabilities to live free from the stress of poverty and be adequately supported to achieve employment. The suitable policy response would address financial and material dimensions of poverty, but also facilitate the well-being of Ontario residents with disability due to critical wellbeing indicators such as personal enjoyment, achievement, and sense of belonging for people with disabilities.

The first policy recommendation is the Strengthening Capacity Initiative in Ontario Now (SCION). This initiative would include adding service staff, communications and evaluation of programs, and communicative feedback with current ODSP clients. This policy would also seek to add people with disabilities not yet connected to ODSP or a Developmental Services Ontario office. This initiative would recognize that even when people with disabilities are employed and independent, they may not have all the resources they need for professional or career growth, which is essential for thriving. The Government of Ontario has a goal of shifting people with disabilities who are on ODSP from receiving social assistance benefits into paid employment.

The desired outcome is for an Ontario resident with disabilities who develops a career to never use ODSP benefits again. The ideal scenario from the provincial government's perspective is that the person with disabilities would earn above-poverty levels of income and would have an employer health, dental, and prescription insurance plan which enables the Ontario resident to thrive. In the 2020-2025 poverty reduction strategy this is presented as a black and white scenario as well as a situation where ODSP benefits are temporary while paid employment can be permanent until retirement. The lived reality of people with disabilities in Ontario is more dynamic because some employment situations are unsustainable for people with disabilities for a prolonged period of time. Employers offer varied insurance benefits which may not be as comprehensive as the insurance benefits from ODSP, and a person with disabilities has to choose between staying with an employer and accepting their insurance plan or leaving an employer for the provincial social assistance plan (Jetha et al., 2023; MCCSS, 2022). The Government of Ontario may create a policy response where the MCCSS and the MLITSD recognize that the working person with disabilities needs continuous support to stay competitive and engaged in the

challenges of a modern labour market. People with disabilities may seek employment opportunities and work to maintain those positions and still require continuous service and funding from ODSP and their local Developmental Services Ontario offices to maintain balance and flexibility with fluctuating employment situations.

In an effort to respond to the missed service delivery, the MCCSS can invest in adding caseworkers and internal researchers who can maintain frequent communication with the clients for feedback and goal setting. The motivation for this policy option is to ensure that there is active societal participation and engagement with the local communities to develop a sense of belonging. A better resourced ODSP caseworker may be able to effectively support a client to achieve these outcomes. Australia, Denmark, and the Netherlands are countries where the social assistance programs anticipate maintaining long relationships with their clients for the purpose of offering tailored and targeted support where needed and encourage the most voluntary or employment participation from the client (Mahboubi & Ragab, 2020). A further step in developing this option would be to create and review frequent short surveys or facilitate focus groups with clients to identify and address pressing issues which face them. Treating the residents of Ontario and the various supports the ODSP offers as a “Scion” or respected heir to the province invites positive feelings towards participation. The feelings of belonging and affirmation from a contribution encourage the well-being of ODSP clients to support their thriving as citizens and heirs to the province.

The second policy recommendation is the SSMENT (Service Sector Management Engaged Nurturing Trusts) Grant. This policy option is a monthly grant offered to people on ODSP who are seeking long-term Employment Ontario services within one of the Service Sector Management (SSM) organizations in Ontario. The funding of the grant would come from the Government of Ontario and would be delivered to ODSP clients who use Employment Ontario services. The recruitment of persons with disabilities and sum total of the grant can be administered by the SSM. The SSM is in the position of developing the criteria of the amount to offer to their clients. Statistics Canada (2025b) offers estimates of the poverty level income in Ontario. This ranges from \$49,691 to \$58,659 depending primarily on location. SSM fulfilling the role of maintaining community partnerships while frequently using data on provincial clients is in an ideal position to identify the poverty level by a market based measure within a catchment

area. In the operation of distributing these grants the SSM may distribute them monthly conditional to participants taking on training, workshops, counselling, and other career services from the Employment Ontario services that SSM manages. Employment Ontario programs such as Better Jobs Ontario currently offer living allowances of more than \$2000 a month or \$26,000 a year for a period of up to two years while in a single training program (MLITSD, 2025). The SSMENT Grant for a person with disabilities in the Better Jobs Ontario program could be an additional \$8,795 - \$15,763 or more depending on the SSM's calculation of the regional poverty rate. A grant which closes the gap of the \$16,896 which a single person on ODSP receives to a minimum within the catchment area. The range of these grants for people with disabilities who are not in the Better Jobs Ontario program but who use other Employment Ontario services regularly could be between \$32,795 and \$41,763 annually in addition to depending on the catchment area of the SSM and client.

Developing the SSMENT Grant would standardize the operations of the SSMs managing Employment Ontario programs and contribute to the employment and well-being of persons with disabilities in Ontario. SSMs currently have funding to distribute gift cards for workplace necessities from retail stores or gasoline to support the client's transportation to employment services or worksites. There is also an auditing requirement for each staff person who distributes a gift card and each Employment Ontario client who receives a gift card (MLITSD, 2024a). This is an administrative burden which does not serve the efficiency of managing employment services and this does not serve the dignity or positive self-concept of the person with disabilities who faces the stigma that they cannot be trusted to prepare for their own employment opportunities. Furthermore, interviews with hiring managers who employ people with disabilities across Canada report that these organizations find their operations are more effective when the new employee with disabilities has the resources to provide their own retail personal protective equipment or work specific clothing before starting the employment contact (Latimer et al., 2020). The SSMENT Grant ensures that people with disabilities who are not employed but who are making a recorded good-faith effort to enter the labour market are able to live above the poverty threshold and that they have autonomy and dignity to develop their own well-being.

A limitation of both of these policy options is that they focus on serving persons with disabilities as individuals who can thrive in the existing labour market in Ontario without

questioning if the labour market itself is suitable or hostile to people with disabilities. Enhancing the ODSP program with more caseworkers and supportive data analysts, or including more living allowance funding for people with disabilities participating in Employment Ontario programs can help transition people into the existing high-demand sectors. However the investment into the training and coordination to bring people with disabilities into these sectors may be underutilized if the employer business closes and there is not a similar business hiring the skilled profession within a local metropolitan area. When a factory which provides specialized automotive parts and employs specialists with niche certifications closes then the skilled trades people often have to retrain for entirely different sectors before they can find employment again. As there are economic concerns that the construction and manufacturing sectors will experience contractions with business closures for the rest of the 2020s decade, the transformational effort that the Government of Ontario can invest in would pivot financial and regulatory resources to encourage a broader concept of work and transferable skills.

Key Recommendation - Working With Your Neighbours (Primary Support for the Community and Non-Profit Service Sector).

The key recommendation from this working paper is to set the community organizations and non-profits as a priority employment sector. This recommendation builds on the original partner from the conceptualization of the poverty reduction strategy. The Poverty Reduction Act (2009) identifies the third sector of non-profit, charitable and voluntary organizations as integral to strengthening communities and making a positive contribution to the economy. Putting investment into community organizations and non-profits on a similar magnitude as the provincial investments in construction, manufacturing, and health care opens the funding for skills training and education purposes to expand into local service and administrative needs for public benefit corporations. The Government of Ontario since 2018 has been funding Employment Ontario training programs which support skilled trades under the Building Opportunities in Skilled Trades Act (2021). Services supported by this legislation include the Skills Development Fund to address groups in Ontario such as residents with disabilities and

barriers to their training or employment in skilled trades. The purpose of the investment into community organizations and non-profits for skilled training is to train a workforce for construction and manufacturing roles. As these roles are not always sustainable for the employment of persons with disabilities, this population deserves training services for roles which are more suitable to their working capacities. Treating community organizations and non-profits as a high priority employment sector recognizes and invests in work which is suitable to people with disabilities.

There is high interest among people with disabilities to participate in the workforce and develop careers. There are people in Ontario with spinal cord injuries, cerebral palsy, or dyslexia who are able to attain leadership positions in organizations (Samosh, 2021). Their sustained commitment to workplaces is restricted by social barriers in these environments. There are stigmatizing work cultures and hostility from colleagues, even in office environments which create feelings of inaccessibility for people with disabilities (Samosh, 2021). Surveys conducted at the University of Guelph in 2019 found that students with disabilities want future workplaces which offer physical workplace and scheduling accommodations, as well as supportive work cultures (Gato et al., 2021). A welcoming and inclusive work culture is necessary for creating a workplace which accommodates people with disabilities because managers who facilitate accommodations need to know the needs of the current staff, but staff can be hesitant to disclose their disabilities because of the fear of stigma (Jetha et al., 2019). Community organizations and non-profits serving people with disabilities can offer flexible hours and medical days as needed to accommodate staff with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

Organizations can foster cultures of collaboration, mentorship, and understanding. Organizations with many resources can also offer frequent surveys with actionable feedback to ensure people with disabilities are being hired and retained (Buettgen & Klassen, 2020). Community organizations support people with disabilities by providing services as Home and Community Care Support Services. These include: physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and specialized services such as social work, nutrition, personal support services, and intravenous therapy at home. These are services which people with mental health disorders can provide the physical services of physiotherapy and facilitate the distribution or use of personal support devices because they do not have to be conducted in a fast paced and high

stress environment. People with physical limitations on movement or dexterity can provide therapy services and consultations regarding nutrition or other local services and community programs. Youth with mental health and physical disabilities in interview studies report that they want more training and education services for integrating AI and digital technology into workplaces and other products or services (Jetha et al., 2023). The Government of Ontario can fund community organizations and non-profits to provide training, education, and information about trends and services ranging from health concerns to new technologies. Investing in these organizations to provide broader services includes funding for people with disabilities to develop careers with these accessible work activities.

The Government of Ontario recognizes the importance of community organizations and non-profits for the contribution to localities. The province works with this sector to provide employment training and public health support. The Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility is providing funding to nonprofit organizations across the province to provide information packages, training programs, and other awareness tools to support people with disabilities entering the workforce (MSAA, 2024, May 21). Community organizations also face frequent layoffs because the funding model is precarious.

However, the ecosystem in the nonprofit sector is collaborative where organizations support the employment of collaborating partners, and organizations support professional transferable skill development for their current staff (Fanelli et al., 2017). People who develop administrative, communication, data analysis, and financial reporting skills working for a community organization have a transferable skill for a wide range of employers within any metropolitan area. People laid off from one community organization have network contacts in adjacent organizations who may be able to provide referrals or direct employment (Fanelli et al., 2017). There is an ecosystem that encourages horizontal and upward mobility. This is the employment sector that supports employment for people with disabilities because the trends within the sector are to nurture the transferable skill growth of the staff and to encourage a whole career working for different organizations staying within local communities. The 2026-2030 period is going to face layoffs in construction and manufacturing from complex multifaceted causes. The Government of Ontario should recognize a broad range of work activities and invest in these to ensure a broad range of people, including people with disabilities who face barriers to

the current labour market, can access services to enable the thriving of people with disabilities and alleviation of poverty through employment in Ontario.

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