



United Way

July 5, 2022

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier,

Congratulations on your re-election as the Premier of Ontario. Four years ago, it would have been difficult to imagine the tremendous responsibility government would need to shoulder to lead Ontarians through a global pandemic and two of the most challenging years in our province's history. We know our shared goal of a prosperous Ontario is intrinsically linked to our social infrastructure which proved to be essential in meeting the needs of disadvantaged Ontarians during the pandemic, and is critical now in the face of the current affordability crisis across the province. Taking up leadership for the next four years means delivering concrete solutions to the unignorable hurdles to a strong and vibrant economy for all – homelessness, precarious work and inadequate income, food insecurity, and mental health challenges – with public policies and programs that enable all Ontarians to house, feed and support our families.

That is how we can strengthen Ontario and build a future where everyone has a place. And that is where United Ways, in collaboration with our community partners, can make a real contribution to government's important work. Like government, United Way has been supporting communities across the province on the frontlines of the pandemic, and for decades before that. Through shutdowns and since, United Way has been the trusted partner of governments, distributing crucial emergency funds to support those most disproportionately impacted and facing continued need – Indigenous, Black or racialized peoples, persons with disabilities, those living in low-income neighbourhoods, 2SLGBTQ+ people, women, newcomers, seniors, and people experiencing homelessness. Ontario's United Ways are working with local elected leaders, integrating our networks of agencies and cross sector partnerships to identify priorities, escalate concerns and share resources – all to bridge gaps and meet needs in real time. And we are continuing to work with municipalities to develop and deliver on the provincially mandated Community Safety and Well-being plans that are foundational to addressing so many of the issues that affect our communities.

Just like government, United Way is ready to do its best for the people of this province and we look forward to working with you to leverage the opportunities before us for the benefit of all Ontarians. In that spirit, we offer the following recommendations for our shared priorities and efforts.

Housing Security

A safe, affordable and accessible home is the first step in ensuring a stable life, foundational for people to access employment, educational opportunities, adequate food and other supports. We know the high cost of housing and energy is becoming prohibitive not just for people on a low income, but increasingly, middle income families as well. The affordable rental housing market offers few viable options – run down apartments, high utility rates and increasing rental costs. And for those on social assistance or in need of additional supports, the options are limited indeed. Stories in the news depict a broken system, where people benefiting from programs offered through one door are discharged into homelessness through another. This disconnect is our collective responsibility. We can and must do more.

The Province's approach with Coordinated Access Systems and By Name List, and efforts to introduce new funding flexibility to Service Managers through the Homelessness Prevention Program, are positive steps.

But we know much more can be accomplished if we ensure people are housed permanently. We want to work with the Government of Ontario to:

- Address Indigenous housing and homelessness in partnership with Indigenous leaders, First Nations communities, housing providers, and all levels of government.
- Expand and protect the necessary range of affordable and accessible housing options through new investment in deeply affordable housing, including social housing and rent-geared-to-income homes, and through effective rent control policies that protect affordability, in rural and urban areas.
- Increase collaboration and investment in transitional and supportive housing for people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Increase support to municipalities for investment in repair and renewal of naturally occurring existing affordable housing, including aging towers.
- Support the ongoing partnership and participation of nonprofits in the housing market, including acquisition of multi-unit residential buildings by nonprofits.

Income Security and Inclusive Employment

Rising prices and inflation, at their highest rates in the last 40 years, are part of our foreseeable future, putting additional pressures on us all. However, the rising cost of living across Ontario puts unimaginable pressures on the workforce the economy depends on. Low-income earners struggle to make ends meet, impacting individual physical and mental health outcomes, collective well-being, and regional prosperity. We know that today's minimum wage is not a living wage in any part of the province and has not kept pace with escalating expenses. The situation for those unable to work is even more dire, with social assistance rates and counterproductive claw back rules inadvertently blocking pathways to independence and effectively legislating poverty.

Over the last year, the Province has introduced promising policies that support Ontario workers – changes to labour legislation regarding temp agencies, licensing requirements and processing times for foreign credentials, and signing the \$13.2 billion child care agreement with the federal government. We trust this direction will continue and we want to work with the Government of Ontario to:

- Align Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works rates to livable levels, index them to inflation, and account for it in the coming budget.
- Elevate the minimum wage to a truly living wage so people can cover their basic expenses and participate in their communities.
- Invest in creating pathways to suitable, stable employment, including better labour market information, accessible employment training and wrap-around supports.
- Support community benefits agreements which leverage infrastructure investments to provide employment, training and apprenticeship opportunities for residents.
- Reduce precarious work conditions, extend the availability of paid sick days, and move forward promptly on childcare commitments to Ontario families.

Inclusive Communities

During the pandemic, the deep cracks in our system were laid bare for all to see. After an unprecedented spike in need for a wide range of services, now is the time to take stock of how we can support communities, neighbourhoods, families and individuals with equitable access to a robust array of social services. As we emerge from extended periods of pandemic-related isolation and brace for the [long-term mental health repercussions](#) to come, many in our community – children, youth and adults – have already fallen through the cracks, lives lost to an unprecedented number of opioid deaths across the province, personal tragedies and community crises that remain unaddressed. Our frontline partners also report increasing complexity amongst people needing social services experiencing multiple challenges of homelessness, food insecurity, mental health, and addictions resulting in calls, for example, of mayors of Ontario's largest urban centres to "[collectively raise the alarm on the need for a more robust social support system](#)".

As the government acknowledged in its 2021 Anti-Racism Strategic Plan annual progress report, against the backdrop of COVID-19, there has also been a rise in anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, and anti-Asian racism, and more work must be done to build fully inclusive communities in Ontario.

The Province has shown strong leadership in the development of Community Safety and Well-being plans and we trust the government sees value in investing in the next step of this work, through funding and implementation. We want to work with the Government of Ontario to:

- Support a wide range of wraparound services and supports including hiring mental health and addiction workers, providing harm reduction, crisis intervention and prevention services.
- Engage community residents and leaders in meaningful consultations about local challenges and solutions, addressing unique needs in rural and urban communities.
- Increase investment in anti-hate and anti-racism public education, relationship building as well as support for victims of hate, and immediate enactment of [Our London Family Act](#).
- Enable low-income households to participate in our increasingly digital world – adding phone and internet bills to utility listings for social assistance clients and partnering with social housing institutions to provide free WiFi, expanding access to a host of social services, employment and education opportunities.
- Invest in a regional rural public transportation system that contributes to climate change reduction, connects workers to job and employment opportunities, and ensures seniors, persons with disabilities and people living on low income can access healthcare services.

Support for the Sector

The community services sector is running on empty. After working flat out through the last few years to sustain Ontarians by providing critical services, we now need to replenish and sustain the sector. According to an Ontario Nonprofit Network survey, almost two thirds of nonprofits reported an increase in demand for programs and services, but half of nonprofits reported pandemic related losses in 2020/21 revenue. To manage loss in revenue, one third of nonprofits reduced hours or laid off staff.

We know that support for the sector is crucial for the many Ontarians that rely on programs and services. Ontario's nonprofit sector is also a major contributor to Ontario's economy and job creation, contributing \$65 billion to our province's GDP and employing 844,000 workers. We want to work with the Government of Ontario to:

- Provide flexible, long-term core funding so that community service providers can continue to deliver essential services and allocate resources in response to changing community needs.
- Ensure provincial funding agreements reflect the costs of doing business, including administrative costs and competitive wages that attract and retain skilled staff.
- Invest in infrastructure (e.g., technology) and capacity building to allow the sector to modernize service delivery, data collection and analysis, and impact reporting.
- Sustain innovative pandemic-era tools and collaborations, with an emphasis on coordinated and improved access to place-based mental health services and initiatives focused on underserved, equity-deserving communities.
- Work with community service stakeholders to develop and deploy an upstream strategy focused on the prevention of gender-based violence, in rural and urban settings.
- Identify and invest in new approaches to funding and delivery of services in rural communities.

We know the potential for Ontario's greatness is within our grasp but only if a bright and prosperous future is possible for each Ontarian. While everyone deserves better and to dream bigger, many need the support of their government and community to do that. Homes, stable jobs, sufficient incomes, accessible services and strong neighbourhoods are what we all need. They should be within reach – and they can be. But only if we work in a united way. And that is what our movement stands ready to accomplish, in partnership with government.

Sincerely,

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cc:

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Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance
Honourable Merrilee Fullerton, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
Honourable Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Honourable Monte McNaughton, Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development
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