

ONPHA's Analysis of the 2020 Ontario Budget: Top Five Takeaways for Community Housing

On Thursday, November 5, 2020, the Province released its much-anticipated 2020 Budget, [Ontario's Action Plan: Protect, Support, Recover](#), after delaying its expected launch in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The budget remains focused on the Province's emergency response to COVID-19, with many budget lines reiterating previous commitments made throughout the pandemic as part of [Ontario's Action Plan: Responding to COVID-19](#).

While ONPHA is disappointed that housing was not a central focus of the 2020 Budget, we understand that the Province has committed to releasing the 2021 Budget by March 31, 2021. We expect the 2021 Budget to focus more on long-term planning than this emergency response budget, and ONPHA will be preparing for upcoming engagement opportunities to continue [advocating](#) for housing to be central to economic recovery planning.

Read on for the top five takeaways from the 2020 Budget for community housing providers, staff and tenants, including opportunities for next steps in preparation for the 2021 Budget.

1. Support for social services and municipalities

One of the most critical pandemic investments for the community housing sector has been through the previously announced federal-provincial **Safe Restart Agreement, which will provide up to \$4 billion to municipalities** to maintain critical community services, address budget shortfalls and invest in transit systems. This includes **\$510 million dedicated to the Social Services Relief Fund (SSRF)**, which provides Service Managers and Indigenous Program Administrators with funding for emergency shelter responses, expanded rent support programming and long-term housing solutions.

The Province also committed **\$30 million over two years for social service providers to continue implementing infection prevention and control (IPAC)** measures. Supports are available for group homes, violence against women shelters, children's aid societies and other congregate care settings to help reduce the number and severity of COVID-19 outbreaks.

While ONPHA was pleased to see three rounds of dedicated funding available for providers through the SSRF and new funding for IPAC, we have heard directly from members that the SSRF funding has not been sufficient to meet their rapidly increasing costs, and in some cases, providers have not received any funding at all (as Service Managers have directed the majority of funding toward emergency shelter and homelessness support systems). We are also concerned that most of our members will not be eligible for the IPAC funding, which could provide critical support to help keep staff and tenants safe.



Across the community housing sector, we know that many providers continue to face cumulative rental arrears, increased costs related to unit vacancies, personal protective equipment (PPE), increased staffing, cleaning and security, backlogs of maintenance and repair work and skyrocketing insurance premiums, which will continue destabilizing the sector beyond the immediate crisis. As a result, many providers are beginning to redirect funding from capital reserves to support immediate operational challenges, severely threatening the sustainability of the sector as we enter the second wave of the pandemic and look forward for long-term planning.

As ONPHA prepares for upcoming engagement opportunities for the 2021 Budget, we continue to advocate for immediate stabilization funding for community housing providers to address the current crisis and ensure long-term sustainability and growth.

2. Support for mental health and addictions, seniors and people with disabilities

Following ONPHA's [submission](#) to the Provincial Engagement on Improving Supportive Housing, we continue to highlight the critical need for accessible, culturally-relevant, integrated supports for people with mental health and addictions challenges, seniors and people with a diverse range of disabilities and intersecting support needs.

The Province reiterated its **10-year, \$3.8 billion investment for new and expanded mental health and addictions services and programs** through Ontario's [Roadmap to Wellness](#). This includes **\$26.75 million already committed to emergency mental health and addictions responses**, plus **\$176 million to increase access to services and supports** and **\$19.25 million for post-secondary mental health supports** this year. As part of the \$3.8 billion investment, the Province also identified that funding would be available for more rent supplements for emergency short-term rentals during the second wave of COVID-19 and additional supports for Indigenous communities. ONPHA will be following up with the Province to determine more details about these supports, including funding allotments, timelines, accessibility and availability for community housing providers and tenants.

A number of new home and community-based supports were also announced for seniors and people with disabilities. This includes a new [Inclusive Community Grants Program](#), which will provide **municipalities and non-profit organizations with \$2 million over two years** for community supports for seniors and people with disabilities to reduce social isolation, improve safety and security and increase labour force participation. Grants could go toward the development of accessible housing units (however there is a very short timeframe for applications, with a deadline of December 21, 2020). In addition, the Province committed to a new **Community Paramedicine for Long-Term Care pilot program** to help seniors age in place using a community-based healthcare model (though no funding or timelines were attached to this announcement).



The Province also announced an **additional \$5 million for the Ontario Community Support Program**, building on the \$11 million already committed to connect seniors and people with disabilities with meals, medicines and other essentials, in addition to **proposing a new Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit for 2021, which would provide up to \$2,500 for accessibility renovations** to help seniors stay in their homes longer.

While ONPHA is supportive of alternative options for seniors and people requiring a diversity of supports to remain in their homes, it is critical that these supports are sustainable, accessible and culturally-relevant, especially as diverse support needs grow and the population continues to age quickly. In addition, ongoing, sustainable investment must be targeted to create new supply of affordable and supportive housing to meet growing needs across the province.

3. Supports for individuals and families

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities, 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, low/limited-income people, people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities and seniors, in large part due to the disproportionate rates at which these communities experience poverty, homelessness and poor access to adequate and appropriate healthcare and supports.

While ONPHA continues to advocate for a targeted arrears management and/or rent relief program for unemployed and low-earning tenants, prioritizing high-risk, marginalized communities, the 2020 Budget provides minimal support for individuals and families. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services did receive a minimal budget increase, however the Province failed to provide new information on the modernization of the social assistance system, which continues to fall short in meeting individual and community needs (particularly as it relates to accessing affordable housing).

Of note is an **additional round of one-time payments through the Support for Learners initiative**, which will provide families with **\$200 per child up to 12 years old and \$250 per child and youth with special needs up to 21 years old** to assist with added COVID-19-related costs, such as technology for online learning. The Province is also investing **\$70 million over three years in the Special Services at Home program**, which supports families caring for children with development and/or physical disabilities, including autism. In addition, **\$2.5 million will go toward a new Victim Support Grant** to improve supports for survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking through partnerships between police services and community groups.

To expand employment opportunities, the Province is investing an **additional \$1.8 billion over two years through the Support for People and Jobs Fund** to respond to emerging needs, including **up to \$10 million in grants for Indigenous-owned businesses** that are ineligible for other provincial and federal COVID-19 business supports. ONPHA will be monitoring for further details about the Support



for People and Jobs Fund, however we know that individuals and families (especially those that are most marginalized) require immediate funding and supports to ensure they are supported sustainably.

4. Increased broadband and cellular infrastructure

One of the signature line items in the budget confirmed the Province's recent [infrastructure announcement](#), which commits a total of **\$1 billion toward increasing broadband and cellular access** across the province to support [Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan](#). This includes an **additional \$680 million over the next four years, \$150 million of which will go toward doubling the Improving Connectivity for Ontario program** targeted for unserved and underserved communities (e.g., in rural, remote and northern regions). However, the Province also continues to call on the federal government to increase and accelerate funding for broadband projects that will help improve internet connectivity across Ontario. (Note: the federal government recently [announced](#) an additional **\$750 million for the Universal Broadband Fund** to improve internet connectivity across the country).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (and preceding it), we have seen the critical need for internet access as an essential service for housing providers to deliver programs and services, for tenants to access critical supports, education and information and to reduce social isolation. ONPHA is pleased to see increased support for broadband and cellular access across the province, especially in rural, remote and northern regions. However, we recognize the need for ongoing, sustainable supports that ensure connectivity across the province, as well as partnerships with local communities and Indigenous partners to ensure infrastructure projects are developed and delivered in consultation with communities.

The Province also restated its recent launch of the new [COVID-19 Resilience Stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program](#), which makes **\$250 million of provincial and federal funding available to municipalities** with no local cost match required to accelerate the delivery of priority municipal infrastructure projects. However, we do not expect this funding to be available for housing and as such, ONPHA will continue to advocate for investment to stabilize, renew and grow the community housing sector as a critical element of Ontario's social infrastructure.

5. Supports for healthcare and long-term care

As we enter the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Province continues to invest in the healthcare system, making **\$6 billion in flexible funding available over the next two years, in addition to the \$2.8 billion previously announced for the [Fall Preparedness Plan for Health, Long-Term Care and Education](#)**. With significant public attention on the disproportionate rates of infection and death among long-term care residents, the Province also committed to **new long-term care**



standards over the next four years, which would increase average daily direct care to four hours per day, in addition to previous commitments of **\$1.75 billion to increase long-term care capacity and access**.

While welcome, the new long-term care standards notably lack any dedicated funding, and with a four-year timeframe, will be unable to meet the urgent needs of many residents. Moreover, we recognize that other congregate care settings (e.g., supportive housing providers, emergency shelters, etc.) are also facing capacity shortages, among many other similar issues to those in the long-term care system, but have not been prioritized for access to the same amount of funding. As critical front-line responders delivering essential services, community housing providers require access to ongoing, sustainable funding to continue keeping our communities housed safely.

Other noteworthy items

The Province reported that the **Land Transfer Tax revenue was \$420 million higher** compared to the 2020–21 First Quarter Finances due to stronger housing resales. ONPHA continues to recommend that these revenues be reallocated to the growth and preservation of the community housing sector, as retaining housing related tax revenues within the housing sector will be critical to ensuring the system's sustainability and in managing the long-term affordability of housing for all Ontarians over time.

The Province is also investing an **additional \$60 million over three years in the Black Youth Action Plan** to help support Black youth in achieving social and economic success. While welcome, Black and other racialized and marginalized communities facing disproportionate rates of COVID-19 continue to require a breadth of supports informed by community experience and expertise, including access to culturally-relevant, affordable housing, as well as critical actions by governments of all levels to dismantle systemic racism and invest sustainably and equitably in communities.

In addition, the Province is establishing the **COVID-19 Relief Fund for Francophone Non-Profit Organizations** to help support with operating costs, including preventing closures and retaining and recruiting skilled bilingual staff (however no funding was attached to this commitment). This funding may be accessible to Francophone community housing providers.

ONPHA's next steps

Recognizing that the Province will be beginning consultations for the 2021 budget shortly, ONPHA will be preparing our response and feedback to inform upcoming advocacy in collaboration with key sector partners to ensure housing is central to economic recovery planning. In doing so, we will continue advocating for:

- Immediate stabilization funding for community housing providers



- An arrears management and/or rental relief for unemployed and low-earning tenants
- Protection of existing community housing
- Investment in community housing growth
- Incentives to develop purpose-built rentals and affordable home ownership

If you have any questions about the Ontario 2020 Budget or want to share feedback to inform ONPHA's advocacy, contact policy@onpha.org