



INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE
Centre d'action pour la sécurité du revenu

Backgrounder: "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change"

A new report written by three working groups was released by the provincial government on November 2, 2017. The report is called "Income Security: A Roadmap for Change".

This is the first report in 30 years that recommends major investments in and improvements to programs that affect the lives of low-income people in Ontario. It reflects a fundamentally different approach to supports and services that puts people – and their needs and rights – at the centre of the system, with a recognition that social and economic inclusion, and not just getting a job, should be the goal. The recommendations in the Roadmap also recognize and reflect the realities of life on a low income in Ontario, whether in work or on social assistance, and respond to the differential impact that poverty has on different groups in Ontario society – particularly Indigenous peoples, but also people with disabilities, racialized communities, and other marginalized groups.

The Roadmap makes recommendations on:

- What an adequate standard of living should be for people who get income supports from benefit programs in Ontario
- How to change the social assistance system so it supports people and responds quickly and appropriately to their needs and goals
- How to make social assistance programs work better for Indigenous people in Ontario
- Improving benefits and supports that go to all low-income people in Ontario, whether they're on social assistance or not
- How to ensure the rights of First Nations to create and administer their own social programs, and the importance of providing appropriate levels of funding
- The investments that government should make immediately to help those in deepest poverty.

This backgrounder gives an overview of the report and highlights many key recommendations. Page numbers in this backgrounder refer to the pages in the Roadmap where recommendations appear.

The Roadmap is online here: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/income-security-reform>.

The government is looking for public feedback on the Roadmap between now and January 5, 2018. They intend to release an "income security strategy for Ontario" early in the new year, using the Roadmap as a guide.

It is very important for people who are interested in improving the income security and social assistance systems in Ontario to engage with the report and provide feedback on what they feel is positive about the report, what's missing, and the actions that government should take immediately. Information about the feedback process is below.

Who wrote this report?

About a year ago, the Minister of Community and Social Services asked three different working groups to give her recommendations on how to improve the income security system in Ontario.

One was made up of people with lived experience, policy experts, advocates from various community-based agencies that work with people from disadvantaged communities, social assistance administrators, and people from business. ISAC's Director of Advocacy & Legal Services was a member of this working group. A second working group represented First Nations

in Ontario, including the Chiefs of Ontario, representatives of a range of First Nations communities, and First Nations welfare and social service administrators. A third represented urban Indigenous peoples, including the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA), and the Métis Nation of Ontario. The three working groups worked separately. The Roadmap brings together all of their recommendations in one document.

Why is this report important?

The Roadmap recommends transformative change that could have positive impacts for low-income people in Ontario. It not only recommends increasing the amount, quality and kind of benefits and services that low-income people receive, but also transforming the vision for the income security system, the principles behind the provision of programs and services, and the goals and outcomes that the system should be structured to help people achieve.

The Roadmap also invites people who will be impacted into the process of change so that the new vision can actually be achieved, through co-design of programs for people with disabilities and through recognition of the inherent right of First Nations to design and deliver the programs that serve their communities. These recommendations, among others, reflects the human-rights based equity approach that the Roadmap recommends be used as the basis for change, to recognize and appropriately respond to the reality that different groups are both more likely to live in poverty and experience poverty and its effects differently.

The Roadmap rejects the framework of the current income security system in important ways. It recommends that the provincial government:

- Make a commitment that income security programs should aim to lift people out of poverty
- Create supports for low-wage workers to help them deal with the high cost of housing and extended health care coverage, like dental services and pharmacare
- Transform social assistance programs, moving them from punishment and coercion to client-centred and supportive
- Recognize the unique needs of people with disabilities through the provision of services that are based on their rights under international conventions
- Recognize the inherent jurisdiction of First Nations over the social programs that they need
- Make immediate investments in improving benefits for those who are in deepest poverty.

These recommendations provide a new, positive direction for the programs that low-income people in Ontario have struggled with for many years. The social assistance system, for example, was designed in the late 1990s to be deliberately inadequate, punitive and coercive. Ontario Works presumes that everyone is employment ready, and doesn't recognize barriers to employment such as caregiving, racism, trauma, violence and the many other factors that leave people economically and socially isolated. ODSP is very difficult to access, and makes it so hard to prove that you have a disability that getting into or back into a job becomes nearly impossible. Neither program adequately supports the individual ambitions and goals of people, whether those goals are related to work or to other kinds of activities.

The Roadmap recommends that government adopt six guiding principles as basis for change: adequacy, human rights, reconciliation, access to services, economic and social inclusion, and equity and fairness (p.62-63). It also sets out a phased ten-year plan for how change should happen, and the investments that government should make in the first three years.

What changes does the report recommend?

The Roadmap recommends a new vision for Ontario's income security system, in which:

“All individuals are treated with respect and dignity and are inspired and equipped to reach their full potential. People have equitable access to a comprehensive and accountable system of income and in-kind support that provides an adequate level of financial assistance and promotes economic and social inclusion, with particular attention to the needs and experience of Indigenous peoples” (p.69).

To achieve the new vision, the report recommends changes in five key areas:

- Making a commitment to income adequacy
- Improving the broader income security system
- Transforming the social assistance system, including a First Nations-based approach
- Providing immediate help to those in deepest poverty
- Respecting First Nations jurisdiction and ensuring adequate funding

Many of the recommendations in the Roadmap reflect demands that advocates have made over the years to fix existing programs.

a) Making a Commitment to Income Adequacy

The Roadmap recommends that government make a commitment to providing low-income people in Ontario with incomes that are adequate, by adopting a Minimum Income Standard (p.69-72). The Minimum Income Standard sets a target for the minimum amount of income that it is acceptable for people to live on.

Making a commitment to adequacy is important. Currently there is no standard for the amount of income that people should receive from income support programs, and so government has no plan for increasing benefits in any meaningful way.

The Roadmap sets the Minimum Income Standard initially at the Low Income Measure (LIM) used in the provincial government's Poverty Reduction Strategy, with 30% more for people with disabilities. The LIM is a tool that the government uses to measure whether or not people are living in “straightened circumstances” relative to other people. It is not quite the same as a “poverty line”. If your income is below the LIM number, it means your income is not adequate.

The LIM is currently about \$22,000 for a single person. For a single person with a disability, the LIM is about \$28,500. The recommendation means that the government would commit to making investments into both social assistance rates and other benefits, in order to bring everyone up at least to these amounts.

Current incomes from OW and ODSP are far below this standard. The benefit amounts given to people in the province's Basic Income Pilot Project are also below this standard. The Roadmap recommends achieving the Minimum Income Standard over ten years, through a combination of benefits and other income sources. The Minimum Income Standard would have to be adjusted for inflation over time.

The Roadmap also recommends that government create an Ontario Market Basket Measure (p.69-72). A Market Basket Measure is a tool that essentially lists and counts up the real costs of regular expenses like food, housing, clothing, transportation, communications and other items. It is then compared against people's real incomes to see whether or not incomes are enough to

pay for regular costs of living. An Ontario Market Basket Measure, particularly one that increases as costs rise, would be a more transparent way to track progress towards adequacy. The Roadmap says it could eventually replace the LIM as the Minimum Income Standard.

In other parts of the report, the Roadmap outlines changes to parts of Ontario's income security system that would help achieve income adequacy:

- A flat rate within social assistance (p.112-115)
- Increases to social assistance rates (p.124-128)
- Letting people on social assistance keep at least part of CPP-D, EI, or WSIB benefits (p.121)
- Improving income supports and benefits for children (p.79-83)
- A housing benefit that would go to all low-income people (p.74-78)
- Increases to the federal Working Income Tax Benefit (p.84-85).

Some of these recommendations are discussed further on in this backgrounder.

The Roadmap also makes recommendations for the investments that government needs to make immediately to move toward income adequacy. We discuss these recommendations below.

b) Improving the Income Security System

The Roadmap makes a number of recommendations for creating or improving benefits outside of social assistance. These benefits would help all low-income people in Ontario.

- Core health benefits (p. 86-87)
- A portable housing benefit (p.74-78)
- An assured income program for people with disabilities (p.89 – see the discussion of this recommendation later in this backgrounder)
- Benefits for children outside social assistance (p.79-81)
- An improved Working Income Tax Benefit (p.84).

It also recommends improving access to justice in tax-delivered benefit programs (p.87-88). Some key recommendations are:

i. Health benefits: Enormous changes in the labour market have meant that too many jobs are now not only precarious, with uncertain hours, low pay, and poor working conditions, but also can't be relied on to provide extended medical benefits like dental, drug and vision care. This means that many workers in Ontario don't have and can't afford to pay for these critically important health care services.

The Roadmap makes recommendations to ensure that all low-income adults receive Pharmacare, dental, vision, hearing, and medical transportation benefits, phased in over the next ten years starting with prescription drug coverage for all low-income adults (p.86-87).

ii. Portable housing benefit: The Roadmap recommends creating a new Ontario Housing Benefit to help all low-income people with the high cost of rental housing, no matter where their income comes from (social assistance, work, other benefits, etc.). This benefit would pay for a portion of the "affordability gap" between their actual rent and what an affordable rent would be relative to their income (p.74-79).

Housing is usually defined as "affordable" if it costs no more than 30% of an individual's or family's income. If rent is more than 30% of income, there is an "affordability gap" (p.77). The Roadmap recommends creating a housing benefit in the next two years that would initially cover

25% of the gap. It recommends increasing investments over time so that 35% of the gap would be covered by 2020-21 and 75% of the gap by or before 2027-28. Everyone would be eligible for a different amount, depending on their actual income and rent.

Some housing advocates have expressed concerns about housing benefits, due to the risk that it would be used as a substitute for building new or repairing existing affordable housing stock. The Roadmap stresses that a housing benefit is only one tool that government should use to help with housing affordability, and says that affordability is such an urgent issue that a housing benefit must be taken seriously (p.74). Some advocates also express concern about the impact that a housing benefit could have on the broader rental market in terms of whether or not it would drive rental costs higher and act as a subsidy to bad landlords. And the impact of a housing benefit on rent supplements and shelter allowances has not been examined. Government must take these important considerations into account when and if they move to design a housing benefit.

The Roadmap also stresses that people in First Nations communities should be eligible for the benefit, or for a similar program created by them if an alternate approach better meets their needs. It also recognizes that some low-income people own their own homes, particularly in rural areas, and recommends that government create a separate benefit that responds appropriately to their needs.

iii. Access to justice: A growing number of benefit programs outside of social assistance are delivered through the income tax system. A good example is the Canada Child Benefit, which people can get if they file their tax returns and if their income is low enough.

But delivering benefits through the tax system creates issues when a person's eligibility for a benefit is challenged by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), which oversees the income tax system. The CRA has a very cumbersome appeal process that is difficult to understand and not easy to access, and doesn't provide interim benefits while appeals are being heard.

The Roadmap recommends that a fair, transparent and efficient appeal process be created for any future benefits, like a housing benefit (p.87-88), and that the government seek advice on ways to improve the current appeal processes for tax-delivered benefits (p.88).

c) Transforming the Social Assistance System, including a First Nations-based approach

A large part of the Roadmap focuses on making the kinds of changes that would transform Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The Roadmap says that the objective is to make these programs "simpler and eliminate coercive rules and policies" and to "create an explicit focus on helping people overcome barriers to moving out of poverty and fully participating in society" (p.90). The changes include:

- Rewriting the legislation that governs the programs (p.90-92)
- Building a culture of trust, collaboration and problem solving, including fundamentally changing the role of the caseworker (p.93-102)
- Creating a flat rate structure in OW and ODSP (p.112-116)
- Keeping and improving ODSP as a separate program, while ensuring that both OW and ODSP can better support people with disabilities (p.103-108)
- Moving toward an "assured income" program for people with disabilities and away from the welfare model (108-111)
- Eliminating punitive rules and redesigning benefits to support individual employment goals (p.117-119)

- Improving income and asset rules (p.120-121)
- Keeping all targeted benefits, at least until income adequacy is achieved (p.121-123).

A separate section talks about how to change the social assistance system so that it works better for First Nations peoples (p.136-140). A number of important changes are being recommended in these sections, and we urge everyone interested in improving social assistance to review them in detail. Some key recommendations are:

i. Legislative change: Transformation of OW and ODSP can't be accomplished without rewriting the laws that govern the programs. The culture of the programs – which is currently focused on coercion, surveillance, control, and punishment – is written into the rules, and those rules are contained in laws, regulations and policies. The Roadmap clearly states that if the rules are going to change in ways that promote a culture of “respect, collaboration, support and autonomy” (p.91), then the laws, regulations and policies have to change.

The Roadmap also states that the new laws would have to explicitly recognize the authority of First Nations to opt out of rules that do not work well in their communities and to create their own models that would work better for them.

ii. Changing the culture of social assistance and improving the role of the caseworker:

The Roadmap makes a number of recommendations that would fundamentally change the focus of OW and ODSP and promote a culture of “trust, collaboration and problem-solving” (p.93-102). Recommendations include:

- Changing the system so that caseworkers don't have to be “welfare police” and instead can act as “case collaborators” to support people to solve problems and to help them navigate various systems of support (e.g., income supports, health care services, mental health treatment, childcare, etc.)
- Creating a new comprehensive assessment tool and a “triage” system that would identify people's needs right away, and connect them with the supports and services that would help them on the road toward greater economic and social inclusion – and that this tool would be based on an equity and trauma-informed approach
- Moving to a holistic, wraparound structure of person-centred supports
- Eliminating the coercive rules that punish people by reducing their benefits or kicking them off the programs when they don't or can't meet employment-related requirements
- Providing mandatory professional development and learning opportunities for caseworkers, including anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice training
- Creating provincial service quality standards and controls
- Conduct continuous service reviews and quality assessments, including culture- and gender-based analyses of programs, and provide ongoing professional development.

The recommendations in this section that would better support Indigenous peoples are:

- Requiring OW and ODSP caseworkers to spend time working in Indigenous service delivery offices to increase cultural awareness and improve ties between Indigenous and non-Indigenous delivery providers
- Making sure Indigenous people have the right to choose where their services are delivered, including in First Nations communities on reserve.

iii. Flat rate in OW and ODSP: Currently, people on OW or ODSP who rent, lease or own their own homes get two basic monthly benefits: “basic needs” and “shelter”. The “basic needs” benefit is intended for basic costs of living and the “shelter” benefit is for housing-related costs.

Currently, for example, single people on OW get \$337 in basic needs and \$384 as the maximum amount for shelter, for a total of \$721 per month. If a person's real housing costs are lower than the maximum, the benefit they get is only equal to their real costs, which means some people get less than \$721. And people on OW or ODSP who live in public housing pay a very low housing charge based on a separate "social assistance rent scale".

While it's widely recognized that these amounts are dangerously insufficient, it's not as well known that there are many people on OW and ODSP who get even less. People who are homeless, people who live in shelters and people who live in long-term care homes or certain kinds of institutions get less. For example, a single person in a "board and lodge" living situation (where they get shelter and food from the same provider) on OW gets only \$594. A person with a disability who, because of that disability, lives in a situation where meals are prepared for them gets \$881. A single person who is homeless gets only \$337 from OW. It is extremely difficult to pay for regular costs of living and impossible to find decent housing with these amounts.

The Roadmap recommends collapsing the basic needs and maximum shelter amounts in OW and ODSP into one flat rate for each program (p.112-116), so that everyone on that program would get the same amount no matter what their living situation is. Doing this would have a number of benefits. A flat rate would mean an immediate increase for everyone who now receives a lower benefit amount due to where they live, and for those whose housing costs are below the maximum monthly shelter benefit. It would also eliminate the requirement for people to report on where they live, how much their rent is, whether or not they have a roommate, and whether someone else prepares their food. This would reduce the amount of time caseworkers have to spend policing benefits and allow them to spend more time providing help and support. It could also allow people to get financial benefits from sharing accommodation, which doesn't happen now. And it would go a long way toward reducing the surveillance and intrusion that's currently built into the social assistance system.

A flat rate would also benefit other parts of the income security system. People on OW or ODSP who live in "rent-geared-to-income" housing would pay 30% of their total income instead of the reduced social assistance rate, so the social housing system would get more money from the provincial government. More funding would result in better quality housing. And people wouldn't lose out, because the other 70% of their income would be more than they get now. And this would eliminate the extremely negative impacts that people on OW or ODSP currently face when they live in social housing and have more income from work than the social assistance rent scale allows – which is that their rent goes up precipitously, from the low social assistance rent scale rate to 30% of their income. This can and does cause people to lose their housing and prevents people from working as much as they might want to.

The Roadmap recommends that couples get a rate equal to 1.5 times the Standard Flat Rate in each program, and that adult children who live with parents who are on social assistance would get an additional amount equal to 75% of the Standard Flat Rate. The Roadmap doesn't explain how these rates were decided. These rates should be examined in the context of the Roadmap's guiding principles.

iv. Improving supports for people with disabilities: The Roadmap is clear that people with disabilities must have a distinct program that supports their needs and is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Recommendations to improve ODSP (p.103-111) include:

- Keeping the current definition of disability
- Improving and streamlining the application and adjudication process
- Giving people supports they need to complete the applications
- Improving the decision-making processes within the Ministry about who qualifies as a person with a disability.

The Roadmap also recognizes that Ontario Works must be improved to better serve people with disabilities, since many people with disabilities either enter the system through OW first while trying to get onto ODSP or remain on OW for many years if they are not able to get ODSP. Many of the recommendations in the social assistance transformation sections would help to improve OW in this way.

The Roadmap also recommends that First Nations be given the ability to administer and deliver ODSP, so that people with disabilities who live in First Nations communities can get better access to the supports that ODSP provides.

v. “Assured Income” for people with disabilities: The Roadmap recommends that a new program be created over the next ten years that would move ODSP away from the current welfare-based model (p.108-111). A new “assured income” model would provide supports to people with disabilities based primarily on their incomes and not on their assets. It would be designed in ways that would make it easy to move in and out of the workforce, which would be much more responsive to the needs of people with disabilities, especially those with episodic disabilities. It would also come with a suite of caseworker services and supports.

The Roadmap doesn’t give recommendations for exactly how this program would work, but instead recommends that the government enter into a co-design process with people with disabilities to design and build the program together over time. That process would include reviewing what the impact would be of moving to a system in which eligibility would not depend on the incomes of other family members; in other words, whether to change the benefit unit to the individual instead of the family.

vi. A First Nations-based approach: One of the most important parts of the Roadmap is the recommendation to ensure that social inclusion and community engagement become stated goals of social assistance programs, which reflects the traditional approach of First Nations communities (p.136). This would broaden the focus of OW and ODSP so that these goals become just as important and valued as finding a job, and so that the system provides supports to achieve these goals.

The Roadmap makes a number of recommendations that also speak to a much more holistic approach to service provision that focuses on ensuring physical, spiritual, mental and emotional well-being (p.137-140). A whole range of services are recommended that address the real needs that people have for training and supports (e.g., literacy services, mental health referrals, life stabilization, self-employment, etc.) and that focus on the well-being of the family and the community as well as the individual.

Reshaping social assistance programs in this way is an ongoing theme of the Roadmap. The specific recommendations in this section give that theme life and structure, and a concrete vision for how social inclusion and community engagement can be supported and achieved.

vii. Other specific issues:

The Roadmap makes important recommendations about specific issues that are long-standing concerns of people on OW and ODSP. These include:

a. Targeted benefits: The Roadmap recommends that, at least until it can be demonstrated that monthly benefits cover people's real expenses (as measured using the Minimum Income Standard), no special-purpose benefits in social assistance should be eliminated (p.122-123). This would mean, for example, that those parts of the Special Diet Allowance that are intended for people who have health conditions that require a balanced and nutritious diet (like hypertension, etc.) would remain at least until such time as everyone has enough money to pay for a healthy diet. Some Special Diet Allowance amounts would remain even after adequacy is reached, because some people have other, more expensive nutritional costs related to addressing the impact of their disabilities.

The Roadmap also recommends that eligibility for the Remote Communities Allowance be expanded to better serve the needs of people in northern and remote areas, many of which are First Nations communities (p.123). The Roadmap also says funeral and burial costs should be made mandatory, and that Ontario Works discretionary benefits, which are now administered by municipalities should be redesigned and provided to the broader low-income community (p.123).

b. The definition of "spouse": OW and ODSP currently define someone as a "spouse" after only three months of living together. This means that people can lose eligibility for OW or ODSP after only three months of living with someone else, because that person's income can be included in their eligibility calculation. This rule prevents people from forming relationships given the risks involved in losing benefits and additional supports. The Roadmap recommends that the definition of "spouse" be changed to align with the *Family Law Act*, which would require three years of living together before financial obligations start (p.116). This would mean that low-income people in Ontario would live by the same support obligations as everyone else.

c. Treatment of employment-related benefits: Benefits from EI, CPP-D and WSIB, which people only receive if they have worked and paid into those programs in the past, are currently deducted dollar-for-dollar from OW and ODSP. This lack of benefit "stacking" means that people's incomes are effectively capped at the very low rates provided by OW and ODSP. The Roadmap recommends that, to help achieve income adequacy and as an initial measure, people should be allowed to keep 25% of benefits from CPP-D, EI and WSIB. It says that that amount should increase over the next five years so that people can keep the same amount of those benefits as they are able to keep when they get income from work (p.121).

The Roadmap is silent on, however, on whether or not the current earned income exemption amount should continue or be increased. Currently people are able to keep the first \$200 in a month, and 50% of any earnings thereafter. Advocates have long been calling on government to increase this amount. As part of moving toward the goal of income adequacy, government must examine how to increase the amount of income that people can keep when they work.

d. Exemption of funds intended for retirement: The Roadmap recommends that assets held in all forms of Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) and in Tax-Free Savings Accounts (TFSA) should be fully exempt (p.121). Right now, people must spend down these amounts to a certain level before they become eligible for support from OW or ODSP. Exempting these investments would mean that people would have a much better financial cushion for retirement.

e. Health benefits: The Roadmap makes a recommendation to improve existing health benefits within the social assistance system (p.86-87). People who are on social assistance have some health benefits, but access to and the quality of these benefits should be improved. The Roadmap states that all of the current mandatory health benefits (like dental care for adults) should be provided to everyone on both OW and ODSP, and that dentures should be included. The Roadmap doesn't, however, give direction to government to address the problems that people have actually accessing dental care from dentists in some regions of Ontario.

d) Immediate help for those in deepest poverty

The Roadmap makes compelling arguments about the need for urgent action to address the deep poverty that people on social assistance live with every day (p.124-125 and p.35-49). It talks about the nearly 22% rate cut of the late 1990's and the erosion in incomes that followed as inflation outpaced rate increases. According to the Roadmap, the purchasing power of people on social assistance has fallen precipitously in the last 22 years – single people on OW have \$315 per month and singles on ODSP have \$302 less per month, taking inflation into account, than they did in 1995 (p.125).

Comparing social assistance incomes to the minimum wage clearly demonstrates the urgency. The Roadmap states that the income of a single person on OW has dropped from 70% of the minimum wage in 1990 to 38% today (p.125). When the minimum wage increases to \$15 per hour, the ratio will drop again to 30%.

The Roadmap also documents the health impact of that deep poverty. The poorest 20% of the population have double the rate of diabetes and heart disease as the richest 20% (p.46). The death rate is 67% higher for men and 42% higher for women who are poor versus those who are wealthy. These impacts are greater and more disproportionately felt by Indigenous peoples, people from racialized communities, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups.

In response, the Roadmap recommends an immediate, significant increase to social assistance rates, because doing so is the simplest and most immediate way to make progress towards adequacy. The recommended increases are:

- Create a flat rate structure immediately to improve the incomes of those receiving less than the base benefit rates (see above)
- Set the OW Standard Flat Rate at \$794 / month (a 10% increase) and the ODSP Standard Flat Rate at \$1,209 / month (a 5% increase) starting in Fall 2017
- Increase the OW flat rate by 7% and the ODSP flat rate by 5% in 2018
- Increase the OW flat rate by 5% and the ODSP flat rate by 5% in 2019.

These recommendations fall short of real progress towards meeting the essential costs of living of people on social assistance. The Roadmap argues that these numbers were chosen because of the expectation that they could be implemented by the government. But even these modest increases are facing pushback, in the media and elsewhere, because of the cost. The Roadmap estimates the cost of implementing its year one recommendations (most of which would address social assistance poverty) at \$810 million (p.162). By year three, costs would be \$3.2 billion annually.

But the Roadmap also clearly outlines the costs of inaction, which are staggeringly large and have a huge toll on real people and their families, and the impacts of action, which would not only help those living in poverty but would benefit us all (p.157-163).

Everyone who cares about ending the deep poverty caused by social assistance programs will need to work together to build a broad-based movement to get the government to make the investments that need to be made. We must not only communicate the urgency of making real progress on increasing the incomes of those in deepest poverty, we must create the political will to make the needed investments.

e) Respecting First Nations jurisdiction and ensuring adequate funding

The needs of Indigenous peoples are expressed throughout the Roadmap, but a separate section of the report outlines specific issues around jurisdiction and funding.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes that Indigenous peoples have inherent rights that must be respected. The Declaration recognizes that, as the original nations on these lands, Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination over their territories and their lives. Given the context of colonization in Canada and the systematic exclusion of Indigenous peoples from social and economic life and opportunity, the recognition and implementation of Indigenous rights is key to creating harmonious and just relationships between Ontario and Indigenous peoples.

This section of the Roadmap states clearly that First Nations communities must be full participants in designing and administering programs and services, which is also key to making services meaningful and effective. The recommendations in this section are to:

- Take steps to ensure that social services for First Nations people are ultimately controlled and determined by First Nations themselves (p.132-136)
- Provide funding for benefits and administration of programs in amounts that recognize the particular needs, realities and issues of First Nations communities (p.141-143).

Other Issues

Other sections of the Roadmap provide other important recommendations, including:

- Calling on the federal government to do more, especially around universal pharmacare, improving access to the Canada Child Benefit for people who don't have regular immigration status in Canada or don't regularly file their tax returns (which includes many Indigenous peoples), improving eligibility for and benefit amounts in CPP-D, EI, and OAS/GIS, and creating a national program for people with disabilities and a national housing strategy (p.144-147).
- Creating a "change management plan" to make sure that, as change happens in the social assistance system and new benefit programs are implemented, unintended negative consequences can be avoided (p.148)
- Ensuring transparency and accountability through annual reporting on outcomes and meaningful indicators, using disaggregated data and data collection methods that are respectful of First Nations peoples, with third-party review and accountability to the Ontario Legislature (p.151).

What has the government said about the Roadmap?

The government has not yet made any commitments to implement the Roadmap's recommendations. But they have said that "the government agrees with the need to fundamentally reform the income security system, including the transformation of social assistance, to ensure all individuals are treated with respect and dignity and are inspired to reach their full potential, with

particular attention to the needs and experience of Indigenous peoples” (<https://news.ontario.ca/mcss/en/2017/11/working-groups-deliver-roadmap-for-income-security-reform.html>).

They have also said that they want public feedback on the Roadmap, and that they will be releasing their own Income Security plan in early 2018.

What's next?

The Roadmap is very different from past reports on how to improve income security in Ontario. It's important that people who are interested in improving social assistance and ensuring better income security in Ontario take the time to understand the report and its recommendations.

But the Roadmap is only a report. The only way for change to happen is for people to engage with the report, talk about it in their communities, and push decision-makers to act.

1. Provide your feedback on the Roadmap

The government wants feedback on:

- the vision, recommendations and timeframe
- the recommendations that are most important to you
- your overall thoughts.

We have created a Feedback Kit that individuals and organizations can use to respond.

The Feedback Tool, including where your feedback should be sent, is available here: <http://incomesecurity.org/policy-advocacy/a-roadmap-for-change-tools-you-can-use-to-have-your-voice-heard/>.

Remember that the deadline for feedback is January 5, 2018

2. Talk about the Roadmap in your community

Even if you aren't able to provide feedback before January 5, we encourage everyone to continue talking about the Roadmap in your communities.

This is because the Roadmap can be used as a tool to advocate for change in both the short and long term. It can be used to push for investments in the upcoming provincial budget. It can also be used to talk about the importance of transforming Ontario's income security system in the upcoming provincial election and beyond, including getting commitments from local candidates and provincial political parties to act to make change.

If you are someone on low income, please read the Roadmap and talk about it with other people who might be in similar situations. Connect with groups or organizations in your community, like your local legal clinic, to see if they can support you in having your voice heard. Or if you work for an organization that regularly works with or supports low-income people in Ontario, set up a meeting or series of meetings with them to talk about the Roadmap. Write down their ideas for change, and send them to the Minister of Finance before the Budget or to all the political parties before the election, including your local candidates.

We will be providing more tools in the new year to help with these processes. But please get the conversation started sooner rather than later.