

Ontario Budget 2021-22

Written Pre-Budget Submission to

*The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance &
President of the Treasury Board of Government*

February 2021

Submitted on behalf of:



**MARCH
OF DIMES
CANADA**

**LA MARCHE
DES DIX SOUS
DU CANADA**

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INTRODUCTION

March of Dimes Canada is pleased to present its Pre-Budget Submission to the Minister of Finance for Ontario's fiscal year 2021-22. As a transfer payment agency and key stakeholder in delivering an array of services for Ontarians living with disabilities and their families, caregivers and friends. In building this submission, March of Dimes Canada has listened to the priorities communicated to us in a survey of Ontarians with disabilities and community stakeholders conducted in Fall, 2020, as well as at our Queen's Park advocacy event in December, 2020. We welcome the opportunity to deliver these ideas and insights into how our society can become more accessible and inclusive for, and supportive of, our community as Ontario begins to plan economic and social recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This submission is organized in three sections:

1. ***Priority Investment Request – Home and Vehicle Modifications Program***

March of Dimes Canada's priority for Ontario provincial program investment in the Ontario Budget 2021-22. Administered by March of Dimes Canada on behalf of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, increasing investment in the Home and Vehicle Modification Program (HVMP) is an opportunity to both facilitate Ontario seniors and people with disabilities staying independent and safe in their own homes and flow economic stimulus to the home renovations and vehicle modifications sectors as part of COVID-19 recovery.

2. ***New Community-wide Initiatives***

New provincial policies and programs which March of Dimes Canada supports as a member of the disability services sector, including undertaking a modernization of the Assistive Devices Program (ADP) and ensuring the economic feasibility of pursuing a career as a Personal Support Worker in home and community care settings.

3. ***Policy Adjustment and Program Investment Validation***

Existing policy adjustment and program investments which March of Dimes Canada validates as a representative stakeholder for Ontarians with disabilities, including supporting rural and northern broadband internet connectivity and ensuring people eligible for provincial and federal disability income supports receive the full benefit thereof.

ABOUT MARCH OF DIMES CANADA

March of Dimes Canada is one of the country's largest community service organizations for people with disabilities, their families and communities, offering a wide array of programs and services to support their everyday independence and empowerment. March of Dimes Canada has operated as a service-delivery organization in Ontario since 1951 and has an in-depth understanding of the diverse needs of people living with disabilities based on our role as a service provider.

March of Dimes Canada delivers services under three core program areas:

- **Community Support Services** provide assistance to people with disabilities to enable them to live in their community and remain in their own homes and avoid hospitalization or institutionalization for as long as possible, through the provision of attendant care services funded through the Ministry of Health, as well as programs such as the Home and Vehicle Modification Program.
- **Community Participation and After Stroke Programs** enhance independence, community participation and quality of life for people with disabilities and stroke survivors.

Employment Services provides comprehensive support through a range of services to assist people with disabilities achieve their employment goals and employers achieve their workforce needs.

SECTION 1

Priority Investment Request – Home and Vehicle Modifications Program

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the provincial government, with leadership from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, increase Home and Vehicle Modification Program funding to a \$50-million annualized investment scaled up over a two-year period and with administrative costs to be determined. This investment would make an immediate and escalating impact in ensuring seniors and Ontarians with disabilities can independently and safely return to and/or stay in their own homes and participate meaningfully in their communities.
2. That the provincial government, with leadership from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility and in partnership with March of Dimes Canada, undertake a full review of the Home and Vehicle Modification Program with a view to modernizing policy guidelines to ensure the program is flexible and accessible, and that seniors and Ontarians with disabilities receive the full support they need to achieve their goals under the program.

BACKGROUND

March of Dimes Canada strongly believes that Ontarians with disabilities have the right to a safe home and a vehicle which meets their needs – just like all other Ontarians. March of Dimes Canada began to deliver the HVMP on behalf of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) over 20 years ago through a Transfer Partner Agreement (TPA) which remains in place today. The TPA stipulates that MCCSS transfers \$9.245M for HVMP grants to eligible applicants of up to \$15,000 (lifetime maximum) for home modifications and \$15,000 (10-year maximum due to vehicle aging) for vehicle modifications. In order to administer the program effectively, March of Dimes Canada receives an additional \$1.4M grant from MCCSS.

March of Dimes Canada administers HVMP on a monthly application cycle, processing applications based on criteria as set out in the program policy guidelines. In accordance with the agreement, no waiting list is maintained; applicants who do not receive a grant in one application cycle are able to repeat their application the following month. Eligibility is based on demonstrated need for substantial modifications due to permanent or recurring disability that puts at risk the applicant's ability to remain in their home and participate meaningfully in their community. Program guidelines require March of Dimes Canada to prioritize application which minimize/eliminate life safety risks, prevent or enable discharge from hospitalization or institutionalization, and avoid loss of employment or income.

Key Program Statistics

The *HVMP Data Report for 2019-20* (the last full year of available statistics, attached as Appendix 'A') shows March of Dimes Canada received 2,841 eligible applications. Given the current transfer amount and prioritization guidelines, 903 grants were awarded (36% of applicants).

- 86% of all eligible applications were for home modifications; 10% were for vehicle modifications and 4% applied for both home and vehicle modification grants.
- Seniors (65+) accounted for 63% of all eligible applicants; adult Ontarians with disabilities (18-64) made up 33% of eligible applicants, with children (0-18) with disabilities at 4%.
- Adults and children with disabilities predominantly applied for vehicle modifications, while seniors applied mostly for home modifications. We may conclude that adults and children required vehicle modifications in order to meaningfully engage in their communities, while seniors required safety and security in their own home, avoiding institutionalization.

Applicants whose requests were approved (“grantees”) largely followed the application statistics regarding home or vehicle modification grants.

- 84% of grant approvals were for home modifications; 15% were for vehicle modifications and 1% of grantees received both home and vehicle modification grants.
- 60% of grantees were seniors; 34% of grantees were adults with disabilities and 6% of grants were for children under age 18.
- 61% of vehicle modification grantees were adults with disabilities, while 69% of home modification grantees were seniors.
- In 2019-20, total vehicle modification grants were \$1.6M; total home modification grants were \$7.7M.

March of Dimes Canada has established service delivery benchmarks to ensure the HVMP is delivered in a timely manner, serving the needs of applicants and grantees. In 2019-20, the *Service Delivery Benchmarks* report (attached as Appendix 'B') indicates:

- Applicants received a response indicating the outcome of their application within an average of six days.
- Modifications were completed within an average of 58 days of approval.
- The full process, from application receipt to project completion, was accomplished within an average of 170 days.

Program Impact

March of Dimes Canada annually undertakes to gather and analyze information from applicants and grantees regarding the modifications they received and the impact of the

modifications they have funded by the program. In the 2018 *Consumer Satisfaction Survey* (attached as Appendix 'C'), grantees reported a high level of satisfaction with both the application and granting process, as well as the service they received from contractors and with their completed modifications. Grantees often contract to local small renovation or vehicle modification businesses, resulting in local economic benefits and community engagement.

Most importantly, the types of modifications achieved grantees' goals of avoiding hospital or long-term care (86%), returning home (89%), improving access to their home (91%), enabling essential activities of daily living (96%) and continuing to manage their responsibilities (92%).

- 98% of survey respondents reported the modifications they still use enable them to do or achieve something they had *not been able to do* previously, including improved access to their own homes, ability to do activities of daily living, keep a job or continue to manage their responsibilities and avoid hospital or institutionalization.
- 89% of grantees were highly satisfied with the outcome of their funded modifications, and often expressed an increase in feelings of morale and confidence as a result of their modifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED

- 1. That the provincial government, with leadership from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, increase Home and Vehicle Modification Program funding to a \$50-million annualized investment (including the current transfer) scaled up over a two-to-three year period and with administrative costs to be determined. This investment would make an immediate and escalating impact in ensuring seniors and Ontarians with disabilities can safely return to and/or stay in their own homes and participate meaningfully in their communities**

March of Dimes Canada's Home and Vehicle Modification Program (HVMP) is housed at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. The HVMP has been exceptionally well-served by this partnership; March of Dimes Canada thanks MCCSS staff for over 20 years of effective oversight and collaborative administration. Hon. Raymond Cho, Minister of Seniors and Accessibility (MSAA) and his staff also have championed the HVMP and March of Dimes Canada more generally. We thank both Hon. Todd Smith and Hon. Raymond Cho, their staff, and the Ontario public servants we work with for their continuing support of this program and March of Dimes Canada.

March of Dimes Canada recommends flowing a \$50-million, annualized investment¹ into the HVMP to scale up operations quickly and deliver direct grants to every eligible Ontarian with a disability who applies for funding for home and/or vehicle modifications. **The proposed investment will dramatically increase the number of Ontarians receiving grants from approx. 900 to well over 3,000 per year. This investment is designed to address the full scope of program needs, and provides for an increase to grant caps (see Recommendation 2) which ensures the purchasing power of each grant fully addresses the home and/or vehicle modification needs of every eligible applicant.**

March of Dimes Canada is positioned to scale up the HVMP quickly and effectively, making Ontario a leader in direct funding for these types of modifications. Additional investment in the HVMP will align with provincial government priorities through direct, immediate funding for essential home and vehicle modifications. These modifications allow seniors who face physical barriers to independent living and Ontarians who identify as having a disability to return to or remain in their homes and participate meaningfully in their communities potentially reducing reliance on more expensive attendant care services – services which are badly needed in other areas of Ontario’s health system at this time. Modifications further promote aging-in-place for Ontario seniors, achieving the dignity and comfort they richly deserve.

- 2. That the provincial government, with leadership from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility and in partnership with March of Dimes Canada, undertake a full review of the Home and Vehicle Modification Program with a view to modernizing policy guidelines to ensure the program is flexible and accessible, and that seniors and Ontarians with disabilities receive the full support they need to achieve their goals under the program.**

March of Dimes Canada and the MCCSS have collaborated in delivering the HVMP for over 20 years. Most programs undergo reviews to ensure they are continuing to deliver on their goals, and to reflect current needs of those the programs serve. After more than two decades, major shifts have occurred in Ontario’s population and annual inflation has lessened the purchasing power of every dollar. Certainly, the current pandemic has shone new light on the need for people to be able to stay in their homes and engage in their communities in new ways.

March of Dimes Canada recommends an HVMP program policy guidelines review and renewal, with a view to adjustments which reflect the reality of increased costs of modifications, grantees’ construction counselling needs, and the need for flexibility and accessibility for all applicants. March of Dimes Canada believes that modernizing HVMP policy guidelines to renew grant caps and deliver arms-length construction counselling would be of significant added value to the HVMP and grantees.

¹ This amount does not include consideration of program administration costs, which are proposed to be negotiated in a renewed TPA with an understanding that March of Dimes Canada has the administrative infrastructure already in place to meet existing funding and program requirements.

Moreover, policy guideline modernization opens the door to potential partnerships with existing third-party contractor vetting services and referral sources.

Grant Cap Renewal

Since the HVMP was initially implemented, the costs of construction, including labour and materials, have increased along with the cost of living. Over time, the \$15,000 lifetime cap for home modifications does not yield the same results as when the program was first created. While a full grant would have resulted in both entrance and bathroom modifications in the early 2000s, that is no longer the case. Applicants are often required to choose which modification is most important, which doesn't serve the full need, putting pressure on low-income Ontario seniors and people with disabilities to find a way to pay for needed modifications themselves. Increasing the home modification grant cap to a lifetime maximum of \$25,000 will ensure eligible applicants receive the full benefit of their needed modifications to return to or remain in their own homes well into the future.

The \$15,000 vehicle modification grant cap is similarly outdated. The full vehicle modification grant has, in the past, resulted in a completely modified vehicle; this is no longer the case. Increasing the vehicle modification grant cap to \$20,000 will deliver on the promise of the program and meet applicants' needs for a fully modified vehicle.

Currently, if the applicant is not able to make up the difference between the grant and the cost of the modification, policy guidelines require the application to be refused. Increasing grant caps would relieve pressure on grantees to supplement HVMP grants with personal funds to meet program timelines and potentially incur debt for already low-income Ontarians with disabilities and seniors.

Construction Counselling Needs

Home construction and vehicle modification projects are complex and challenging for most people. For seniors and people with disabilities, this is even more so the case. Applicants and grantees regularly seek advice from HVMP staff on hiring architects, gathering quotes and managing contractors, or finding a reputable vehicle mechanic who can install the modification required. However, HVMP policy guidelines prohibit even maintaining a preferred vendors list, and do not allow HVMP staff to warn grantees off contractors who have proven difficult to work with in the past. Without construction counselling, grantees are left to their own devices to oversee complex projects and may turn to less reputable contractors to complete the work.

SUMMARY

March of Dimes Canada recommends a \$50-million annualized investment, including the current transfer, with administrative costs to be determined, scaled up over two-to-three fiscal years, and implementing policy modernization recommendations, in order to:

- Fully fund all expected eligible HVMP grant applications (over 3,000 per year), ramping up over two-to-three years.

- Market the HVMP more broadly to increase applications and grants funded.
- Increase grant caps to reflect current home and vehicle modification market costs, to \$25,000 for home modifications and \$20,000 for vehicle modifications.
- Permit time to fully review of HVMP program policy guidelines and implement resulting modernizations, including increased grant caps, construction counselling, partnership development and allowing flexibility for exceptional cases.

SECTION 2

New Community Investments

March of Dimes Canada is Ontario's largest provider of community support services for Ontarians with disabilities, their families and caregivers, and is a key stakeholder in the disability services sector. We are an active member of the Ontario Community Support Association (OCSA) and support the activities of other agencies, organizations and charities in our community which positively impact the people we serve.

Consequently, March of Dimes Ontario supports investment in four areas which are top-of-mind for Ontarians with disabilities, their families, caregivers and friends. Investment in these key areas will ensure equitable access to medical, home and community care, and facilitate fast, inclusive and access to devices that are essential to independent living, mobility and meaningful participation in our communities.

Community Investment #1

Equitable and accessible COVID-19 vaccinations and vaccination sites

March of Dimes Canada supports ensuring that Ontarians with disabilities have equitable access to COVID-19 vaccinations, and that all vaccination directives, instructions, communications and sites are required to be barrier-free for Ontarians with physical and cognitive disabilities. Ensuring equitable access to vaccinations and barrier-free vaccination communications and sites will contribute to higher vaccine uptake among higher-risk populations in Ontario.

Community Investment #2

Re-design and investment in a person-centered Assistive Devices Program

March of Dimes Canada supports the work of organizations such as the [Canadian National Institute for the Blind](#) (CNIB) Foundation and the [Disability Justice Network of Ontario](#) (DJNO) in investigating the current state of Ontario's Assistive Devices Program (ADP), and researching and educating our community on how the program could be re-imagined to deliver a responsive and efficient program that is essential for Ontarians with long-term disabilities the high-quality service they need and deserve. March of Dimes Canada has learned valuable lessons from delivering our own donor-funded Assistive Devices Program which fills in some (but not all) ADP gaps, and is amenable to working with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, stakeholders, and Ontarians with disabilities in determining a path forward for the ADP into the future.

Community Investment #3

Home and Community Care Recruitment and Retention

In December, 2020, March of Dimes Canada partnered with Spinal Cord Injury Ontario (SCIO) to host a celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities via an online Queen's Park Day event. We were delighted to receive remarks from Hon. Raymond Cho, Minister of Seniors and Accessibility, and heard presentations from

Ontarians directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, either through lived experience of a disability personally, or as a caregiver. The presentation which received the most empathy from the almost 150 event attendees was delivered by Carol Sagan, a former Personal Support Worker (PSW) and wife of Matt Sagan, an Ontarian living with significant physical disability. As a directly-funded family, Carol discussed how the pandemic has impacted her family's ability to recruit and retain PSWs for Matt, particularly given the need for Matt to be a PSW's only client for his own safety. As a provider of attendant care services in Ontario, March of Dimes Canada is also acutely aware of the challenges being faced by families and service providers across the province as PSWs are being required to choose one client or work location, which can often be the difference between choosing to remain in the career or not.

PSWs have become a highly-sought resource in Ontario. Premier Ford has often called out the value Ontario's PSWs are delivering in long-term, home and community care and our community very much appreciates the investments in recruitment and retention of PSWs, including a temporary wage increase through March, 2021. The Ontario Community Support Association has advocated for this wage increase to become permanent in their [2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission](#), which March of Dimes Canada supports on behalf of our staff and the Ontarians we serve each and every day.

Community Investment #4 Access to Care and Treatment for Stroke Survivors

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a breadth and depth of impacts which Ontario will need time and investment from which to recover. Among these impacts have been delays in access to care and treatment for Ontarians who require in-person medical care. The [College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario](#) has acknowledged that Ontario doctors have had to limit in-person care to prevent spread, and that there are significant backlogs in care and treatment. March of Dimes Canada has heard from the people that we serve as part of our donor-funded After Stroke program that access to normal procedures, such as treatment for post-stroke spasticity and access to physical therapies, have been delayed. These delays can result in permanent post-stroke disability, which in turn increases use of health and long-term care services. Access to post-stroke medical treatment and therapies are essential in preventing avoidable disability and returning stroke survivors to their normal lives as quickly and effectively as possible. March of Dimes Canada supports investments in post-stroke care and treatment, including rehabilitation services, to ensure stroke survivors have the care they need and deserve.

SECTION 3

Policy Adjustment and Program Investment Validation

March of Dimes Canada is a key stakeholder in Ontario government policy and programs across the government which impact the people we serve. The province has an exciting opportunity to adjust existing policy and programs which work well for Ontarians with disabilities to have an even greater positive impact. We support these adjustments and investments and validate taking the next steps to continue to improve Ontario's policies, programs and services.

- a) *Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Allowable Working Income*
March of Dimes Canada, as a long-time employment services provider, believes in the value of meaningful work, and has seen over many years how it plays a key role in facilitating self-esteem and independence for Ontarians with disabilities who are able to transition from income supports to employment. We also know that in order to encourage and facilitate this transition, it is essential for Ontarians with disabilities to know that they will have income supports while they work to establish independence.

As Ontario plans its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring equitable access to employment for Ontarians with disabilities has never been more important. Incentivizing transitioning back to work or taking steps to find employment is essential; March of Dimes Canada strongly believes that increasing allowable working income before ODSP affected is a statement that the province is incenting work while ensuring stability during the transition.

- b) *Canada Disability Benefit & ODSP Integration*
In the September, 2020 Speech from the Throne, the federal government announced a new benefit for Canadians with disabilities modeled on the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS). While details on this benefit in terms of monthly amounts, income thresholds and provincial benefits alignment have yet to be announced, the disability community has concerns that eligibility for the new Canada Disability Benefit (CDB) will impact eligibility for provincial disability income supports.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontarians with disabilities have faced unprecedented economic challenges. One-time payments have not effectively covered the true costs presented by such a widespread crisis, leaving Ontarians with disabilities who are unable to work or who have lost their jobs feeling left behind, with some contemplating previously unthinkable action to relieve economic stress. The new CDB is a response to this extreme stress as the federal government has undertaken to do its part in ensuring people with disabilities are not caught in a never-ending, low-income cycle. March of Dimes Canada strongly urges the government of Ontario to align ODSP with the new CDB and refrain from clawing back any portion of the new federal benefit.

Ontarians with disabilities who are unable to work deserve both benefits to escape the low income sentence their disabilities currently impose.

c) *Technology Purchase Eligibility for Passport and Special Services at Home Reimbursement*

The global pandemic has taught us all – government, business, civil society and population alike – about the importance of connectivity to our jobs and to education, to our families and friends, to medical care and community services, and to each other. We have learned that while technology won't be the only way we keep in touch in the future, it facilitates connections important for our mental health and wellbeing and for meaningful participation in our communities. Hon. Todd Smith, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services made an important decision to allow Passport and Special Services at Home (SSAH) clients to have communications technology purchases reimbursed. This decision ensured that hundreds of thousands of Ontarians with disabilities have had the ability to attend online school and social programs, apply for programs and services, and receive medical care from the safety of home.

Communications technologies are a staple of everyday life but can be unaffordable to those who rely on disability income supports. The Passport technology eligibility expansion is a success story in nimble response in challenging circumstances to ensure the best possible outcomes and has clearly been successful in facilitating engagement in online programming and development of relationships across geographic boundaries. We have heard from our clients that they are meeting new friends both locally and from across Canada as part of participating in novel online programs which is a direct result of being able to purchase a laptop or tablet with Passport funding. March of Dimes Canada has seen first-hand the benefit of this decision to the people we serve and supports these measures to ensure connectivity and meaningful relationship-building and community participation.

d) *Rural and Northern Broadband Infrastructure and Connectivity*

In November, 2020, Minister of Infrastructure Hon. Laurie Scott announced that the fund to implement *Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan* had been increased to an historic \$1 Billion. March of Dimes Canada supports this investment as essential to ensuring connectivity for all Ontarians; we encourage further investment to accelerate infrastructure-building in Southwestern, Eastern and Northern Ontario.