

## **The Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit and the Home Repairs Benefit: What You Need to Know**

The provincial government announced in its 2012 budget that the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit and the Home Repairs Benefit for people on Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are being cut.

The Home Repairs Benefit ended as of June 30, 2012. Community Start-Up will end as of December 31, 2012. These changes are intended to save government \$162.5 million over three years.

### **What is the CSUMB?**

The Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit is a mandatory benefit that people on either OW or ODSP can receive.

CSUMB is intended to pay for expenses that will help people on OW or ODSP:

- Establish a new place to live;
- Prevent their eviction;
- Prevent them from having their heat, electricity or other utilities shut off;
- Maintain their existing residence.

CSUMB can be used to pay for large lump-sum expenses like:

- First and last month's rent deposits;
- Buying or replacing furniture;
- Deposits on utilities;
- Paying overdue rent or utility bills.

Single people on OW or ODSP have been able to receive up to \$799 and families up to \$1500, once every two years.

### **What is the Home Repairs Benefit?**

The Home Repairs Benefit (HRB) is a discretionary benefit for people on OW and ODSP who own and live in their own home.

HRB is intended to help people on assistance who own their own home to keep it in a decent state of repair. It has helped people pay for things like plumbing repairs, patching a leaky roof, or repairing damage from fire or floods.

In order to be eligible for HRB, people have to have no other way to pay for the expenses. There is no ceiling on the amount of benefit paid. People have to submit an invoice for work done and confirm that the work was done properly.

### **Why Do These Cuts Matter?**

CSUMB and the Home Repairs Benefit are ***homelessness prevention benefits***.

Community Start-Up is often a last resort for people on assistance – who couldn't otherwise afford to pay for big expenses that will keep them housed – because the amount of benefits they receive each month is so dangerously low.

About 16,000 Ontarians rely on this benefit every month.

There are three very important aspects to CSUMB:

- It is targeted to help people on assistance. People on assistance are among the most vulnerable and excluded in our communities. It's important that these benefits are there for them.
- It provides people with the direct assistance they need to retain their housing and prevent homelessness. In other words, it provides the cash payments that keep people on assistance in their homes.
- The benefit is mandatory. People who are denied are able to appeal the decision. This oversight ensures a measure of fairness for Ontarians with low-income and protects them from arbitrary decisions.

The Home Repairs Benefit is also a last resort for people on assistance who own their own homes and need to make repairs to ensure their homes continue to be habitable. These are often people on ODSP or people who live in rural areas. They are most affected by the cancellation of this benefit, which has already come into effect.

People across Ontario were asked to apply for the Home Repairs Benefit by June 30, 2012. The remaining funds available will be paid out over the next six months.

### **How is This Going to Affect Your Community?**

Losing these benefits will have direct impacts on people in your community, like:

- women trying to move from transition shelters into permanent homes after experiencing domestic violence;
- people trying to move from homelessness – living on the street, in ravines, alleyways, parks, or under bridges – or a shelter into permanent homes;
- people dealing with bedbugs who need to move and/or buy new furniture and clothing;
- people who cannot afford the rising cost of utilities;
- women with a lack of resources to buy cribs and other items for infants whose parenting may be called into question by Children's Aid;

- people who have fallen behind in their rent for a variety of reasons – including unexpected expenses or unexpected loss of income – but who have no financial resources to make up the accumulated arrears;
- people with mental health disabilities / mental illness who are trying to move from hospital into the community and whose discharge from hospital will be delayed;
- people with health challenges and disabilities who require air conditioners, hospital beds, bathroom aids, etc.;
- people who have to pay retroactive electricity bills that come in annually;
- people needing to transition from one home to another for safety reasons, an increase or decrease in family size, because of maintenance problems, or simply because of eviction;
- anyone needing to rent a truck in order to move their possessions;
- people with developmental disabilities trying to make their first move into the community from their parents' home into a place of their own;
- people moving to another city or town for education or to try to find work;
- people recovering from substance abuse issues who are trying to get back on their feet;
- youth transitioning out of family or institutional trauma who need to get established independently in the community for the first time.

The loss of these benefits will in turn put more pressure on other services in local communities, like homeless shelters, transition houses, hospitals, food banks, social / public housing providers, etc.

The cuts will also increase the demand on existing low-income energy programs, like the Ontario Energy Board's LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance program, which provides grants to low-income energy consumers facing short-term difficulty in paying their electricity or natural gas service bills. The EFA is administered by local social services agencies on behalf of the local gas or electricity distributor.

### **What About Impacts on Other Reform Processes?**

The other major problem with the cuts to CSUMB and the HRB is the implications that they will have for other reform processes that the provincial government currently has underway.

The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance was charged in January 2011 to make recommendations to the government about how to reform Ontario Works and the ODSP. People across the province have been very engaged in the Commission's public consultations, given that this is the first opportunity for real improvements to be made to these programs in 20 years. The Commission will be issuing its final report and recommendations in September.

The fact that the government has chosen to make these cuts – and to make them now – not only pre-empts and undermines the important process of reform that will arise out of

the work of the Commission. It also sends a very dangerous and disheartening signal that the province is more concerned about reforming the system in order to save money rather than reforming it in order to improve the lives of people on OW and ODSP.

The other issue is the implication of the consolidated housing and homelessness fund for the province's housing and homelessness policy overall.

Under the *Housing Services Act*, local Housing and Homelessness Plans are not required by the Ministry of Housing until January 2014. Moving 50% of the CSUMB funding to municipalities before they understand and plan responses to their local housing and homelessness issues is simply out-of-step with good policy and the timetable established by the government in its *Housing Services Act*. And, importantly, it remains unclear how moving CSUMB funds will impact First Nations.

### **What Happens Next?**

Starting in January 2013, half of the funds usually spent on the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit is going to be re-allocated into a new program.

The money will be combined with funding from five other housing-related programs. This is the first phase of a new "consolidated housing and homelessness fund" being created by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing under the province's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy.

The new fund will be administered by municipalities. Municipalities must produce Local Housing and Homelessness Plans so that they can understand and respond to housing need in their communities.

There are four big problems with moving CSUMB money into this new program:

- People on assistance will be competing with other low-income people for help from this program. They will lose the targeted benefit so, no matter how urgent their need is for this money, people on OW or ODSP may not get it;
- There is no guarantee that the money will be paid in direct assistance to people who need the funds. Municipalities may decide that their own local needs are different, and use the money to pay for shelter programs, seniors housing, or other, equally important programs – but not for direct payments;
- Municipalities don't have to have their Local Housing and Homelessness Plans in place until January 1, 2014. This means they will receive one full year of funding without having done the planning required to know what their local needs are. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is currently working on guidelines for how municipalities are to spend the money between now and 2014, but those guidelines are not yet in place.
- First Nations currently administer CSUMB funds for people who live on reserve. Clearly, moving the money to municipalities will have a negative impact on First Nations people who rely on OW or ODSP.

The provincial government has said that people who own their own homes and need to make repairs can apply to the Ontario Renovates program.

This is a new program through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing that is administered by municipalities across the province.

While individual low-income homeowners can receive funding through this program, there are some problems:

- Both individuals and owners of multi-unit buildings are eligible for funding through this program, which means more competition for relatively scarce resources;
- Ontario Renovates operates as a loan program. People on social assistance will have a very difficult time paying back the large costs associated with major repairs that their homes sometimes require. While the loan can be forgiven, having a large loan hanging over your head while you're receiving such a small amount of money for daily expenses can be very stressful – and the loan forgiveness is not guaranteed.

### **What Should Be Done?**

The provincial government should rescind these cuts and restore the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit and the Home Repairs Benefit for people on social assistance.

### **What Can I Do?**

Call or visit your local MPP and speak out against these cuts!

### **If you don't know the name of your MPP or your Electoral District:**

- Go to the Elections Ontario website and use your postal code or address to look them up: [http://fyed.elections.on.ca/fyed/en/form\\_page\\_en.jsp](http://fyed.elections.on.ca/fyed/en/form_page_en.jsp).

### **To get their contact information, once you know their name:**

- Go to the Ontario Legislature addresses list to get their contact information: [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/members\\_current.do?locale=en&channel\\_id={923146e7-4d81-42a8-99f0-e61f5ab50387}&lang=en](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/members_current.do?locale=en&channel_id={923146e7-4d81-42a8-99f0-e61f5ab50387}&lang=en).
- Make sure to look up their Constituency Office contact information – that's the office in your local community.

And use our online email tool to send a message to the government:

<http://sareview.ca/isac-news/act-now-to-save-housing-supports-for-people-on-ow-and-odsp/>