

Ontario's Budget 2017 makes some needed changes but overlooks severe, chronic mental illness.

Budget 2017 includes some investment in and prioritization of mental illness, however, there is much further to go to address the deep-seated challenges faced by people living with severe and chronic mental illness in the province.

Access to community mental health services and supports

The Budget reiterates the province's February 2017 announcement of an additional \$140-million over three years to advance mental health and addictions initiatives. The investment targets increasing access to structured psychotherapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for anxiety and depression, as well as the creation of an additional 1,150 supportive housing units for people with serious mental illness, or who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The investment also targets youth and young adult mental health, including a network of up to nine hubs for one-stop access to mental health and addictions and other services for people ages 12-25 to help increase early identification and intervention.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) is pleased that the province has invested in these critical areas to help reduce wait times for much-needed community supports. However, people with complex needs and their families and/or caregivers continue to experience barriers to accessing specialized community mental healthcare for conditions such as schizophrenia and other psychotic illnesses.

As Ontario moves forward on mental health, we urge greater investment in services and supports for chronic and complex mental health conditions. SSO will continue to monitor the implementation of these investments and call on the province to expand structured psychotherapy to include CBT for psychosis.

Access to medications

Access to timely, affordable and effective medications is an issue that significantly affects the individuals, families and communities that SSO supports. The Budget announcement of OHIP+: Children and Youth Pharmacare Program is a step towards achieving universal pharmacare for all Ontarians. Starting in January 2018, the program will fully cover the cost of prescription medications for everyone under the age of 25, with no deductibles or copayments, regardless of family income. The program will help ensure that eligible people who use prescription medications will not face barriers related to lack of insurance coverage or inability to pay out-of-pocket for medications that are available through the Ontario Drug Benefit Program.

However, for chronic illnesses like schizophrenia, people may use medications as part of their treatment over the long-term and/or throughout the course of their illness. It is therefore critical that the next step is to expand access to medication in Ontario to include people over 25, to help ensure that barriers such as age, costs, lack of health insurance and challenges qualifying for health insurance due to preexisting conditions do not prevent people from accessing this form of care.

It also becomes increasingly critical that doctors and other healthcare practitioners, as well as individuals and families, have access to information and education about medications and other forms of treatments and supports to help ensure appropriate prescribing and shared-decision making between healthcare providers and individuals.

OHIP+ comes into effect in January 2018. SSO looks forward to working with the province as it continues to develop the program and further expands access to pharmacare for all.

Income security

Budget 2017 announced significant changes to asset limits and gift exemptions for Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Nearly half of people receiving ODSP have a mental health-related disability and are faced with numerous social barriers, and the changing nature of mental health conditions often undermine the long-term financial security of people living with these conditions.

For those receiving ODSP, cash and other liquid asset limits will be increased from \$5,000 to \$40,000 for single individuals and from \$7,500 to \$50,000 for couples. These changes will take effect by January 2018. In addition, cash gift levels will increase from \$6,000 to \$10,000 per year for both OW and ODSP and gifts in any amount will not reduce the amount of social assistance people receive if the funds are used to pay for first and last month's rent, to purchase a principal residence or to buy a vehicle. These changes are to take effect in September 2017.

The province is also increasing the Remote Communities Allowance by providing an additional \$50 per month for the first person and \$25 for each additional family member to help address the unique needs of people in northern and remote communities, such as higher costs of living including food and transportation.

Recognizing the impact of financial security on quality of life, SSO strongly supports investments and initiatives which address the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities and in turn, provide financial help to individuals and families who are directly affected.

Although substantial, these changes do not go far enough to address the issue of inadequate incomes for people on social assistance. SSO supports calls for a 10 per cent increase to income rates, as current OW and ODSP rates leave people critically below standard measures of poverty. Budget 2017 includes a

mere two per cent increase to rates, continuing the pattern of increases which do little to close the income gaps experienced by people on social assistance.

Rate increases will be applied across the board for all recipients and will come into effect in September 2017 for ODSP and October 2017 for OW.

Justice and mental health

The Budget includes recent funding announcements to expand and enhance the Bail Verification and Supervision Program as well as investments to reduce the overuse of segregation in Ontario's correctional institutions including hiring an additional 239 staff to increase health and social supports for inmates, particularly for those with significant challenges with long-term segregation. The province will be adding dedicated managers at institutions with higher segregation use to help lower these rates and support individuals as they transition back to the general inmate population. In addition, Budget 2017 specifies that services will be enhanced for inmates on remand and those serving custodial sentences to ensure access to a standardized set of core services, spiritual services and programming with a focus on improving inmate mental health and well-being.

Overall, the Budget highlights an investment of \$51-million over three years to improve services for people with mental health and addictions issues who have contact with the criminal justice system. This will include expanding the availability of safe beds to provide time-limited emergency housing as an alternative to jail or hospital and increasing reintegration supports. It is unclear where this investment will be targeted specifically beyond the above-mentioned initiatives.

We are pleased to see an emphasis on decreasing the use of segregation and improving the mental health and well-being of inmates, particularly for groups like those on remand who traditionally do not receive the same levels of support as others. We also encourage the ongoing expansion of the bail program and "bail beds" program to support vulnerable, low-risk accused including people experiencing mental illness, poverty, addictions and homelessness.

These are much-needed steps to help ensure that people with mental illness are diverted from incarceration and to address their substantial over-representation in Ontario's prisons and in segregation. However, greater investment is needed to enhance supports for people who are justice-involved, including expanding pre-charge diversion programs like mobile crisis intervention teams and police/health service collaborations; post-charge programs such as mental health/addictions courts and mental health court workers; and improved screening for these programs.

Caregiver supports

As a member of the Ontario Caregiver Coalition, SSO is encouraged by new investments of \$20-million each year for three years in respite for caregivers highlighted in Budget 2017. Although more respite is important, new funding must be invested in programs and initiatives that allow caregivers more

flexibility and control over what respite services they are able to access. Investments must extend to people who provide caregiving support to people with mental illness and addictions, in addition to other health conditions. Family and friends make significant contributions to assisting people living with mental illnesses, both in terms of day-to-day activities (such as providing transportation to medical appointments, offering financial assistance and helping with errands like grocery shopping) and in emotional support, but often lack supports to help them in this role.

The Budget also reiterates that a provincial Caregiver Organization will be developed to coordinate supports and resources, such as training, local resources and peer support. It is important for caregivers to have a point of contact for support and resources, however it is recommended that any work by this organization should not duplicate what already exists across the province, such as training and peer support services provided by community organizations, including SSO, and that it works collaboratively with groups like the Ontario Caregiver Coalition to ensure that it addresses people's needs, including those supporting people with mental health and addictions.

Conclusion

SSO commends the Ontario government for its work to improve the health and quality of life of people experiencing mental illness and their families. We support the various strategies and initiatives underway to ensure that people have access to the treatments and supports they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives which in turn helps to create a healthy, resilient society.

We also urge the government to ensure that future investments address the gaps that persist in the current system. Specifically, we call for more targeted investment in services and programs that support people with severe and persistent mental illness like schizophrenia. To read SSO's 2017 pre-budget submission, please click [here](#).