

Ontario 2022 Pre-Budget Consultation

Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Submitted by OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

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OCASI is the umbrella organization for Ontario's immigrant and refugee serving sector and was established in 1978. The Mission of OCASI is to achieve equality, access and full participation for immigrants and refugees in every aspect of Canadian life. OCASI has 240 member agencies across Ontario and they play a critical role in facilitating the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees.

Almost two years into the health pandemic we have ample evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly increased long-standing structural and societal inequalities. Indigenous, Black and racialized communities – including immigrants and refugees - were put at higher risk of exposure to the virus and were at higher risk of contracting the infection.

The health pandemic has shed light on a second pandemic of racism-especially anti-Black racism and the racialization and feminization of poverty. In fact, Black and other racialized immigrant and refugee women are bearing the economic brunt of these dual pandemics. They will take longer to recover and rebuild, and some may never regain lost ground.

Data collected in Canada and Ontario reveal a growing disparity in all life outcomes for racialized and Indigenous communities. As Ontario prepares the 2022-2023 budget, budgetary decisions must prioritize racialized and Indigenous communities in light of the growing racialization of poverty, their higher rates of unemployment, their worse health outcomes (including the devastating impact of COVID-19 on these communities), the need to enhance access to justice for over-represented racialized and Indigenous communities in the justice

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system, and the impact of COVID-19 on racial and Indigenous people facing increased gender-based violence.

Economic, social and health recovery is the priority. But as a society we cannot simply re-invest in, and sustain systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, immigration status, religion and faith.

The Ontario budget must be developed using a gender equity framework that includes these factors, as well as paying attention to rural-urban equity.

OCASI also makes specific recommendations in ten thematic areas to support an equitable approach.

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1. Invest in newcomer settlement and language training

A [September 2020 ICES report](#) found that immigrants, refugees and other newcomers accounted for almost 44% of all COVID-19 cases in Ontario despite being only 25% of the population and having lower rates of testing. Immigrant and refugee settlement services are essential to get COVID-19 related and other critical information and supports to newcomers.

Ontario's Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP), and English and French Language Training programs are critically needed to support the settlement and integration of newcomers. They were especially important during the pandemic. NSP funding has stayed the same for several years. Meanwhile the challenges of settling in Ontario have grown, in large part due to the housing crisis, difficulty in finding decent jobs, lack of safe affordable childcare, and more. OCASI member agencies must do more work to support their clients to settle. Their workload has grown but on the same amount of funding.

Recommendation

- **Increase investment in the Newcomer Settlement Program and Language Training Program.**

2. Invest in employment

Employment programs and services - Employment programs are an important resource for immigrants and refugees both to connect them with a job, and also to give them important information about employment standards and occupational health and safety. They are also necessary to support immigrants to get a job in their field at a level consistent with their

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experience and skills. The new employment Ontario service prototypes are not geared to addressing systemic labour market barriers faced by immigrants, particularly women, Black and racialized immigrants.

Remove barriers for internationally educated immigrants - The under-employment of immigrants is a long-standing and well documented issue. An effective remedy must activate employers, specifically small-and-medium sized enterprises (SMEs), to address the barriers immigrants face in accessing commensurate employment. Recruiting eligible internationally educated healthcare professionals is an effective remedy to address the shortage in healthcare support in hospitals and long-term care homes.

Minimum wage - We appreciate the fact that the minimum wage was increased this year to \$15. But that is still less than the lowest living wage in Ontario – which was calculated at \$16.20 in Sault Ste. Marie in November 2021.

Bill 124 - In general, wages in the non-profit sector are approximately 29 per cent lower than the Canadian average as reported by the Ontario Nonprofit Network. The wage freeze imposed by Bill 124 has a disproportionate impact on the care sector and other publicly funded sectors – sectors where racialized and immigrant women are highly represented and are often among the lowest paid workers. The impact is compounded by Ontario's housing crisis and rising inflation of 4.9 per cent. Together with COVID, Bill 124 restrictions have led to a loss of workers in the affected sectors, with impact on human resources (including hiring-back costs) and loss of knowledge and expertise in the sector.

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Equity in employment - Racialized and Indigenous communities have long faced poorer labour market outcomes that result of systemic racism and discrimination. Data during COVID-19 (federal labour force survey) confirms that many racialized communities now face much higher rates of unemployment. An Equity in Employment Secretariat can implement a mandatory and comprehensive provincial employment equity program in Ontario to remove systemic employment barriers for Indigenous peoples, peoples of colour, women, persons with (dis)abilities and LGBTQ community members.

Recommendations:

- **Create a care economy labour force strategy given the high numbers of immigrants employed in this sector.**
- **Ensure that the new Employment Ontario service prototypes will address the unique barriers and systemic barriers to employment faced by immigrants, particularly women and Black and racialized immigrants.**
- **Invest in services to remove systemic barriers and support the licensure of internationally educated professionals and tradespeople.**
- **Repeal Bill 124.**
- **Establish a fully mandated and adequately resourced Equity in Employment Secretariat to implement a comprehensive and mandatory employment equity program in Ontario.**

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3. Invest in Women's organizations and programs

Violence against women and girls was already at frighteningly high levels, and increased by up to 20% during the pandemic. Preliminary data suggests that racialized and Indigenous women have been deeply impacted by gender-based violence over the course of the pandemic. Ontario has made important investments in the Women's Futures Program and Immigrant and Refugee Communities Newcomer Friends and Families Program (IRC/NFF). But to have a real impact we also need stable and ongoing funding for women's organizations, especially those organizations providing services and supports to immigrant, refugee and Black and racialized women, and for shelters, and health and mental health services for women.

Recommendation:

- **Increase funding for women's organizations, including women's centres and shelters and language interpretation services, to support women facing multiple systemic barriers in employment, income support, housing, access to childcare, unsafe work, and violence.**

4. Invest in ending poverty and racialized poverty

Statistics show that racialized communities are now facing disproportionate levels of unemployment, which is likely to result in the deepening racialization of poverty in Ontario. People of colour, particularly immigrants face disproportionate disadvantage and systemic discrimination in employment as well as access to income supports, poverty-reduction measures and programs and services. Cost of living – especially the cost of housing and food –

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have increased exponentially in Ontario, but social assistance rates have remained low and are nowhere near meeting real expenses.

Recommendations:

- **All poverty reduction measures in policy and the budget must explicitly address the disproportionate disadvantage and systemic discrimination peoples of colour face.**
- **All Ontario residents should be allowed to access social assistance support regardless of immigration status, and social assistance rates must be increased to meet the basic needs on low-income people in Ontario.**

5. Invest in health care access

Ontario's response to the pandemic has demonstrated it can extend universal health care to all people regardless of immigration status and period of residence. Effective March 21, 2020, the Government of Ontario began to cover medically necessary health services for uninsured people who do not meet the criteria for provincial health care coverage and effectively suspended the 3-month residence requirement.

Recommendations:

- **Permanently extend universal healthcare so that health care is prioritized as an investment in reducing costs and saving lives.**

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- **Invest in targeted and culturally tailored approaches to improving health outcomes for Indigenous peoples and people of colour, who continue to face poorer health care outcomes in Ontario.**

6. Invest in Affordable Housing

We have a homelessness crisis and a housing crisis in Ontario, which are made worse by the pandemic. Indigenous, Black and racialized communities are disproportionately affected by both. The average market rent in communities across Ontario has increased exponentially, and is completely unaffordable for anyone working for minimum wage. Tenant evictions are on the rise, triggered in large part by investors and speculators. Recent immigrants and refugees are disproportionately impacted – they simply cannot find a place to live. The digitization of the Landlord and Tenant Board has made it inaccessible for thousands of low-income tenants, of whom a significant number are racialized.

Recommendations:

- **Invest in a rights-based housing strategy, in consultation with the people who are affected, and not just builders, developers and investors.**
- **Invest in tenants' supports by creating a rent relief program for low-income tenants.**
- **Eliminate vacancy decontrol to increase affordable rental housing stock and to stop “renovictions” (where landlords evict tenants only to re-rent for higher rates of rent).**
- **Ensure the Landlord and Tenant Board is accessible for everyone, especially low-income tenants who lack digital access.**

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7. Invest in Disaggregated Data Collection

Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, in which OCASI is a founding Steering Committee member - has long been working to help develop a culture of socio-demographic data collection across all orders of government as well as other relevant spaces and places. Improved data collection will lay the foundation for budget considerations that address the disparities of our most vulnerable and marginalized populations and will support Ontario to ensure that an equity framework is centred within the budget process moving forward.

Recommendation:

- **Invest in creating and implementing a robust, whole of government approach to the collection of disaggregated data, including race-based data.**

8. Invest in Child Care

We urge the Ontario government to quickly reach an agreement with the federal government under the new national Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) program. The delay is unfair to low-income racialized parents and children who need precisely this kind of support from our government to start recovering from the impact of the pandemic. Child care inextricably ties to the ability of these families to work.

Recommendation:

- **Develop an immediate strategy for safe, regulated and affordable childcare in Ontario, starting with signing onto the national Early Learning and Child Care program to.**

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9. Invest in access to justice

Ontario has Canada's highest population of low-income peoples of colour. Cuts to Legal Aid Ontario and refugee and immigration legal services have had a significant impact on access to justice for these communities. The lack of sustainable legal aid / legal clinic funding has meant a reduction in the capacity to provide legal services in all areas of poverty law. We can no longer ignore the very real and drastic impact of lack of services on racialized communities. In addition, with the increase in self-represented litigants in all parts of Ontario's justice system the costs to the province continue to rise.

Recommendations:

- **Restore and enhance funding for legal aid in the 2022-2023 Budget.**
- **Work with the Federal Government to establish a long-term, sustainable funding model for legal aid in Ontario, including Immigration and Refugee legal aid.**

10. Invest in education

The pandemic continues to magnify inequities in educational outcomes, especially in high-density urban areas where low-income, racialized children and youth predominantly reside.

Recommendations:

- **Immediately invest in funding and resources to reduce class sizes.**
- **Invest in technological resources and supporting an appropriate home environment to facilitate online learning.**

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